

Forthcoming in *Open Space*

On Reading *Listening*

Brian Kane

Assistant Professor, Yale University, Dept. of Music

In conversations with colleagues about Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening*, I am often surprised by two recurring themes: the frequency with which Nancy's text is read and the sense of disappointment it produces. For many, the text seems to lack something promised; one expects magnificent illumination from such a vaunted philosopher turning his attention to music. Whether this acute disappointment is indeed Nancy's fault is something of which I'm not altogether certain. Indeed, Nancy's slim volume may not be a text on music at all, or at the very least, not a text *primarily* about music. Disappointment may stem from irresistibly demanding more from the text than what it simply and clearly sets out to do. *Listening* is a text on *listening*.

Despite the sense of disappointment, I often hear people praise Nancy's writing, for even in translation the sensitive reader is struck by Nancy's resourceful use of language. His aphoristic style, full of wit and allusion, is perhaps envied by the academic for being the obverse of arid, scholarly prose that must unpack, explain,

demonstrate and leave little unsaid. Yet, Nancy's book, while aphoristic, is hardly autonomous. It is overripe with claims about listening, resonance, echo, and rhythm, which invoke thinkers to whom Nancy is closely associated, most importantly Derrida and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. The echoes described in the text are not simply sound figures, but they themselves trace Nancy's method of engaging philosophical problems, through reading, listening and responding to his interlocutors.

The paragraph that opens *Listening* is no doubt an allusion to Derrida's "Tympan," which itself opens *Margins of Philosophy*. Two themes are brought together in close proximity, the question of the limit and the question of listening. In "Tympan," Derrida begins:

Being at the limit: these words do not yet form a proposition, and even less a discourse. But there is enough in them, provided that one plays upon it, to engender almost all the sentences in this book.
(Derrida, *Margins*, x)

The question of the limit is constantly posed in Derrida's work, for the limit is the place where philosophy produces the distinctions that allow it to maintain its propriety. By producing the limit by which it distinguishes itself from its other (say, literature), philosophy secures its territory, circumscribing and maintaining itself, while expulsing its other as the improper. The question of the

limit can be brought to bear upon a second question, the question of listening. If, as Derrida argues in *Speech and Phenomena*, the philosopher has found himself bound to the logic of auto-affection such that the paradigmatic act of guaranteeing meaning is the act of hearing oneself speak, then one must interrogate the philosopher's ear to find alternative modes of listening that avoid reinscribing philosophy's internal soliloquy. Derrida poses precisely this question:

Can one violently penetrate philosophy's field of listening without immediately...making the penetration resonate within itself, appropriating the emission for itself...In other words, can one puncture the tympanum of a philosopher and still be heard and understood by him? [*Autrement dit, peut-on crever le tympan d'un philosophe et continuer à se faire entendre de lui?*] (Derrida, *Margins*, xii)

I have provided the original French of the final sentence, because I want to underscore how the phrase "se faire entendre" is forced into English as "be heard and understood," in order to capture the double sense of *entendre*, which means both to hear and to understand. Yet hearing and understanding are not equivalent. Where is the limit at which hearing changes into understanding? What moment of transport carries us from one inflection of *entendre* to another? What is this other mode of listening, and how can it be articulated? The conjunction of the question of the limit and the question of listening, the

limit that distinguishes hearing from understanding, motivates Derrida's final question about pricking the ear of the philosopher.

For Nancy, this other mode is called *écouter*. Thus, when reading the opening paragraph of *Listening*, one not only hears the echoes of Derrida's question of the limit and of listening, but detects the opening of a difference between *entendre* and *écouter* that will become one of Nancy's central themes. Nancy writes:

Assuming that there is still sense in asking questions about the limits, or about some limits, of philosophy...we will ponder this: is listening [l'*écoute*] something of which philosophy is capable? Or...hasn't philosophy superimposed upon listening [l'*écoute*], beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening something else that might be more on the order of *understanding* [l'*entente*]?
(Nancy, *Listening*, 1)

Nancy is not simply drawing a distinction between *entendre* and *écouter*, in order to sort them along the lines of the proper and improper. For this would be to allow philosophy's internal soliloquy to remain unbroken, that is, to reinscribe the very technique whose legitimacy is questioned in Derrida's work. Rather, Nancy appears to be posing the question of the limit anew, by asking if there is a mode of philosophical listening which allows us to hear what is at stake in the question of the limit—a mode

of listening that, I assume, would be very much like the mode in which Derrida wants his texts to be heard.

