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# **Hermeneutics and Anti-Hermeneutics of Music**

## **The Question of Listening in Jean-Luc Nancy and Lawrence Kramer**

*Erik Wallrup*

### **1**

Something strange happened when musicology, always a latecomer, at the end of the 1980s started to take part in the theoretical discourses that had permeated the humanities for at least a couple of decades. When American musicologists began to read poststructuralist, feminist and postmodern thinkers, something called “New Musicology” was born, even if we now rather speak about “critical musicology” (you cannot stay young or new for ever, especially not in the ever-changing field of theory). Pivotal in this reception was the idea of dissemination of meaning, and the hermeneutics of music saw a possibility of taking advantage of a view of language where signification was heavily criticized and the weaker notion of meaning took its place. Music seemed to be much closer to language than it had been for ages. The ideology of absolute music, the total dominance of formalistic analysis (reaching from traditional harmonic analysis to pitch class set analysis) and the positivistic view of historical investigation were suddenly challenged. Today, twenty-five years later, the dominance of formalism is gone, analysis is often historically contextualized and interpretation is something that can happen in the language of musicology, too, not only in the rendering of a musical work of art.

That does not seem to be strange. Sometimes we witness this kind of changes within the sciences. But we should remember that the deconstructive readings of both philosophic and literary texts often ended in a statement saying that language is self-referential and in a demonstration of how meaning was dissolved in the text. Words were expected not to refer to any reality outside language, only to other words, and in the end they showed themselves to be paradoxical. Here, music could be taken as a model: notes have no significance in themselves, only in relation to each other can they have any meaning, and the total lack of meaning is always an option. Since the romantics, the age-old relation between mathematics and music had been used to

characterize language, too, with Novalis speaking about a self-sufficient play, expressing only its own marvellous nature. In this context, New Musicology does not seem to be that radical anymore, and the repressed past of contemporary musical hermeneutics in the birth of the discipline, namely with the German musicologists Hermann Kretzschmar and Arnold Schering in the first decades of the twentieth century, when music was said to have a content that should be verbalized, comes back as a ghost. Whereas language had lost its stable signification in the heated discussion among French philosophers (and certainly not only by them), music was in a peculiar way suggested to have a meaning that could be expressed in language.

Something of this strife can be found in the American reception of Jean-Luc Nancy's intriguing book *À l'écoute*, and then especially by today's most renowned musical hermeneutist, Lawrence Kramer. The response to Nancy did not come at once, when he published his book in 2002, but some years later when it had appeared in English translation and then with two texts added. This change made the book even more incisive what concerns the relation to music. In the first of these added texts, «March in Spirit in Our Ranks», Nancy associates the betrayal of music's self-referentiality with the instrumentalization of music by the National Socialists. In the second, «How Music Listens to Itself», he elaborates his own notion of musical listening as a listening that allows music to listen to itself: «It returns to itself, it reminds itself of itself, and it feels itself as resonance itself: a relationship to self deprived, stripped of all egoism and all ipseity».<sup>1</sup> In the present article, I shall after a short introduction to *À l'écoute* first discuss Kramer's criticism of Nancy, however, not as being representative for the musicological reception at large in the Anglophone world,<sup>2</sup> but in order to show that we find an interesting paradox in the new hermeneutics of music. Then I shall return to Nancy's musical thinking, suggesting some alternatives

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1. NANCY 2007, 67. Since I am investigating Kramer's discussion of Nancy's position, I shall refer to the English translation by Charlotte Mandell (NANCY 2007), but when there is reason to scrutinize Nancy's formulation I may turn to the French version (NANCY 2002).

2. Reaching from Roger Mathew Grant's appreciating review of the book in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* to the Nancy section of the Music and Philosophy conference 2013 arranged by Royal Music Association at King's College London.

to his views on the musical.

