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Listening to Music

Allan Schindler



Music

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Allan Schindler

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Preface

Listening to Music is designed for use in a one-term introductory music survey course at the undergraduate level. The primary aims of the book are to explore the nature of musical expression and to present this discussion in a manner that encourages perceptive and involved listening. Only by active participation in the process of musical communication, with both composer and performers, can the listener experience the unique insight and joy of musical understanding; this understanding is ultimately a journey into oneself, but it is also one that can be shared.

The principal focus of this book is on the music itself rather than its context. The first questions most people are likely to ask when confronted with an unfamiliar piece of music are not, "When and where was it written? What influence does it reflect?" but rather more elemental ones, such as, "What kind of statement does it make? How is it put together? How do I respond to the music, and why?" Historical information can immeasurably enrich our appreciation of the unique qualities of a musical work, but it becomes vital only after we have gained an initial feel for those qualities.

Whatever their historical period or style, the compositions examined in this book are viewed as living works, not as museum pieces. Ample historical and biographical information is introduced within this broader perspective, but it remains subordinate to the development of effective, individual listening skills. This is not meant to minimize the importance of historical scholarship. Without it we would have few objective criteria for evaluating a work, and would be left merely with subjective attitudes or allegorical description ("the cellos sing a mellifluous theme"). Basic historical and biographical information is necessary even at the introductory level, or else the music remains faceless. But once the listener has been seized by the strength or beauty of a musical statement, his or her own desire to understand it better and experience it more fully will encourage further exploration of its background. Without this initial involvement, the listener will be impervious to exhortations to study the music, because the listener's most basic question, "What's it to me?", has not been answered.

This book is organized into four basic units, which respectively examine: 1. *The Language of Music*. What is it made of? 2. *Forms*. How is it put together? 3. *Styles*. What does a composition have in common with other works written at the same time, and in what ways is it unique? 4. *Genres*. How is the music specifically tailored to its performing medium? The final unit examines the innovations in sounds and compositional media, and the profusion of musical styles, that have marked the last 30 years.

This text attempts to present a concise introduction to these essential facets of musical expression as we experience them in specific works. It also, however, endeavors to approach the compositions on their own terms, and

to understand them as a *whole*, because that is how we hear and perceive music. Basic to this approach is the often neglected question of the listener's own intuitive responses to a piece of music. Many listeners are hesitant or mistrustful of these responses ("I really don't know much about music, so my opinions are not very . . ."). Such diffidence may be preferable to arrogance, but it can cut the listener off from a vital dimension of musical expression—him- or herself.

The rudimentary features of musical notation are laid out in the first two chapters, and notated musical excerpts are included throughout the book. Some students feel at a disadvantage in the face of musical notation, particularly when they discover that the student sitting next to them has studied piano for ten years as a child. Unfortunately, sounds cannot be presented in a book. The notated excerpts are meant to serve as visual representations of important passages. They are graphic aids, to be used *while listening* and in class discussion; the student is not expected to be able to pick up the book and whistle these excerpts. Other types of pictorial representations have been included to facilitate comprehension, including diagrams, pictures, graphs, and visual and dramatic analogies. They have been used sparingly, however. If overused, such secondary aids run the risk of reducing music to graphic depiction, taking it out of the realm of pure sound. Music does not sound "as though it were . . ."—it is the way it sounds.

The repertoire of concert music, particularly that of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, forms the core of this book, but works drawn from other idioms and cultures are also introduced to broaden its scope. For those instructors who include more extensive coverage of jazz, examples "For Further Listening," drawn from jazz and jazz-related styles, are included at the end of selected chapters. In some one-term or one-quarter formats, it may not be possible to cover every composition included in the text. This abundance is by design. My intent was to provide the instructor with a sufficient breadth and choice of examples to meet the requirements of his or her own syllabus, whether its primary emphasis be the development of perceptive listening skills, a historical survey, an understanding of the principle elements and genres of music, or a balanced mix. The instructor's manual presents a variety of possible lesson plans and teaching suggestions.

A few other features should be mentioned. A record set is available to supplement the text. It includes individual demonstrations of the major musical instruments. The musical selections have been chosen with particular regard for performance quality and, wherever possible, historical appropriateness. The selections are whole works or whole movements, and the most frequently used selections are placed where they are most easily accessible. The records serve a dual purpose: they include most of the music for in-depth analysis, but they also provide a well-balanced introduction to the varieties of music that can serve as the core of a growing record library. A booklet provided with the record set discusses the individual performances as examples of musical interpretation, and offers further information on how to use these records and find and choose new ones. (A complete listing of the recorded selections is provided in the instructor's manual.)

To reinforce the historical context, there is a pull-out time-line of "Major Composers and Stylistic Developments" at the back of the book, designed to serve as a permanent reference for the student.