Although I hesitate to call describe Nancy's text as a work for insiders, I believe that tacit awareness of these echoes is something of a necessary condition for understanding *Listening*, if the reader wants to avoid acute disappointment. But, it is not a sufficient condition. For Nancy does more than drum up echoes in his text; he also engages various problems that accrue around the question of listening, within the philosophical tradition to which Nancy responds. Listening is a nodal point that allows Nancy to engage in questions of phenomenology, subjectivity and temporality. Given this orientation, given this set of concerns, and given the echoes in Nancy's text of other texts, how can the non-expert find a place to begin reading *Listening*?

In what follows, I would like to try a severe technique; I am going to explicate one sentence of Nancy's text, and quickly try to bring as much to bear on it as possible. I have selected this sentence not to totalize all of the interests at work in Nancy's text, rather because it deals with a certain set of themes about listening, phenomenology and selfhood that I find compelling. (And I would hope that others may find them compelling as well.)

The sentence concerns the listening subject. Unlike some contemporary thinkers about the subjectivity, Nancy does not view the subject as something to be easily dismissed, performed away, or fractured to bits. The subject remains a perpetual question. To engage Nancy's thinking about the relation of listening and subjectivity, I want to closely read the following sentence:

It is a question, then, of going back from the phenomenological subject, an intentional line of sight, to a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to that same self. (21)

If Nancy is developing the question of the subject away from a phenomenological subject towards a resonant subject, what distinguishes the one from the other? Nancy qualifies the phenomenological subject in various ways, associating it with an "intentional line of sight" (21), and a "phenomenal gaze." (19) He also invokes it negatively, in its contrast to the resonant subject, by asking elsewhere: "Why, in the case of the ear, is there withdrawal and turning inward, a making resonant, but in the case of the eye, there is manifestation and display, a making evident?" (3) The phenomenological subject and the resonant subject are not simply reducible to the difference between the eye and the ear, a simple ocular-centrism versus an auricular-centrism, nor comparing the relative

values of an *augenmensch* with an *ohrenmensch*. The difference concerns the logic to which these modalities tend, the eye supporting the "logic of manifestation" (20), "phenomenality" or "appearance" (3), the ear supporting the logic of "evocation" (20), dispersal or resonance.

This opto-logy, the logic of the eye, classically undergirds the phenomenological subject (at least in Husserl and those in his horizon), which has always been a subject that constitutes its object through an act of intentionality. Although Nancy takes up Husserl and his famous discussion of melody from the *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, in order to make this point, perhaps it is worth mentioning another context where this the opto-phenomeno-logical subject is deployed as a listener, and how such a thinking persists in conceptualizations of listening.

The phenomenological listener is central in the work of Pierre Schaeffer, whose neglected *Traité des objets musicaux* is perhaps the most extensive example of Husserlian phenomenology applied to the aural domain. Schaeffer deploys his famous acousmatic reduction (which is really an *epoché*, or bracketing of the "natural standpoint") in order to disclose an immanent sphere of aural experience, or better, evidence. Within this

immanence, through a process of "reduced listening," one discovers the sonorous object (*l'objet sonore*), which Schaeffer describes as an "...intentional unity, corresponding to acts of synthesis." (Schaeffer, *Traité*, 263)

The problem is this: the sonorous object is conceived of as a unitary synthesis by the subject of a series of adumbrations. A unity is formed out of distinct parts by a subject who directs the process but remains untouched, or untouchable, by it. Nancy, however, challenges any adumbrational thinking of sound; unlike objects, which are visible only partially, always seen in perspective, Nancy writes, "Sound has no hidden face: it is all in front, in back, and outside inside, *inside-out* in relation to the most general logic of presence as appearing, as phenomenality or as manifestation." (13) Synthesis via adumbrations, whether constituting the objects of vision or hearing, whether physical thing or sonorous object, always produces a split between a temporal production and a temporalized reproduction: between temporal act of continuous intentional grasping, of synthesis, and the reproduction of the intentional unity as object, as synthesized. Adumbrational, intentional synthesis, the kind of synthesis found in Schaeffer, neglects production for

reproduction, reifying its temporal productivity into a thing, a sonorous object. Phantasmagorically, one finds the phenomenological gaze peering out from inside the ear. This is why Nancy qualifies the phenomenological subject, by invoking "the intentional line of sight", and follows Granel in suggesting that "Husserl persists in 'seeing' the melody instead of listening to it." (21)

Husserl, when discussing the constitution of a melody as a unity within internal time-consciousness, overlooks what Nancy calls its "modulation," (19) or what one may want to think of as its temporal, continuously flowing appearing and disappearing. "[Husserl] does not concentrate his ear on musical resonance but rather converts it ahead of time into the object of an intention that configures it. Sound (and/or sense) is what is not at first intended. It is not first 'intentioned': on the contrary, sound it what places its subject, which has not preceded it with an intention [*qui ne l'aurait pas précédé d'un visée*], in tension, or under tension."¹ (20)