2

As already indicated, Nancy's *À l'écoute* is not a book on music, even if music sometimes plays a decisive role there; it is a book on listening. He sets out by suggesting that philosophy has only been able to understand (*entendre*, which also means "to hear"), not to listen (*écouter*). This is an elaboration of a theme that has cropped up in many contexts in the last decade, namely the fact that sight has been the privileged sense in the history of Western philosophy (linked to visually related expressions like "insight" and "theory"), whereas hearing as well as touch, smell and taste have been supposed to be philosophically insufficient. From the sun outside Plato's cave to the excess of light in the Enlightenment and Husserl's visualized hearing in *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, sight has been paradigmatic and dominant. Part of this history is told by David Michael Levin, and Martin Jay has written about the French rising against the dominance of sight in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> But opposing voices could be heard even earlier: we have Schopenhauer freeing himself from the Will by listening to music (it soothes him, while it only disturbed Kant) as well as Nietzsche's auditory philosophy, auscultating the idols of thought. Nevertheless, as a general judgment on Western thought the assumption is valid. Even Heidegger, with whom hearing started to be active in a more sensitive way, leading to listening, was long unable to release his readings of Hölderlin from the urge to understand.

Nancy's distinction is more exact. According to him, a philosopher needs to neutralize listening in order to philosophize. Only by stripping off tone and timbre, resonance and the resounding body, can the philosopher think. What Nancy wants to do is to prick up the philosophical ear (*tendre l'oreille philosophique*). Instead of things being made evident, they should be made resonant. He listens to the different tonalities of sense: there are both *sens sensible* and *sens sensé*, both «perceiving sense» and «perceived meaning». But these dualities should not be taken as sheer opposites; instead they have to do with

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3. Cfr. LEVIN 1988 and JAY 1993.

each other. And he asks: «Why, however, does each of these facets also touch the other, and by *touching*, put into play the whole system of the senses?».<sup>4</sup>

Nancy's answer lies in "timbre":

It forms the first consistency of sonorous *sense* as such, under the rhythmic condition that makes it resound (even a simple monotone contains rhythm and timbre). *Sense*, here, is the ricochet, the repercussion, the reverberation: the echo in a given body, even *as* this given body, or even as the gift to *self*, of this given body.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of being easily notated in a score or measured, like the other musical parameters, timbre is «the unity of a diversity that in its unity does not reabsorb»,<sup>6</sup> in other words a singular plural. It resounds «with and in the totality of perceptible registers»,<sup>7</sup> and can be found in the *Klangfarbe*, in the textures, in the *parfumes de soirs*, in the bitter discords, that is metaphorically in sight, touch, smell and taste (these examples being an elaboration of Nancy's formulations).

The human voice has its timbre, and the meaning of the words cannot be disconnected from the voice that utters them. Even when we are reading texts in silence, the words are not mute (hear, right now, the insistent tone that lends its force from another, more resonant voice; different voices can be discernable in one and the same word, timbre). Remember how Heidegger in *Der Satz vom Grund* auscultated the different tonalities, the different accents and melodies, in one and the same phrase: «Nihil est sine ratione» or, in German, «Nichts ist ohne Grund».<sup>8</sup>

Yes, haven't taken a gigantic step through Nancy's *À l'écoute*, I have not mentioned that he distinguishes between listening that «strains toward a present sense beyond sound» when directed at a speech, whereas in listening to music «it is from sound itself that sense is offered to auscultation».<sup>9</sup>

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4. NANCY 2007, 2-3.

5. NANCY 2007, 40.

6. NANCY 2007, 2-3.

7. NANCY 2007, 42.

8. HEIDEGGER 1957.

9. NANCY 2007, 6.

But I have also not mentioned that Nancy imagines a subject in the form of a diapason, a diapason-subject that has different tuning according to which person we intend, and, one can go on to imagine, that even that tuning changes. In other words, even if Nancy does speak about musical listening, that is not his main goal with the book; music just makes him wonder or wander through different registers of being.

3

Already in his book *Interpreting Music* (2011), Lawrence Kramer complained about «distinguished philosophers» continuing to «reinvent the nineteenth-century metaphysics of music under other names»,<sup>10</sup> thinking of Nancy in particular. He continues by writing that «Music is the last bastion of the ideal in a thoroughly de-idealized world. Its pleasures can shrug off wordly burdens even if we acknowledge that its sound is inflected by them».<sup>11</sup> Kramer describes an attitude that could, perhaps, be circumscribed as an “othering” of music, that is, the non-linguistic form of art music is set in opposition to philosophical discourse, thereby mystifying it, even making it exotic. What Kramer says is, to put it crudely, that philosophers today, when they take an interest in music at all, do not reach the standards that theoretically minded musicology has reached. In general, that may be true, but is it really pertinent for Nancy? As Marie-Eve Morin observes in her recent introduction to Nancy’s thought, the French philosopher often retains traditional concepts, but brings them into play in a new way.<sup>12</sup>

Before we can answer that question, Kramer’s own position concerning musical hermeneutics should be briefly outlined. He has justly been praised for having put forward a theoretically underpinned hermeneutics of music, for the first time systemized in *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900*. There, he draws on Austin’s distinction between locutionary meaning (claims of a speech act) and illocutionary force (the power a speech act exerts on a situation), saying that music may not have any locutionary abilities whereas it certainly has an impact

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10. KRAMER 2011, 97.

11. KRAMER 2011, 97.

12. MORIN 2012, 4.

on the flow of events, being expressive acts: «If we can learn to recognize them as such, to concretize the illocutionary force of music as we concretize its harmonic, rhythmic, linear, and formal strategies, we can then go on to interpret musical meaning». <sup>13</sup> However, by then he has also introduced the criticism of Austin's speech act theory in Derrida's famous text «Signature Event Context», <sup>14</sup> where the French philosopher argues that all acts of communication must be iterable in different contexts, thereby being open for an never-ending reinterpretation. Thus, communication is bound to disseminate meaning in different directions.

It is by opening a "hermeneutic window" (Kramer's telling metaphor) in the work that enables the musical hermeneutist to enter the field of interpretation. It is, however, the work that affords the interpreter this possibility, either by "textual inclusions" like titles, texts or programs, or by "citational inclusions" that alludes musically or refers textually to other works of art, or, lastly, by something that Kramer calls "structural tropes" – «a structural procedure, capable of various practical realizations, that can also function as a typical expressive act within a certain cultural/historical framework». <sup>15</sup> We can see that Kramer finds passages from music to texts in a wide sense (in both literature and the visual arts), but that he also aspires to have found a kind of structure that can be discerned in different contexts, in poetry, philosophy, visual art and society at large. <sup>16</sup>

If Derrida with his text showed how meaning in language is unstable, that any attempt to stop the dissemination is meaningless, then Kramer tries to figure out how music is drawn to meaning or how meaning is drawn to music. He is not satisfied with the notion of musical meaning, which pertains to an immanent meaningfulness that is not easily translatable into language, no, it is the transgression of the border to language that is important to him. There is nothing outside the text, Kramer would agree with Derrida, definitely not music.

It is these suppositions that Nancy challenges. Kramer is certainly right when he in *Expression and Truth* (2012) points out that «Nancy

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13. KRAMER 1990, 9.

14. In DERRIDA 1984.

15. KRAMER 1990, 10.

16. KRAMER 1990, 6-11.

assumes that any involvement of the semantic or linguistic or affective immediately negates the musicality of music, as if these modes of representation could not be plurally singular together with music as heard presence, and as if music's heard presence were the only way of experiencing music». <sup>17</sup>

Kramer picks out one of the emblematic formulations of Nancy's book, namely: «Listening is musical when it is music that listens to itself». <sup>18</sup> This formulation is an extreme version of the romantic notion of the tones only caring about themselves in their play since it musicalizes the subject too, leading to music being the subject to which the listener is subjected. Kramer's conclusion: «music is [in Nancy] the negation of human agency, identity, and responsibility». <sup>19</sup>

