

#1

One-Page #12: Listening Is Grasping and Seeing Is Pointing:

the Opening Passage of the Aria “Un bel di, vedremo” from Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty claims that aural perception evokes the act of grasping, and visual perception evokes “the act of pointing” (Merleau-Ponty, 131). He elaborates that “the sounds always leads us to the content,” while “visual presentation” directs us “to the space” “where the object is to be found” (131). In the opening passage of Puccini’s Aria “Un bel di vedremo” from

(sets the scene as though it were actually taking place)

122

Butterfly

Andante molto calmo. ♩ = 43.

One — fine day we'll no — tice A thread of smoke a —
Un — bel di, ve — dre — mo le — rar — si an fi di

12

pp come da lontano

Butterfly

— ris — ing on the sea — In the far ho — ri — zon,
fi — no sull' e — stre — mo con-fin del ma — re.

Madame Butterfly,

many listeners would more likely to follow Puccini’s melody in Butterfly’s beautiful voice closely. If someone visualizes this opening passage in a painting with a title “A Thread of Smoke on the Sea,” many would first try to locate the thread of smoke, and would more likely to ignore the blue sea, white cloud, and other parts of the painting.

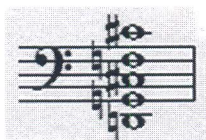
#2

In relation to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of external space and bodily space, I would like to posit a musical correlation. In common-practice music, a tonal key can be understood as a "musical body" whose space is comprised of the diatonic collection that corresponds to its constituent scale degrees. This musical body (tonal key) could be articulated in terms of a dynamic bodily schema, dynamic in the sense that its spatiality is not a "spaciality of position", but a "spaciality of situation" (MP, 115). That is to say, while the elements of the body (its scale degrees) can be understood in terms of the intervals separating them in the abstract schema (the scale), their *directedness* is accounted for only in the situations of musical discourse. For instance, I can say that G is a whole step above F in the C Major scale, but this relation can be made manifest only in musical discourse, perhaps as a bass line supporting ii6 V.

This interpretation of musical space in Merleau-Ponty's terms can be clarified by considering "musical external space". If musical bodily space can be understood as the space constituted by a key area (and its diatonic collection), then musical external space can be understood as the 12-note chromatic collection within which musical bodies are constituted. In light of this clarification, the figure-ground relationship of musical discourse can be understood as follows: figures (scale degrees) appear against an "indifferent background" (the chromatic collection), and these figures appear, as such, before (or, in front of) the musical body (the key) (MP, 115). The musical body is the "third term...in this figure-background structure, and every figure [or, scale degree] stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space" (MP, 115).

In this sense, tonal music is embodied in a musical key, and even departures from that originating key can be subordinated within the hierarchically privileged "home key". Atonal music is, in this sense, then, reminiscent of a disembodied experience of musical external space. For instance, within which musical body-space could the following chord from Webern op. 3, no. 1, be understood?

piano, mm. 7-8



I found Merleau-Ponty's assertions about empirical proof being more about manner than content to be a bit paradoxical if the assertion itself is to seem backed up by empirical logic; however, it is very liberating in terms of validation of analytical empiricism applied to artistic constructs. It seems the validity of musical analysis relies more on the reasonable genesis of the manner of analysis backwards from the perceived content; for example, a functional harmonic analysis makes more sense in a Bach chorale than in a spectralist work. #3

For my work on the Dallapiccola, this upsets me in that I am not sure if the symbolic, visual representation of the musical structures should have a consistency of symbolic language across the examples, or if each example should define its own terms of symbolic language in order to more accurately represent the terms of the content. I believe Merleau-Ponty would explain this as a manner in which removing one limit will place a limit upon another element when the symbolic lines are parallel rather than intersecting.¹ Thus, I think it may be most potent to find ways in which to diversify symbolic language, but strive for intersections between examples; for example, the visual for example A could be rotated in such a way that it resembles or equals the visual for example B, even though the symbolic language differs. This could potentially be very dishonest in that it could validate symbolic choices that are actually somewhat arbitrary if the perception of the model is very striking (although the goal of the visual representation is to be striking).

I think this type of discourse would actually be very important to accompany the actual discourse and examples on the musical text. It would perhaps be most enlightening to see the manner in which different representations of the same musical construct differ and how these different versions compare to representations of musical constructs with different dimensions.

¹ By "symbolic lines," I refer to the manner in which an analytical symbolism resembles the symbolic representation of musical data/performance. Whether one refers to the other or they both refer to the same thing, the distance between perception and object makes the manner of symbolism always predicated by a judgement of inference.

Response #12: The Body in Early Music

#4

Much of our discussion of the body on Monday revolved around questions of activity and passivity of the body involving perceiving vs. being perceived and touching vs. being touched. This stems from Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as being articulated by the threshold between subject and object. As I am wont to do, I began thinking about this threshold in the context of early music, specifically the performative—and not receptive—aspects of early music.