¹ Two side comments: First, the verb "viser", which Madell translates as "aim," is the word used in French to mark intentionality as a consciousness-of, as a directedness-towards. Thus, I have altered the translation to underscore Nancy's care to place intentionality in tension. Second, when Nancy contrasts the "unity of monitoring the melody and its modulation, its tune and its notes" (19), he is echoing the critique of "melocentrism" which can be found in the work of his close collaborator Philippe Lacoue-

Before inquiring about how sound precedes the phenomenological subject, I want to ask a further question about the subject: Who is it? What is it? Who or what exactly is doing this "intentioning?" As a correlate of the sonorous object, one would expect to find a sonorous subject (*le sujet sonore* to go with *l'objet sonore*). However, nothing is less sonorous, more unmoved, than this transcendental ego, a punctual ideality, a vaporous lord constituting its immanent objectivities. Well, perhaps the phenomenological subject gets what it deserves: a static, foundational subject disclosing a world of static, constituted objects.

Nancy calls *his* subject "a resonant subject" because both the object and subject of listening, in his account, resonate. And they resonate because the object and subject of listening, both share a similar "form, structure or movement" (9), that of the *renvoi*—a word whose translation as "reference" in this text misses its double meaning as both a sending-away (a dismissal), and a return.

To see how this term is deployed in Nancy's text, compare two passages on meaning and sound:

Labarthe. In "The Echo of the Subject," melocentrism always covers up rhythm, the more significant dimension of music, one which is ultimately precedes and structures subjectivity.

Meaning: "Meaning consists in a reference [*renvoi*]. In fact it is made of a totality of referrals: from a sign to a thing, from a state of things to a quality, from a subject to another subject or to itself, all simultaneously." (7)

Sound: "Sound is also made of referrals...it resounds, that is, it re-emits itself while still actually "sounding," which is already "re-sounding" since that's nothing else but referring back to itself." (7-8)

Meaning and sound, as Nancy describes them, both share the same "form, structure or movement": they are comprised of a series of infinite referrals, a sending-away which returns, only to be sent away again, ever anew. The return penetrates the sending, "all simultaneously," producing a dispersal of bounds and rebounds without end. This applies, for Nancy, equally to the actual physics of sonorous reverberation as well as to the infinite circulation of meaning and reference. Meaning and sound share the "form, structure, or movement" of resonance.

If the phenomenological subject got what it deserved—a static sonorous object—then *mutatis mutandis*, the same follows for the resonant subject. Nancy conceives the subject, not as a proper self (an I), not as the self of the other, but as a "form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral [*renvoi*], since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral." (9) The self is always an approach to self, in that any

representation of the self (a specular *imago* or proper "I", the other, whether present or absent, rival or gap) cannot capture the productivity of the self as an ongoing temporal, or rhythmic, flux. This unrepresentable self produces an oddly quasi-circular logic, a spiral logic: the self is always an "approach to the self." (9) This involuted curl, this misalignment of presentation and representation lies behind Nancy's claims that the self "identifies itself by resonating from self to self," in the irreconcilability between "[the] in itself and [the] for itself," and is, "hence outside itself, at once the same as and other than itself", or echoing Lacoue-Labarthe, "one in the echo of the other." (9) So, sound is not "intentioned" by the subject, rather it is contemporaneous with the subject because of the fact that meaning, sound and self all share the same "form, structure or movement", namely, *renvoi*, resonance.

Perhaps I ought to revisit the original sentence, to see if it has become clearer:

It is a question, then, of going back from the phenomenological subject, an intentional line of sight, to a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to that same self. (21)

There are a few terms that still could use some explication, like "spacing" (a central term in Nancy's

thinking), or echo, which I've only barely touched upon (at what point, at what delay, what spacing changes or transforms a resonance into an echo?) or even the difference between the intentional and the intensive.

But one term still stands out in need of explication, and that term is "it". What is the "it" that begins this sentence, its subject? In the paragraph from which this sentence is extraced, "it" is literally "the question of opening oneself up to the resonance of Being." Perhaps this opening to Being is precisely what Nancy sees afforded by listening, at least when conceptualized in his "beyond-phenomenological" (20) manner. As for our sentence, allow me to attempt a quick paraphrase via substitution:

Listening is a question of moving from the phenomenological subject to the resonant subject, a subject that is listening to the infinite referral, the resonance, which co-constitutes meaning, sound and itself, all simultaneously. Listening then is a listening to sounds as much as a listening to self, a way of listening beyond the punctual imago or proper "I" we often fancy to believe we posses, towards an unrepresentable self, albeit one that is never outside representation, one that shares an important homology with sound.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2007. *Listening*, tr. Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press.

Schaeffer, Pierre. 1966. *Traité des objets musicaux*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil.