

music, sensation, and sensuality



sensuality

ited by

inda phyllis austern

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Music, Sensation, and Sensuality

Edited by
Linda Phyllis Austern

CRITICAL AND CULTURAL MUSICOLOGY

Volume 5

ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published in 2002 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, New York 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group.

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Printed on acid-free, 250-year-life paper.
Manufactured in the United States of America.
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Design and typography: Jack Donner

The publisher wishes to thank the School of Music at Northwestern University for helping to underwrite the publication of this book.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from
the Library of Congress.

Music, Sensation, and Sensuality/ edited by Linda Phyllis Austern
ISBN 0-8153-3421-4

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

General Introduction to Critical and Cultural Musicology

Martha Feldman

Musicology has undergone a seachange in recent years. Where once the discipline knew its limits, today its boundaries seem all but limitless. Its subjects have expanded from the great composers, patronage, manuscripts, and genre formations to include race, sexuality, jazz, and rock; its methods from textual criticism, formal analysis, paleography, narrative history, and archival studies to deconstruction, narrativity, postcolonial analysis, phenomenology, and performance studies. These categories point to deeper shifts in the discipline that have led musicologists to explore phenomena which previously had little or no place in musicology. Such shifts have changed our principles of evidence while urging new understandings of existing ones. They have transformed prevailing notions of musical texts, created new analytic strategies, recast our sense of subjectivity, and produced new archives of data. In the process they have also destabilized canons of scholarly value.

The implications of these changes remain challenging in a field whose intellectual ground has shifted so quickly. In response to them, this series offers essay collections that give thematic focus to new critical and cultural perspectives in musicology. Most of the essays contained herein pursue their projects through sustained research on specific musical practices and contexts. They aim to put strategies of scholarship that have developed recently in the discipline into meaningful exchanges with one another while also helping to construct fresh approaches. At the same time they try to reconcile these new approaches with older methods, building on the traditional achievements of musicology in helping to forge new disciplinary idioms. In both ventures, volumes in this series also attempt to press new associations among fields outside of musicology, making aspects of what has often seemed an inaccessible field intelligible to scholars in other disciplines.

In keeping with this agenda, topics treated in forthcoming volumes of the series include music and the cultures of print; music, art, and synesthesia in nineteenth-century Europe; music in the African diaspora; relations between opera and cinema; and music in the cultural sensorium. Through enterprises like these, the series hopes to facilitate new disciplinary directions and dialogues, challenging the boundaries of musicology and helping to refine its critical and cultural methods.

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Introduction

Linda Phyllis Austern

We never cease living in the world of perception, but we bypass it in critical thought[.]

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *“Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty”*

The scholar and the critic have been taught to reduce the savory stew of experience to the texture of words on paper. Convention demands silence of the “musical examples” at the core of a learned journal article and discrete fragmentation of the orgiastic experience of a rock concert in a review. How can those who labor in the pristine world of the intellect return to the rich sensorium of music? How can those who work with words as theorists or critics of perceptible experience re-member an embodied art? The varied essays in this collection, written by scholars from across the arts and human sciences, begin to address these questions. They bring us from modern Hungary to colonial Mexico, from Enlightenment France to the Bolivian Andes over two centuries later. They speak of the artifice of museum display and the manic pace of dance video; of the scientific study of acoustics and the impact of noise; of love, death, tears, and the classification of knowledge. But they never abandon the kaleidoscopic world of perception. This book is an attempt to gather together some of the many ways in which manufactured sound can be perceived as part of the corporeal world of human culture and contemplation.

The experience of music remains firmly rooted in the senses. The production of ordered sound involves not only the intellect, but, depending on the medium, also touch, taste, sight, and smell as well as hearing. Advertising executives and purveyors of goods and services toy with our sensory expectations, particularly as one pleasure suggests the intoxication

of another. "Sleep-inducing piano compositions that are as soothing as a warm tub soak before slipping between cotton sheets," proclaims the advertisement for a compact disc packaged in soft, glowing colors. A famous billboard image suggests the ancient synaesthetic pleasures of musical notes and alcohol every Christmas in North America. One French master-perfumer likens her art to symphonic composition, while a major-label recording offers "a romantic Italian feast for your ears." Behind the counter of an upscale cookware and gourmet shop, "Sunday Brunch" is served as an audio disc. Across the way, "Harmony," "Music," "Rhapsody," and "Whisper" are proffered as tiny pots of rich color and luxurious texture at a Swedish cosmetic boutique. The list is endless, yet the phenomenon escapes serious critical attention.