I found one potentially rich line of thinking in the consideration of ensemble and texture. One can think of an ensemble in two ways: as a unified body, and a collection of individual bodies. These conceptions can exist together, in conflict, and in alternation. Texture determines which mode of operation (single entity, or entity of entities) is in play at any given moment in a piece. Notably, when the ensemble behaves as a cohesive unit, the ensemble can either be subject or object, but not both. When the ensemble utilizes individuals or smaller groups, then both subject and object can be present, with the different elements touching and being touched. Changes in texture cause a momentary crisis in identity when the ensemble shifts from unified to divided or vice versa, and these moments of crisis might be where Lacan's reality emerges.

As an example, let us examine a passage in Clément Janequin's Parisian chanson, *Le Guerre*. Highly imitative, Janequin uses a polyphonic texture throughout almost all of the work; however, the texture is not stagnant. Janequin uses varying combinations of voices (e.g., four independent, two against two, three against one, three against three, etc.) to achieve variety, thus changing the make up of the body.

continues



In the following example, one line of text ends with four individuals (four bodies), which are transformed into two pairs (two bodies) at the start of the next line. At m. 21, the upper voices are the subject presenting the new material, but when the lower voices enter at m. 23, the upper voices become the object being acted upon by the new subject, the lower two voices. For a fleeting two beats (the anacrusis and downbeat to m. 23) the body is both touching and being touched. The body is in essence a body of bodies whose constitution constantly in flux.

#5

16

çois, du no - ble roi Fran - çois, du no - ble roi Fran - çois. Et

no - ble roi Fran - çois, du no - ble roi Fran - çois. Et

du no - ble roi Fran-çois, du no - ble roi Fran - çois.

du no - ble roi Fran-çois, du no - ble roi Fran - çois.

21

or - rez si bien é - cou - tez, des coups ru - ez de tous cô - tés,

or - rez si bien é - cou - tez, des coups ru - ez de tous cô - tés,

Et or - rez si bien é - cou -

Et or - rez si bien é - cou -

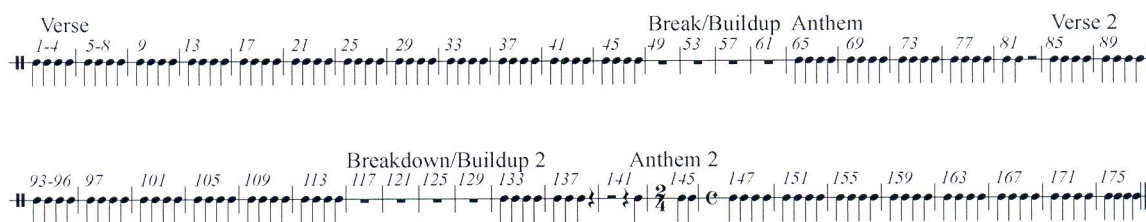
#6

Can we consider instruments as an extension of the body? Maurice Merleau-Ponty's view seems to be in support of this idea. The interconnectedness of our brain with our nervous system defines our experience of perception. One without the other would only tell half of the story, the two are inseparable. So if we extend this idea to that of a violin player for instance, we can see that over years of practice, the physical body starts to adapt to its interaction with the violin. Neurosynaptic connections are formed to create an ease in playing in very particular ways. Furthermore the body develops calluses on the skin to act as an interface with the instrument. The body of the violin itself resonates with each note played giving the player feedback and sending information back to the player's brain through the nervous system. This prosthesis then acts as a modification and extension of the body. Almost in a way to become a new sense organ of the body, however less functional than some of the human bodies built in organs. This idea brings up an interesting idea with regard to Vinko Globokar's *Corporel* where the performer's body becomes the instrument. Just as a singer's voice is the extension of their body while also being a part of their body, the percussionist in *Corporel* is playing their body as an instrument which creates some sort of recursive loop with the body functioning as a prosthesis for the performer to use as a means of expression. So while using the body as a means of expression we can look at the body as an external thing to be played, not a collection of organs to interact with the world, but rather a blurring of the line of our ontological perspective. Is this what the title is pointing to? Our corporeal existence is, as Ponty points out, which is very much in line with the Hegelian point of view, seamlessly connected with our intellectual. So much so that to understand one without the other would leave a gap in the definition. In looking back at the violin player we can see a much clearer definition of how the body and the mind are separate from the instrument but can act as a natural extension of the body and form a prosthesis and a further extension of the nervous system becoming part of the feedback loop that informs perception. The instrument becomes an external part of our body with its own characteristics, feeding the brain with its own particular information. At any time that we put the instrument down we lose a part of our bodily experience.