#### 4

Even if Kramer's criticism is serious here, the scope is even greater when he turns to an ideological discussion of Nancy's book. The second flank of attack is the association between Nancy's position and the idea of German supremacy: «Never mind that as a matter of history, the nonsemantic, nonlinguistic dimension of music was precisely what apologists for Teutonic supremacy claimed as uniquely their own». <sup>20</sup> Kramer does not, of course, recommend that we should not mind this history, so the «never mind» in the quotation is only there to drive the nail even deeper into the imagined coffin.

What he intends is the ideology of «absolute music», detaching music from not only content and emotionality, but also from society, politics and questions of gender. We can here draw attention to how Susan McClary, the second most prolific musicologist taking part in the New Musicology, was attacked by her American colleagues when writing that at the end of the development section of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the listener witnesses a rape. The traditional musicologist Pieter Van den Toorn accused her of being

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17. KRAMER 2012, 143-144.

18. NANCY 2007, 58.

19. KRAMER 2012, 144.

20. KRAMER 2012, 144.



obsessed by a belief in the sexual-political meaning of music,<sup>21</sup> and even if she later tempered herself when publishing parts of the texts in her by now classical *Feminine Endings*,<sup>22</sup> Robert Fink has argued<sup>23</sup> that what McClary did was actually to adhere to a hermeneutic practice that started already in the earliest reception of the symphony.

We are, that should be clear by now, on the old battleground of absolute music. It should also be clear why Kramer is irritated: here comes a French philosopher, so closely related to the deconstructive movement that Kramer himself is influenced by, apostrophizing and defending the target for Kramer's criticism during thirty years of intellectual work.

But then the ghost comes back, the repressed ghost of a father who is not recognized as such by the American hermeneutists of today. What they do not acknowledge is that at the same time as Arnold Schering wrote his *Beethoven in neuer Deutung* (published in its first edition in 1934), where he suggests that a series of Beethoven's key works should be understood from the point of view of scenes from Shakespeare's and Schiller's dramas, he saluted the *Machtergreifung* of the National Socialist party, placing himself at their service, and spoke about the Germanic in German music.

No, this is not to suggest that either Kramer or McClary take part in a dialogue held in secret with a defamed precursor, but what I do mean is that they are heirs to a tradition that definitely is not protected from totalitarian tendencies. If we read an earlier contribution to the hermeneutics of music by Schering, the article «Zur Grundlegung der musikalischen Hermeneutik» (which is without any political blunders), then we find a series of parallels between his practice and what would be brought about with the New Musicology. There, he is totally aware of the difference between a sounding musical structure and the linguistic interpretation, but he stresses that there are musical events that insist on interpretation (just as Kramer speaks about «hermeneutic windows»). There, he gives attention to the likeness between the dynamics of music and the dynamics of human desire, even he does not call them "desire" as McClary does, but instead uses expressions like the Will, relating to Schopenhauer, and the drives. We even find

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21. Cfr. TOORN VAN DEN 1995.

22. Cfr. McCLARY 1991.

23. Cfr. FINK 2004.

corporeal aesthetics in the name of *Leib*, the lived body.

Having come so far, we can clearly see that neither the formal approach nor the hermeneutic approach can be exclusively defined as the one responding to the aesthetics of the Third Reich; more exactly, both of them were elements of it, without being essential for the Nazi understanding of music. That does not mean that music can be placed outside the murderous ideology; it can be placed both inside and outside in both its modes.