I am deeply grateful to the many people who assisted in the development of this text; to Roth Wilkofsky, Senior Acquisitions Editor, for initiating the project; to Tom Hitchings, Senior Editor, who has provided numerous suggestions for improvement and supervised the preparation of the record set; to Steven Moll, copy editor, for holding my feet to the coals on questions of content and organization as well as presentation. Reviewers of the manuscript also contributed valuable suggestions for clarification and strengthening of major points; my heartfelt thanks are extended to James Anthony, Towson State University; Robert Briggs, University of Houston; Kenneth Bruggers, University of Arkansas; Kathryn Bumpass, University of Illinois; Kenneth Cuthbert, North Texas State University; Richard von Grabow, Iowa State University; Harold Haughton, Jackson State University; Gene Hemmle, Texas Tech; Marie Henderson, University of Florida; Larry Jarvis, California State University, Northridge; Ingeborg Johnson, Ricks College; Rudolph Kremer, University of North Carolina; Louise Pinkow, University of Georgia; Elliott Schwartz, Bowdoin College; George Steiner, George Washington University; Dennis Wakeling, Northern Arizona University; Christopher Wilkinson, West Virginia University; Allen Winold, Indiana University; and Robert Winter, University of California, Los Angeles.

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Introduction: *Musical Communication*

An old adage states that architecture is the one unavoidable art. We can refuse to have anything to do with paintings, poems, concerts, or plays, the argument runs, but we hardly can avoid all contact with buildings.

In our present electronic age, music has become nearly as unavoidable. Wherever we go, it is there. Retailers have decided that the time we spend buying a broom will be enriched if accompanied by canned music. Advertisers believe that their message is more persuasive if delivered by attractive young people singing, laughing, and having fun. Much of this "music we can't avoid" is slickly packaged to arrest our attention, create a common bond, tranquilize us, or provide the general impression that something is happening.

Often, the product being retailed is music itself. In promotion as a leisure time activity, music may be pitched as pure entertainment, an instant high, or a sauna for the ears. Such music usually is designed not for concentrated listening but as a *release* from mental concentration. The music is casual—something we slip into, like worn jeans and sandals, to escape mental pressures and hassles. It is there, but makes no demands. It soothes or energizes us but leaves us free to do something else as well. We often forget that we are hearing it. Much of this music is brewed to be *heard*, or even over-heard, rather than *listened to*.

There is nothing "wrong" with utilitarian music, unless it is relentlessly imposed upon us. Music always has fulfilled a wide variety of needs and functions in our society, many of which are utilitarian. Background scores heighten the emotional impact of dramas and films. As an integral part of most religious worship and public ceremony, music is an important element in shared experience. Music can lend festivity to an occasion, complement our moods and activities, heighten the expression of elemental feelings.

Music can be all of these things, but much more. Many musical compositions make *awful* background music. Such works are not designed to enhance whatever else we might be doing; they are meant to be a totally absorbing experience in their own right. If we listen casually to such music, it will make no sense; it will only annoy us, like a buzzing fly that won't go away.

We automatically adjust our listening to various kinds of music and do not accord a commercial jingle the same attention we give to our favorite performers. We are so surrounded by incidental music, however, that casual listening can become habitual, to the point where we begin applying it to virtually every musical experience. This casual approach is not necessarily "natural." One need only watch a group of young children singing to appreciate the sense of complete involvement in music that is an inherent human gift.

A work of art, be it a painting, a novel, or a symphony, will hold little meaning for an individual until he or she feels a personal involvement in what it is saying and begins asking, "How do *I* understand this work? What responses does it arouse in *me*?" If we look casually at Renoir's *Dance at Bougival*, reproduced on the color plate, we might say, "Oh—a guy with a yellow hat is dancing with a woman with a red hat." Nothing of much significance has been communicated.

If we look more closely, however, it becomes apparent that the man's straw hat serves to obscure his identity (we'll never know who he is), and so directs our attention back to the woman. She is the center of the painting. Renoir has set off the dancing couple in relief from the hazy background and, further, has shrouded the man in anonymity. The girl is the only sharply drawn figure. The motion of the dance is suggested in the play of her dress, while the man appears almost immobile, completely absorbed in her. She glances down, but the character of her face reveals that she is very much enjoying the moment, taking pleasure in herself and his attention. As our eyes run over the picture, they are likely to be drawn increasingly to her face. What, exactly, is she thinking? What is she feeling?

In observing these features we become personally involved in the painting. It begins to strike us in a very particular way. We understand the woman—and the moment—in the light of our own experience. The "little moment" depicted in the painting has become important. Something is being expressed, not only by Renoir, but from within us as well.

In similar fashion, to listen *actively* to a piece of music is to open ourselves to its special qualities and means of expression. Active listening is a process of discovery. As a piece of music stimulates personal responses, it enables us to recognize and voice feelings that are already within us, to experience and understand them more deeply, and so to know ourselves better. The ability to listen actively to music is not a special aptitude known only to a select few, nor is it a step-by-step routine for putting our ears in gear. It is a capacity we already possess, which will develop naturally as we put it to use.