Ponty discusses the perception of the body by using the absolute permanence of the body as a means of defining it. In relation to the permanence of the body, he adds the concept of a phantom limb, where a person feels a part of their body that is no longer there. Ponty explains that the limb is not a part of recollection or memory, but rather is quasi-present. The absence of the limb establishes the permanence of the body itself.

But how does this relate to music? In Armin's "In and Out of Love," the body can be represented through the "permanence" of the percussion groove. In this song and the majority of other trance songs, this permanence is nearly absolute. The goal of the music is to create sections where there is an absence of any percussion and to bring back the percussion in a climactic arrival. Looking at this hypermeter reduction of "In and Out of Love," you can see that the groove, represented by quarter notes, is present in almost 80% of the song (140 measures out of 178).

Hypermeter Reduction of Percussion Groove in Armin's "In and Out of Love"



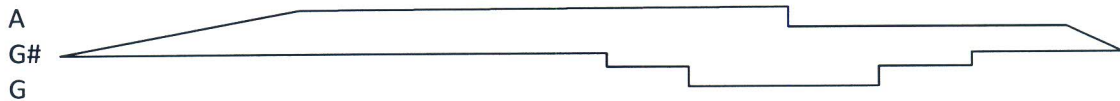
The relative permanence of the percussion groove is a representation of the body through this song. Even though the groove falls silent for a few small moments, this relates to the idea of the phantom limb. In this music, I hear the presence of the groove even through the absence of it, leading to a quasi-presence throughout the whole song—a "phantom" percussion groove. The strong expectation that it will come back gives it a lingering presence even through its absence.

#8

Gubaidulina's First String Quartet opens with the four voices playing a similar gesture in series.

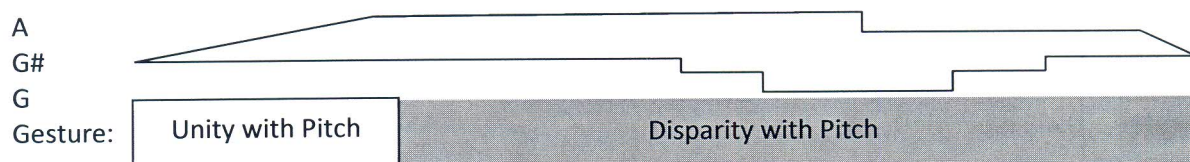
The cellist is the second player to articulate this gesture:

*) — vibrato mit ständig anwachsendem Tonumfang



The “wedge” articulating A-G around a G# center is asymmetrical, and although each voice plays this gesture in series, each voice’s gesture is not identical. By beginning the move toward A, the upper part of the wedge, with ever-increasing vibrato, the physical gesture created by the player’s hand aligns with the increasing pitch. The player’s left hand begins in stillness on the stable G#, and as the wedge expands, so does the distance that the player’s hand and finger travel in the vibrato gesture. The increasing vibrato gesture could even represent an exaggerated version of the expanding oscillations in pitch.

This unity of gesture and sound ends, however, when the lower part of the wedge begins to move toward (and away from) G. This part of the wedge is articulated with tremolo, and the player’s fingers are constantly oscillating, and changes in pitch are not articulated by large gestures of the hand and fingers as a unit, but by minute movements of the fingers on the fingerboard. Here, the gesture of the hand-finger unit is constant, and the player’s gestures do not correspond to the wedge created by the changes in pitch. Pitch/gesture correlation could be mapped as such:



This change from unity to disparity portends the form of the string quartet as a whole.

#9

Merleau-Ponty maintained that a true spatial awareness/perception of the body requires the act of motion. He added that when subjects perform an act—say, grasping towards an object—the act cannot be executed when isolating limbs; rather, the act requires the entire body. The motor 'habit' is how we humans are able to function under some kind of obstacle. For instance, if my obstacle is blindness and I need to grasp towards a sound, I am able to perform the act because I re-imagine the sound in my head and become a member of my imagination. It is then that I am able to grasp accurately toward the sound. If I am simply told to point at the location of the sound, it will be significantly more difficult because this arbitrary spatial recognition activity is not a daily habit mine.

I'm not sure how pertinent this is, but I feel the need to bring it up. I recently finished reading the book, *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. At one point, he discusses an amazing experiment where college subjects—who believed they were part of a marketing survey for headphones—were asked to do various movements in their bodies to see if their headphones would fall off. Half of the subjects were told to nod their heads up and down, while the other half was asked to shake their heads back and forth. The subjects assumed that the radio station they were listening to was a normal station when in reality, it was pre-made and fixed. During 'commercial breaks,' there would be a segment where the news casters would discuss the pros and cons of raising college tuition. When the subjects were finished with the experiment, they would fill out a form. At the end of this form, there was a question asking their opinions of raising tuition or keeping it the same. Amazingly, those who nodded their heads up and down were in favor of raising tuitions. Likewise, those who shook their heads back and forth opposed the tuition hike. This reverse in cause and effect between mind and body, while not necessarily discussed in our reading, must be somehow related. I believe that this proves we can't reduce to

the mind and body into a binary system.