On any given evening in any large Western city, the symphony patron moves across smooth marble and plush carpeting whose contrasting textures and colors invite the caress of eye or hand. Moving through a sea of bodies whose attire has been selected to draw the gaze and suggest pleasure to the other senses, she passes stalls purveying aperitifs and dainty foods. As she sinks into a cushioned seat covered with sumptuous fabric, she becomes aware of the carved and glittering architectural details of the hall before being plunged into darkness designed to draw the vision toward the stage and accentuate the sense of hearing: crystal chandeliers, velvet draperies, gilded coats of arms, voluptuous plaster nymphs, and sirens. Not many blocks away, the club-goer gyrates in an equal darkness punctuated by flashes of vivid light in a haze of smoke and the mingled scent of alcohol, human sweat, and fragrances meant to allure. Amplified music, selected by a headphone-crowned disc-jockey isolated in a soundproof booth, vibrates through the bodies of dancers, drinkers, and auditors alike, drawing them together in communion. Scattered across town stand still, silent houses of worship awaiting the canonical hours at which the faithful will join in celebrations which link music to the objects of the other senses in an effort to contemplate the otherworldly. Yet the scholars and critics who consider these musics—or those of the cinema, theater, passing automobile, or other venues that incorporate the art across time and space—tend to isolate them from their full sensory complement.

To return the word to the flesh. To make knowledge carnal again; not by deduction, but by immediate perception or sense at once; the bodily senses

—Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body*

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of popular and scholarly works about the senses. Shifting between the poles of philosophy and social science, or cognition and culture, the common

point of these reconsiderations has been a return to an epistemology of embodiment.¹ “When a person becomes ill, he is likely to become aware of it through his own senses,” begins one of the *Cambridge Texts in the Physiological Sciences* (1982). Gravely pronouncing a fundamental truth to “a medical student in the second or third year of a preclinical course,” the passage continues:

If the condition progresses to the point where he seeks help, his advisor, even while *listening* [italics mine] to the patient’s story, will use his own senses to pick up what he can of the cause of illness, and in very many cases what he sees, hears, feels, and smells will be enough for him to diagnose the condition. . . . Of course it is not just in sickness that the senses tell one about one’s own body. . . .

Thus the senses are the bodily mechanisms for gathering up-to-date information, and as such it is hard to exaggerate their importance.²

Hard to exaggerate, indeed. In a bold new study from the end of the twentieth century, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, representing a radical branch of cognitive science, overthrow at least 2,500 years of Western assumptions about the link between mind and body. Using the sort of lush language most often banished from philosophical and clinical studies of the intellect, they conclude that:

The embodied mind is part of the living body and is dependent on the body for its existence. The properties of mind are not purely mental: They are shaped in crucial ways by the body and brain and how the body can function in everyday life. The embodied mind is thus very much of this world. Our flesh is inseparable from what Merleau-Ponty called the “flesh of the world” and what David Abram refers to as “the more-than-human world.” Our body is intimately tied to what we walk on, sit on, touch, taste, smell, see, breathe, and move within. Our corporeality is part of the corporeality of the world. . . . The mind is not merely corporeal but also passionate, desiring, and social. It has a culture and cannot exist culture-free.³

It can hardly be coincidental that the same twenty years of theoretical re-emphasis on the senses also marked the rise of the music video worldwide, and a sharp increase in the Western marketing of music to accompany an ever-expanding array of routine physical tasks. From exercise to shopping, from public travel to waiting for service, even the most mundane ventures are now regularly enhanced by commercially designed mood-altering soundtracks. Music scholars and critics have nonetheless been as slow to join their multidisciplinary colleagues in the investigation of bodily modes of

knowing, as others have been to recognize the full impact of music on the human sensorium and its cultural extensions.⁴

The senses clearly help to mediate consciousness and communication. There has, however, been little agreement about their nature, value, or even number across human time and geography. Are they valid or invalid means to recognize the self and the world? How are they linked to each other and to which additional cognitive faculties? Are they shared with other entities, visible or invisible? Are their data trustworthy? In what ways are they linked to the arts and sciences, to morality, emotion, or social structures? Even the five senses of common Western parlance owe their categorical foundation to Aristotle and are far from universal. Their definition and order have been seriously questioned by many experts from our own culture, let alone from others that evaluate them differently.⁵

