

# The Gesture of Listening to Music



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**Myth and tradition** have so strongly stylised the gesture of the seer that on television and advertisements it can be observed daily and everywhere how it has become a pose (for example the pose of the statesman energetically fixing his gaze towards the stars). Through Rodin the gesture of the thinker has become a cliché. On the other hand, the gesture of the listener seems at first sight not to be similarly stereotyped, even though it is related to that of seeing and thinking, in so far as it is not a matter of a movement but a position of the body. However, if we take a look at mediaeval iconography from the standpoint of gesture, then we are confronted with the gesture of listening as one of the

central themes. It is Mary's gesture at the conception, the gesture of being fertilised by the word (*logos*). Mary "receives", that means she hears a voice. We can learn something from observing how the gesture changes with the onset of the Renaissance. In the Gothic period it is the gesture of someone who is surprised and called; in the Renaissance it is that of the resolved, hearing Mary. If it is a matter of listening to music, the Renaissance gesture is important for us and we must observe Ghirlandaio and not Giotto.

And yet misgivings have to be announced straightaway. Music is heard differently from voices that speak (*logoi*). Speaking voices are listened to and deciphered, we "read", and that is why deaf people can read from the lips. In the case of music they cannot do that. Mary hears as if she were reading and that means "conceives": she receives and understands. Listening to music also means deciphering, because music is codified sound and that is why the musical message is just as logical as that of the *logoi*. But it is not "semantic reading", not a deciphering of a codified meaning. Despite centuries of discussion, agreement has not been reached about what is deciphered when music is heard. In actual fact it ought to be possible to recognise this by the gesture itself of listening to music. Mary's gesture of the conception, as portrayed in Renaissance paintings, can serve as the starting point, for listening to music is hearing. Nevertheless we have to bear in mind that Mary is not listening to music even if at the conception the angels playing violins in Heaven accompany the message. At best we could say that Mary is a musical borderline case, in that she listens to a "song".

If we admit this, confusion begins. Let us assume that at the conception Mary hears a song. Then the gesture of listening would depend on the song that is heard. The gesture with which we hear the *Marseillaise* or a song by the Rolling Stones is completely different from Mary's gesture, and if we were to listen to the *Marseillaise* like Mary, or if Mary were to march at the conception, then the musical message would somehow have been wrongly received. However, what is true for listening to songs, must also be equally valid for listening to music in general.

The gesture of listening is completely different for chamber music than for film music; it is different for electronic music than for music made with a mouth organ. Nevertheless, if we have admitted that this gesture depends on the message received, for instance like that of catching an object thrown, the question is raised whether there is indeed any sense in talking about a gesture of listening to music in general.

However, after some consideration this confusion dies down. The fact that the gesture of listening to music depends so strongly on the message received (indeed not only on its content but equally on what is referred to as its “channel”), allows and at the same time demands that a common core is found for all these forms of gestures. Precisely because we listen to operas differently from how we listen to Indian ragas, and hear operas differently on television than from records, we have to ask what justification is there for allocating something like listening to music in general to these special forms of listening. For something or other seems to differentiate the gesture of listening to an opera on television and a raga from a record essentially from other listening gestures, even if these gestures appear to be close to listening to music. Listening to an opera on television is closer to listening to a raga from a record than listening to a sports event on television or to a political discussion from a tape. We have to address our attention to the common core – of all kinds of listening to music – and not to the noticeable differences between individual forms of listening to music.

If we bear in mind that the gesture of listening to music largely depends on the message received more so than any other receptive gesture (that listening to operas on television is far more different from listening to the *Marseillaise* at a political assembly than the reading of a novel differs from reading a political pamphlet), then we are able to advance the following hypothesis: listening to music is a gesture that adjusts to the message received, and precisely because it changes its form from message to message is the essential factor common to all these forms and makes them gestures of listening to music. The Renaissance gesture of Mary at the conception confirms this thesis: Mary hears, and that means obeys, she responds to the message to be received. However, this provokes at least two objections. Firstly, as stated already, the gesture of listening to music is not a bodily movement but a position of the body, even if this position is not rigid. In other words, it is not a matter, as in catching something, of trying to intervene actively in the process of receiving. Of course it can occasionally be observed how, when listening, the foot beats the rhythm or the lips appear to whistle, but in these cases, as when reading whisperingly, it is a matter of naively disposing of what is essentially internal tension. In other words we cannot speak about responding to the message in the usual sense, as in catching or dancing. Secondly, however, it is characteristic of acoustic messages that in fact they cannot really be caught but are passed on. The human body is permeable for sound waves in such a way that these waves cause it to vibrate and they seize it. Although there are specific listening organs in the body that transfer the acoustic vibrations into a different kind, for instance into electro-magnetic vibrations, it is music that not only activates the listening nerve but the entire body and makes it vibrate. Therefore we cannot speak about adapting to the message where the message itself imposes its form on the listener.