Serious music—"serious" not in the sense of grim or humorless, but as an important means of human expression—demands this kind of involvement by the listener. A jazz improvisation, a symphony, or a lyrical song is more than a momentary diversion. It is a vital form of statement and communication between composer, performer, and listener. A serious piece of music—whether "classical," jazz, rock, or whatever—speaks to the listener in several ways. It engages our intellects ("minds") by the quality of its construction, our senses ("ears") by the force or beauty of its sounds, and our

emotions ("hearts") by the manner in which it touches personal feelings. Whatever its tone (impassioned, detached, bright, dark, and so forth) or its "message" ("joy runs deeper than sorrow," "let the good times roll," or simply "listen to how I put these notes together"), a piece of music is serious—worthy of active listening—if it has something to say, and says it in such a manner that the music still sounds vital and fresh after many hearings.

Music is in many ways the most abstract of the arts. It cannot by itself, without words, tell a story or describe explicit situations. It operates on a more elemental level of expression. A composition has no single meaning. Rather, precisely because music is an abstract language without immediate concrete associations, its meaning occurs on several levels, some of which may be obvious and others only dimly perceived. We may not even be consciously aware of some of the most significant ways in which a piece of music moves or appeals to us, but we respond intuitively.

Listening

Gymnopédie No. 1 by Erik Satie, orchestrated by Claude Debussy

Record Set Side 1, Band 1

Listen to Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1*, a short piece written for piano in 1888 and later arranged for orchestra by Claude Debussy:

What is the nature of musical expression in this work?

How do you respond to this expression?

Do you find it difficult to put these responses into words?

Do you feel that other listeners would respond in roughly similar fashion, or would they likely "feel" the music in different ways?

If you heard the piece again—now or in a few days—would you listen and respond to it in the same way?

What are the most prominent features of the music? One listener might naturally focus on the melody; another might become immersed in the overall quality of sound. Is the essence of the piece a purely musical one—a pattern of notes—or is it a mood or emotional state which takes the outward form of notes?

How does the music fill time? Did you feel the *passage* of time, marked off by a series of musical events, or did time seem suspended, as though the clock had stopped on a fleeting moment of eternity and crystalized that moment?

Did you feel a sense of movement in the music, and of completion at its end, or did the music seem to linger on a single thought? Does the piece express one thought or many?

How would you characterize the tone of this piece? Introspective? Warm? Hollow? Rich? Haunting? Resolute? Plaintive? Distant? Very close?

Did you feel that the music was being directed toward you, that it created a private world that you could enter, or that in some way its expression was coming from within you?

Were you most aware of the composition itself, of the way in which it was performed, or of your own responses?

Was this a good performance? Was it a good listening?

These are highly subjective questions. They are intended not as an inquisition, but as representative of the kinds of questions we intuitively ask—and answer to our own satisfaction—when we actively listen to a musical performance. In active listening, musical expression is not a “thing” over *there*, but a process that is *happening*, here and now.

The Process of Musical Communication

Music consists of organized sounds that express thoughts and feelings. It exists not simply as notes on the printed page, but as a form of communication involving the composer, the performer(s), and the listener. The printed music, or score, is a blueprint for this communication, conveying the composer's intentions to the performer. Musical expression can only be shared, however, when the performer translates these notations into sounds that become significant to the listener.

The Composer

Musical composition is a process of beginning with isolated sounds and building something meaningful with them. For the composer one skill is necessary above all others: the ability to think directly in sound, as a writer thinks in words.

Although it might appear that the composer begins each piece from scratch, grabbing sounds from thin air, this is rarely the case. In the process of composing previous works, he or she has developed a special sensitivity to certain kinds of sounds, and has perfected techniques for fashioning them into a coherent musical statement. These distinguishing traits comprise the composer's *style*—the framework within which he or she works. A composer's style is not fixed, but will normally evolve over the years. It is something to build upon—an individual voice with which to express ideas, and a starting point for further creation.

A composition begins with new musical ideas—a fragmentary but memorable scrap of melody, a few chords or, perhaps, a particular quality of sound. The composer works with these initial ideas the way a sculptor works with clay, shaping, refining and combining them, seeking out their possibilities and implications. Sometimes this is a laborious process. Beethoven habitually carried sketchbooks with him, continuously jotting down and revising his musical ideas in them. He described his method of composing as follows: “I carry my thoughts about with me for a long time, often for a very long time, before writing them down . . . I change many things, discard others, and try again and again until I am satisfied.” Beethoven's original ideas often underwent several stages of transformation, and the final version of one of his melodies may bear only superficial resemblance to the original. For Mozart, on the other hand, much of this effort seems to have taken place