For over two millennia, even Western intellectual inquiry has been torn between rationalist and empiricist models of the human processing of sense-data, roughly based on the Aristotelian idea that knowledge was ultimately derived from information gathered by five discrete senses, and its Platonic opposite that found sense-data as a distraction from true wisdom.⁶ For the past century, especially its final quarter, perceptual modalities and the very conditions of sensory experience have undergone rapid and unprecedented transformation as new technologies and new forms of intellectual inquiry have emerged.⁷ We belong to an overtly visual age in which less "pristine" senses are sometimes underestimated, an age of passive reception of artificially created sense-data. Ours is an era in which machines from seismographs to televisions enhance and transmit sense-data before it reaches us. How easy it has become to surrender our sensory consciousness, to let others feel and think for us: how easy and how dangerous. For sensation, as concept or process, is far from simple.

One of the most vexing questions has long been the relationship between emotion, intellect, and the senses. Is there a higher form of contemplation that stands divorced from physical stimuli and bestial desires? How and when does bodily perception contribute to the cognitive process, visceral reaction, or aesthetic judgment? Through what processes do sensory responses become part of narrative, ritual, or creative vision? In an intellectual culture that has traditionally divorced subject from object and fact from feeling, Western thinkers have tended to separate perceived from perceiver, to create separate faculties for processing things sensed and things known.⁸ "Man communicates with his whole body, and yet the word is his primary medium," writes Walter Ong, "and communication, like knowledge itself, flowers in speech."⁹ Nowhere is this attitude more strongly reinforced than in scientific studies of the sensory process or its objects, especially in

their pristine publication as silenced speech. "Sensing is to knowing as a cry is to words," adds medical doctor Erwin Straus, "A cry reaches only him who hears it, here and now; but words abide, they can reach everyone when and where ever they may be. In sensing, everything is for me. But knowing seeks the 'in itself' of things."¹⁰ However, "to sense" is not merely "to feel." It is to become aware of the hidden meaning of something, to be affected, concerned, pleased, or displeased, or aroused by it. Sensibility is both perception and apprehension by sense. It is only a short step from sensation to metaphor, from sense to symbol, or from bodily sensation to intellection and back again.¹¹ One of the results of recent inquiry into the nature of sensation and its relationship to thought has been a recognition that, in spite of the traditional opposition between reason and sensation in Western culture and aesthetics, any human faculty of thought is ultimately inseparable from bodily experience. "The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind," wrote Merleau-Ponty some forty years ago.¹² Music, with its physical origin and paradoxical intangibility, with its beginning in the mind and end in the imagination or memory between mind and body, must necessarily occupy a complicated place in any scheme linking corporeality and contemplation. The essays in this book barely begin to intimate just how complicated it can be.

Music is most immediately rooted in the perception of sound. Sound, through which music becomes inextricably tangled with language, communication, and bodily ways of locating the self in culture and in space, reaches outward toward the other senses, and toward the senses of others. "Sound is literally disembodiment, an emanation from the bodies producing it that leaves their materiality and concentrated localization behind," writes David L. Burrows in a pioneering study of sound, speech, and music:

The singers themselves have the sensation of expanding, in attenuating form, into surrounding space, and filling it, and when their listeners close their eyes, the whole auditorium becomes their music. What expands outward from them in every direction presses in on the audience from all sides, neutralizing the normally charged issue of here and there.

All of this takes place without any overt activity on the part of the listeners. Looking is an outwardly active process, involving as it does active movements of the eyes, head, trunk, and body to achieve favorable orientation and focus. . . . [I]nwardly, listening may be just as active as looking, but outwardly we often arrest movement and wait for the sound to come clear. Seeing is like touching, hearing like being touched; except that the touch of sound does not stop at the skin. It seems to reach inside and to attenuate . . . the biologically still more basic one between within and without.¹³

No wonder those medieval and early modern thinkers who retained more than a slight suspicion of the power of music over the body likened its effect to the rape of the ear, or the forcible theft of the soul.¹⁴ And no wonder so many rituals that draw together multiple senses and multiple bodies from across multiple dimensions feature music at their very centers.