Despite these two objections the hypothesis can be maintained according to which the gesture of listening is essentially an adjustment of the body to an acoustic message and according to which it thereby differs from other gestures. This is not only because it is not refuted by the two objections but strangely enough also because these two objections indeed initially show what we are dealing with in the case of listening as an adaptation to sound waves. Therefore each of the two objections is to be analysed now somewhat more thoroughly. Listening to music is a bodily position, this means an inner tension that relaxes, in other words denies itself, when it is expressed as movement. As such the gesture of listening to music is comparable to the position of attention or that of a defending boxer. In the same way that a soldier on guard cannot sneeze without losing the right position, persons listening to music can only listen well when they concentrate themselves, this means that they somehow shut down muscles and nerves. The difference between a soldier on guard and a boxer on the one hand, and a person listening to music on the other, consists in the fact that the soldier on guard and the boxer are not adjusted to receiving but to taking action. This means that they concentrate themselves from inwards to outwards. Persons listening to music are actually not concentrating at all but they concentrate the sound waves arriving in the inside of their body. This means that when listening to music the body becomes music, and music becomes the body.

Correspondingly the gesture of listening to music is a body position in which music is embodied. (Characteristically, in so doing the action can no longer be distinguished from passion, in other words music from the body.) The objection, according to which the listener cannot adapt to the message because he is in a passive position, is thus annulled. As the listener while listening is himself the music heard, because his "self" is the music, this means adapting to the music and indeed becoming music. The observation of the second objection shows what we are dealing with here (and this has nothing to do with romanticism). The human body is permeable for sound waves but not in the same way as for X-rays. Without having to go into physical details, it is clear that sound waves, when they go through the stomach, produce different effects from X-rays. One feels them and knows that one is suffering from them. This awareness of suffering is known in Greek as *pathein*. The reception of music in the stomach (and in the breast, in the genitals, in the head, in brief in all parts of the body disposed to vibration) is pathos, and its effect is empathy with the message. This pathetic character is true literally only for acoustic messages, for all the others it is valid only metaphorically. While listening to music the person in the entire physical (not in the figurative) sense is "seized" by the message, he is in empathy with its pathos. (Of course we can think here about Pan and Orpheus but equally so about aerodynamics).

Yet it is not such a simple matter. Firstly the liver probably vibrates differently from the sinuses, secondly the liver is linked to the nervous system in a different manner from how the sinuses are, and thirdly there is a listening nerve specialised in receiving sound waves. Consequently empathy with the message is a complicated process. It is especially complicated because of the fact that not only a cybernetic feedback is created between the individual body vibrations but also and mainly because in normal language this complicated pathetic experience is referred to with verbs such as "feel", "wish", "dream", "think", with nouns such as "happiness", "love",

“longing”, “beauty”, “order”. In brief the matter of the permeability of the human body for sound waves is not so simple because it is experienced as happiness, mathematical order and beauty.