"But each stimulus applied to the body of the normal person arouses a kind of 'potential movement', rather than an actual one; the part of the body in question sheds its anonymity, is revealed, by the presence of a particular tension, as a certain power of action within the framework of the anatomical apparatus."

#11

This sentence really struck a chord with me. The idea that a stimulus will reveal something that already has a certain awareness but is lying dormant. Our bodies are always "on" and the potential for feeling is always available, but it's not until something touches, scrapes, prods, pokes, it that it is made active. The idea of potential movement rather than actual movement is powerful too, it makes us aware of our bodies without us actually having to move it for it to be revealed.

This can be musically compared to small process-oriented changes in the works of Phillip Glass early in his career. Repetitive structures with slowly-evolving changes make us aware of a part of us that we thought was just lying dormant, but with potential changes (which may not really include change, or at the very least subtle ones) instead of active ones (which makes me think of the brash juxtaposition on Louis Andriessen). Andriessen reveals our bodily deadness by completely bashing it in and we are actively involved in the change. The more discreet changes in Glass reveals small parts of our periodic stability by slowly changing one note at a time. Changing one note in a repeated phrase is subtle enough to have us question whether there is a changing note. Is it a ghost note? Is it a real note? Was that an active or potential movement?

We're really listening for pattern breaking which draws us closer to the music, to know it, even passively. We know our body, it's always there, but am I really aware of the small of my back right now? I know I would be if something interacted with it. A red hot cattle prod would give different results than a cool liquid. Either way, we are made aware of something dormant when an outside force impedes on its space, and we react to it. Glass creates these long repeated phrases that we get lulled into and when he breaks it subtly we are made aware.

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of what is learned from patients suffering from psychic blindness reminded me of the physicality of playing instruments. The patient could not perform abstract movements or point to body parts while blindfolded. He could, however, perform the same movements when they were performed as parts of habitual actions. He could not, for example, point to his nose, but when asked to grasp his nose, he found it easily. This is analogous to bodily movements of musicians that would be completely arbitrary and abstract outside the context of performance. A cellist may not be able to quickly find a particular pitch in a high position on the string, but during performance, he can move to the same pitch with speed and precision—even while blindfolded. The pianist, too, can easily and quickly move the hand two or three feet and land precisely on a particular chord without looking in the context of a performance—a feat that would be quite difficult if attempted in isolation. Practice and the acquisition of habits have something to do with this ability to perform quick, precise actions, but even a moderate sight-reader could shift position on the cello or piano with ease.

Related to this is Merleau-Ponty's concept of backgrounding/foregrounding. In the case of musical performance—as opposed—to practice, the performer has a heightened sense of the spatiality of the body. She is more acutely aware of her positions and actions (including every mistake) because her body-in-performance is foregrounded against the background of the concert. The space shrinks to the body, and time feels differently. There is still awareness of the hall—though in focusing on performance it fades into the background.

#12

Thoughts on the relationship between instrument and body:

#13

Could the instrument be experienced as having a body, in some way?

On one level: no. It is clearly an object. It is not sentient. It does not constitute experiences, or interact (on its own) with the world. And yet, it has a kind of double status, being both an object and (according to M-P) becoming part of the player's body when its use becomes habitual. The instrument becomes incorporated into the body schema, an extension of its horizons and abilities, directed towards action.

The relationship is complicated. Only in action is the instrument part of the body, yet an awareness of it is always there, lingering, affecting other (musical) perceptions. On the other hand, if the separation is not quite clean, neither is the incorporation/absorption into the body, which is never quite complete and seamless. There's always an otherness – another bridge, another level of mediating, like the body does already. It's gritty. There is a struggle involved: trying to make it do things, often failing. But how much of that struggle is in the instrument, how much in the body?

Examining the grit of this relationship moves away from the ideal of perfect absorption and ease, becoming one with the instrument, a (passive?) channel through which the music flows. The body in M-P is constantly being enacted and articulated, which requires action, doing, agency. Extending that idea into music, the musical body is active, not a passive channel, and not perfect. Though traditionally musicians try to minimize and smooth over this struggle, some music brings it to the forefront, such as that of Brian Ferneyhough. He says that he wants an un-notatable result, which is achieved by struggling to realize the notation, some of which can't actually be realized. Is this pointing out the limitations of the instrument, or of the body, or of their compound entity? He wants the difficulty to be perceived, implying that the grit of the body, the gaps, the messiness, are not a bad thing. I think this is like Barthes' "grain," hearing the body (of the player, and maybe also of the instrument) in the music.