If sound itself may be likened to a disembodied emanation, its “grain,” its uniqueness, its individually identifying factors come from and refer back to the materiality of the producing body. Sound unites its listeners communally within the orbit of its motion even as it dissolves the bounds between the senses of its performer.¹⁵ From infancy, children learn their place in the world and the overlapping powers of their senses through the production of sound:

[S]ound, a medium of communication since the child's first cry, manifests new potential of meaning as the child passes through the lalling stage, where he constructs around himself a vast bubble of sound, burbling, gurgling, playing with his diversifying vocal powers— and with his lips at the same time, for sound, both in speaking and in hearing, is closely linked with touch and kinaesthesia. One “mouths” words quite literally, and our hearing is partly feeling.¹⁶

Hearing begins in the womb and helps the newborn identify his mother and the warm nourishment she provides. From this primal sensory cocoon, the female body has easily been refigured in sound or remembered as an ear.¹⁷ Perhaps for this reason, as Adshead-Lansdale's and Tolbert's essays in this collection particularly make clear, the music-language knot has often been tied with gendered strings and copious strands from Nature instead of Artifice. Perhaps this is a contributory factor to the many forms of opposition between (manly) restraint and emotional response to music that Christensen, Craig-McFeely, Kramer, and McIver present in such different manifestations. Likewise, absence of the rich, vibrant texture of living sound is often read or figured as a metaphor for death or the dehumanization of the landscape, as Grover Friedlander and Kassler remind us quite differently in their essays.¹⁸

Western thinkers have traditionally positioned music somewhere in the shifting space between mathematical abstraction and corporeality, between reasoned creation and emotive response. To contemplate, study, or compose enduring music is to be intellectually active; to abandon oneself entirely to the pleasures of listening (or even performing) has become the passive partner in a potentially damaging physical entanglement. “Pure” taste and the aesthetics that provides its basis, even in scholarship, has been founded on a refusal of “impure” taste and the simple, primitive delights of sensation.¹⁹ The discipline of music theory has long emphasized the clinical

relationships between notes with the ultimate goal of preserving such interplay as printed text, proceeding through what Roland Barthes refers to as the "toilette of the dead."²⁰

Psychoacoustical studies of the phenomenon have tended to be based on the physics of sound and hearing, on the clean reception into the ear (and thence summarily to the brain) of waves of motion, on sound as an element of itself; Amy Graziano's historical summary in the present collection illuminates this long-standing tendency even through its very language. "A musical note is just pulsating air stimulating the organs in our ears," proclaims Diane Ackerman in her *Natural History of the Senses*.²¹ Nonetheless, there is always a tacit understanding that, somewhere at the basis of these manipulations and these abstract studies, lies pulsating, affective embodied music, received by the senses through physical and cultural filters.²² "The score of a Bach fugue cannot be understood in the complete absence of mathematics; nor can it be understood with mathematics alone," says Straus of even the silent skeleton of a piece of music, awaiting the stroke of a hand to give it sonic flesh.²³ "We listen with our bodies," concludes Ackerman.²⁴

Even the most erudite discussions of music from beyond the narrow confines of traditional academic musicology and theory have tended to dissolve the boundaries between sensations, between action and passive reception. Orphic legend and the myths of the sirens and of similar beings worldwide emphasize the overwhelming admixture of sensation and desire in attentive listening. St. Augustine's famously lachrymose account of his baptism conjoins music, water, tears, and overwhelming passion into a powerful unity that appears again and again in Western thought, as in Kramer's article in the present volume.²⁵ William Barley invited the would-be purchaser of his Elizabethan book of lute tablature "to have a taste of so ravishing a sweet science as music" with a deliciously synaesthetic metaphor.²⁶ Over three-and-a-half centuries later, the German physician Erwin Straus evoked multisensory images of intoxication, addiction, and erotic fulfillment in an anachronistic flight of fancy triggered by echoes of Bach, birds, and Roma violins:

The gypsy, like the bird, knows only surrender to the individual tone: a sometimes stormy, sometimes tarrying progression from one resting point to the next, a rhapsodic outpouring and an intoxicated dilatoriness. . . . His music-making is Dionysiac; his slow relishing of individual sounds and moods is drunkenness. . . . Classical music is strict, strictly exact in measurement and laws. . . . the listener, too, may be carried away into dreams of landscape; or he can become an attentive listener who understands the language of music and who perceives its manifest expression.