5

But what meaning does music have in Nancy's thought? If we take a closer look at the passages Lawrence Kramer quotes, they are all to be found on one single page of Nancy's work. To be sure, that is not the only page worth quoting, not even the only work worth attention. In another text, published in *The Sense of the World*, we can find a critical reflection on the "ineffability" topos apostrophized and attacked by Kramer. Nancy writes:

One could say that music has signified for us significance itself, and even beyond significance the sublime access (say, in the mode of negative theology) to a pure presentation of sense. But in order for this to be the case, it was necessary that it be understood as "an art beyond signification". The threshold of such "beyond" is the critical point par excellence of any approach to sense: one can always pass on anew to an ineffable (but sonorous, audible, vocal, evocative) "oversignification", but one can also keep to the threshold as to the in-significant opening of sense.<sup>24</sup>

And on the threshold music shall stay. Commenting on what he calls the «insurmountable division» of musical aesthetics and criticism between «the most insignificant technique» (that is musical analysis) and «the interpretation most charged with sense» (different hermeneutic approaches), Nancy finds a new threshold between aesthetic sense and signified sense.<sup>25</sup> No, music cannot be found in the signification or the structures stripped of all resonance; it dances on the threshold;

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24. NANCY 1997, 85.

25. Cfr. NANCY 1997, 188, n. 91.

it is sheer play. «The entire body is involved in this play – tensions, distances, heights, movements, rhythmical schemes, grains, and timbres – without which there is no music». <sup>26</sup> Sense is not abstracted from the sounding world of music, instead: «That which is propagated, apportioned, and dispersed with the song, in its innumerable forms, is at the very least – and stubbornly – a playful execution of sense, a being-as-act through cadence, attack, inflection, echo, syncopation [...]». <sup>27</sup>

In this citation “sense” cannot be understood as *sens sensé*, but as *sens sensible*. This is not a way of setting music against language, and instead we are coming closer to writing, to *écrire* (and now we are back in the book *Listening* again): «making sense resound beyond signification». <sup>28</sup> Language has music in itself, but not the traditional notion of the musicality of language: it is

the arch-music of that resonance where it *listens to itself* (*s’écoute*), by listening to itself *finds itself* (*se trouve*), and by finding itself *deviates* (*s’écarte*) from itself in order to resound further away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its “subject”, which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text. <sup>29</sup>

Both in music and in language, listening has to do with the non-coded, «what is not yet framed in a system of signifying references, and we never *hear* (*entend*) anything but the already coded, which we decode». <sup>30</sup>

Yes, the different musical modes, the keys, musical figures, rhythms, all these components have from time to time been given different significations. Wagner’s *Leitmotiven* are nothing but a machinery producing signification. But Nancy takes us to a point before such codification, to a point where there is only movement and fluidity, but also, and this is important, where the affects dance, being rhythm. It is the opposite to the *Affektenlehre* of the Baroque (perhaps, however, a

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26. NANCY 1997, 86.

27. NANCY 1997, 86.

28. NANCY 2007, 34.

29. NANCY 2007, 35.

30. NANCY 2007, 36.

system invented in our own time), and instead we «touch a fundamental rhythmic of affect as such».<sup>31</sup>

Even if such a formulation brings us close to Nietzsche, there is certainly another bent of Nancy's thinking on music. He never stops drawing near to timbre, the colouring of both words and notes. Timbre makes him deviate from phenomenology: «Rather than speaking of timbre and listening in terms of "intentional aim", it is necessary to say that before any relationship to object, listening opens up in timbre, which resounds in it rather than for it».<sup>32</sup> And suddenly we are afforded an insight:

timbre is communication of the incommunicable: provided it is understood that the incommunicable is nothing other, in a perfectly logical way, than communication itself, that thing by which a subject makes an echo – of self, of the other, it's all one – it's all one in the plural.<sup>33</sup>

## 6

On the threshold. That means that two spaces are opened up. Music is not in-significant, as well as not significant. It is neither, and it should be pointed out that Lawrence Kramer, on his part, never suggests that music has to do with signification; he is one of the most sensitive listeners of our time, able to find the most secret paths between sounding music and discursive interpretation. However, according to Nancy, in language, *sens sensible* and *sens sensé* touch, but what about in music?