No experience shows to such an extent as listening to music that “mind”, “soul” or “intellect” are words that define physical processes. Listening to music is thereby not a so-called “borderline case”. It cannot be said that listening to music is a kind of massage (for instance, like diathermy) whereby a kind of spirit is stimulated. On the contrary, in listening to music, in this acoustic massage, one of the highest forms, indeed perhaps the highest form of mind, soul, intellect is received, and in such a way that in this acoustic massage the own mind and that of the emitter of the message concur. Therefore an analysis of listening to music from the physiological and neurological standpoint would probably be a good method of comprehending processes such as “logical thinking”, “creative imagination” or “intuitive understanding” from their physical side. If we sum up the two mentioned objections to the thesis according to which listening to music is essentially a gesture in which the body responds to the message, the following can be said: the two objections show what “body” and “respond” mean in this context. When listening to music the body becomes music, and the relevant body position corresponds in its internal tension to precisely that music that or she is on the point of receiving. And he can adopt this position because he is adjusted in an extremely complex way to vibrating in the pathos of this music. In other contexts this complex manner in which the body vibrates is called “feeling”, “thinking”, “wishing”. Expressed differently and more radically, listening to music is a gesture in which the body becomes mind through acoustic massage. This spiritualization of the body by means of acoustics (a process that cannot be compared with any other physical process) is in the individual case perfectly non-transparent; it is, speaking in cybernetic terms, a so-called “black box”. It is therefore impossible that a composer plans to do the following: I will make the salivary glands of the listener vibrate in such a way that they can grasp the geometric structure of the fugue and indeed a logical aspect of the world, thinking and feeling. Or, I will make the mouths of the listeners vibrate in such a way that they experience human, all-encompassing love. Yet although neither Bach nor Beethoven were able to compose in this way, it was their intention to provoke precisely this effect in the listener.

They acted in a cybernetic manner: they treated input and output of the black box “body”. They fed it with vibrations which have logics and love as output, without worrying about the processes in the interior of the body. Therefore describing listening to music as an acoustic process is not a sacrilege of the mind. On the contrary, it really shows the secret of the intellectual in general and of music in particular: the mysterious darkness in the inside of the black box. It is only when one takes music back to acoustics and the mind to nerves and muscles that one sees the secret of pathos, the Orphic mystery, the Pythagorean “theorem”: harmony, according to which music and mathematics as *peri-pathein* and *em-pathein* are those arts (*techne*) which lead to the wisdom of beauty and goodness, to the *sophia* of the *kalokagathia*. Listening to music is a gesture in which the body adjusts to the *mathesis universalis*. It can do this because the acoustic vibrations not only permeate the bodily skin, they also cause it to vibrate. The skin, that no man’s land between human being and the world, thus becomes a link instead of being a barrier. When listening to music the separation breaks down between human being and the world, the human being overcomes its skin, or vice versa, the skin overcomes its

human being. The mathematical vibration of the skin when listening to music, which is then transferred to the innards is ecstasy, it is the “mystic experience”. It overcomes Hegel’s dialectic. When listening to music, the human being finds himself without losing the world, by finding himself as the world and the world as himself. For he finds himself and the world not as a contradiction between subject and object but as a “pure relationship”, namely acoustic vibration. Only in listening to music can one experience physically, specifically, nervously, literally what science means when it speaks about “field” and about “relativity”. One experiences how in the acoustic field (which is a special case of the field of gravity) the human being and the world in the pure relation, in other words related to one another, becoming one, “pure intentionality”, to use Husserl’s words. That is why listening to music is the “absolute” experience, the experience of the relativity of subject and object in the field of the *mathesis universalis*.

Listening to music is the gesture that overcomes the skin by transforming it from a barrier to a link. It is the gesture of ecstasy. Possibly there are other ecstatic gestures. For example, by chemical means, through drugs, or mechanically, by means of yoga gymnastics one can probably force the body to gestures in which it overcomes itself. And there are certainly also techniques by means of auto-suggestion of provoking physical processes which lead to ecstasy. St. Theresa is probably an example. Yet listening to music is a different matter. When I switch on *Radio France* so as to listen to *France Musique*, then I am carrying out a perfectly profane, technical, public (non-hermetic) gesture. And if I am in the right mood, I can have an ecstatic experience. Precisely because the gesture is so profane, so technical, so public, because there are music schools and musical animations and happenings, precisely for that reason music is the greatest and holiest mystery of all. It is not necessary for it to conceal itself; it is dark in its magnificent, extremely complex simplicity, in mathematical simplicity. Like death and life. For it is life in death and death in life. In order to know that it is not necessary to have read Schopenhauer. In order to know that one must only have tried to listen to music properly.

*Translated by Elizabeth Mortimer*

### **Vilém Flusser**

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