Let us once more recall the intoxicated addict. They all long for the space

of landscape; they find their fulfillment in the Dionysiac lingering by their dreams, intoxications, ecstasies, by turning from the bright waking world of the day to the night, to sleep and to that music of which the gypsy is the master. The tavern is the sympathetic landscape of the drinker and his center of life.²⁷

In an interview conducted by Hector Biancotti and published in December of 1973, French critic Roland Barthes drew on a multisensory vocabulary to describe the unique qualities of Gundula Janowitz's voice in a performance of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*: "To describe [Janowitz's vocal] grain, I find images of milkweed acidity, of a nacreous vibration situated at the exquisite and dangerous limit of the toneless."²⁸ Through hearing, through an engagement with the performing body, Barthes's senses of sight, taste, touch, and smell became aroused in auditory-linguistic imagination. These are, in turn, transmitted to the interviewer through the sound of his words and transformed into verbal images of pearly luster and the smoothness of milkweed. It was also Barthes who, in 1970, famously divided practical music, bodily music, and fully sensed music into "the music one listens to, [and] the music one plays," music received through the ear and music engaging the entire body.²⁹ Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, it has been recognized that the music of the theater and the cinema, unfolding in darkness along with narrative and visual stimulation, permits public indulgence in private fantasy and forbidden emotional release.³⁰

The eighteen essays in this book share a number of common themes. They reinforce each other even as each raises new issues from contrasting perspectives. I have organized them not according to specific sense, culture, or historical epoch, but by the questions they raise and the manner in which they raise them. Each one is unique, self-contained, and can also be read in any order at the reader's own pace. The collection begins with Descartes as do many studies in the philosophy of mind or history of cognition. But here Van Orden reevaluates the synthetic work of a youthful scholar, which draws on over a millenium's worth of information about music and on early-modern developments in mathematics, experimental science, and applied kinaesthetics. Like the other two essays with which it is grouped, it shows some of the dynamic tensions inherent in any attempt to categorize and delimit particular effects of music on the body physical and the body social from which it cannot be separated. Christensen also brings us into a world in which sounding music merges with theory, philosophy, prescriptive action, and premodern Western medicine conjoined to physics. Here, it is the sense of touch that circumscribes all others. Musicians surrender aspects of the rational mind to pure corporeal instinct and tonal sensibility before improvising a keyboard prelude. It is with this blend of music and

overflowing affect that Kramer's article opens, considering the German Romantic cultural conjunction of tears, song, and sympathy. Tears, so often linked to the primal, prelinguistic utterance at the boundary between sensation and rationality, are conjoined through a varied musical vocabulary to sublimation and erotic longing, to hidden truth and vivid pain expressed through voice and keyboard.

The next section includes four essays that feature contrasting forms of sensory overload, excess, and transgression from one sense to another through the use of music. Tolbert's essay begins in the same primal realm of emotive sensuality as Kramer's. She draws on cultural criticism, semiotics, and gender theory to shed new light on the tangled reception of music as standing somewhere between the natural cries of animals and the pure "manly" rationality of language. Stobart begins with the complexities of the subjectivity and embodiment of the musical voice with which Tolbert ends. He takes the reader through the multisensory landscape of Andean music with its cultural and calendrical oscillation between excess and austerity, and its numerous links to evident and hidden energies. Adshead-Lansdale unifies the strains of sensory intoxication and the powerfully feminine capacities of embodied music raised respectively in the two preceeding essays. Her reading of a multimedia piece of performance art from the end of the twentieth century adds the dimension of dance to the linguistic argument articulated by Tolbert, and returns to the cusp between the physical and metaphysical worlds where music is so often located. Here, primal myth, sound, light, and movement work together through the body and the camera to reinforce a deeply rooted misogynist vision. Gordon-Seifert's paper also works with the multimedia retelling of mythological material through the highly gendered and sexualized body in performance. In this case, parody, scatology, politics, and erotica serve as a focal point for exposing the foibles of a royal court that favored unlikely narrative romances full of stock male and female character archetypes; and for the experience, through music, of a powerful sexual energy that ran counter to the culture's didactic images of men and women in control of their passions.

The next three essays focus on the evident transcendence of this world of sensuous excess. In them, music takes its place of ontological mystery by spanning the distance between things physical and metaphysical. Wagstaff and Wilkinson present contrasting rituals of mourning, death, and burial, in which objects of many senses and many sorts of formal gesture blend together and help to create different senses of community. Wagstaff demonstrates how music mixed with other sensory stimuli not only to bridge the temporal and the eternal, the living and the dead, but reinforce a sense of colonial power and concomitant cultural hierarchy in sixteenth-century Mexico. Kertész Wilkinson outlines the funereal and mourning