On the one hand, Nancy describes how musical listening is a tension towards meaning (*sens*):

but toward it completely ahead of signification, meaning in its nascent state, in the state of return (*renvoi*) for which the end of this return is not given (the concept, the idea, the information), and hence to the state of return without end, like an echo that continues on its own and that *is nothing* but this continuance going in a *decrecendo*, or even in *morendo*».<sup>34</sup>

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31. NANCY 2007, 38.

32. NANCY 2007, 40.

33. NANCY 2007, 41.

34. NANCY 2007, 27.

Music still dances on the threshold, and it does not lose its balance.

On the other hand, he also says that the return of music is given in musical listening: «Listening is musical when it is music that listens to itself». <sup>35</sup> By then, he has already said: «To listen, as well as to look or to contemplate, is to touch the work in each part – or else to be touched by it, which comes to the same thing». <sup>36</sup> In the book *Listening*, he accordingly touches upon the *work*, but in another context he is more outspoken. In a foreword to the philosopher Peter Szendy's *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, he discusses the listening subject and turns the perspective around in the same way, saying that the listening subject is the subject of music, even the musical work. «The work is what refers (*renvoie*) to itself, and in a way the entire work (*ouvrage*) of this work (*oeuvre*) consists in this referral, by which alone it is possible – and necessary – for the work to refer and send itself (*renvoie et s'envoie*) to the outside (to the world, to the soul)». And so, a citation: «Thus “listening is immanent to the work: it is an activity of the musical subject”». <sup>37</sup>

Nancy takes the citation from the French composer François Nicolas, writing on Schoenberg, <sup>38</sup> but interestingly Nicolas had a text published in the volume where the main part of *À l'écoute* was printed for the first time, namely in the expanded conference volume *L'Écoute*, edited by Szendy after a colloquium held in Paris at IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) in 1999. This circumstance is interesting, since it shows us the link to the great modernistic tradition in France – with the founder of IRCAM, Pierre Boulez, still being highly influential. What is more, it also heralds the return of the Work.

If, in many ways, the tendency of the latest decades has been an emancipation of the listener, then Nicolas goes in the opposite direction in his contribution to the IRCAM volume:

In conformity with the thesis that the subject of music – the musical subject – is the work and not the individual musicians who compose it, play it or listen to it, we must start to think that there is a listening

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35. NANCY 2007, 67.

36. NANCY 2007, 65.

37. NANCY 2008, xi.

38. Cfr. NICOLAS 1997.

supported by the work itself and no longer by the individuals who listen to it or perceive it.<sup>39</sup>

Probably, this is one of the sentences in which Nancy finds «a remarkable counterpoint» in relation to his own essay in the same volume.<sup>40</sup> Both authors take in any case a totally different route from Roland Barthes, who goes from the authoritative work to a text, be it linguistic or musical, open to joyful excursions.

When Kramer criticized Nancy, he did not observe the tendencies to hypostatize the work. But if I find a problem in Nancy's extremely rich thoughts about musical listening, it is precisely the work's return to the work itself. The position is close to the structural listening we can find in Adorno, and in his kind of musical hermeneutics, the work may be in opposition to the surrounding world; however, an opposition is still a relation. Playing with the words *oeuvre* (work) and *ouvrage* (entire work, or, how the work works), as Nancy does, one could also add the verb *ouvrir*, to open. A world emerges in the musical work, and this world is not something untouchable, but instead – using Nancy's parlance – it touches the other worlds around it. There are a rich variety of ways to engage oneself in this worlding world. It can be understood from its composition, its way of being put together from different parts. It can be touched upon with hearing, opening up sense. But listening to it, the listener can also be attuned by that world, being disposed by it. Perhaps this is a touch, but this touch is not only a referral back to the world of the work, it is not only a score to be sent to the world outside. Instead, it continues to work beyond that work, it works outside the work. Being a world it changes the worlds, the world. It is already the world, in a way.

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39. NICOLAS 2000, 58.

40. Cfr. NANCY 2007, 70, n. 6.

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