

(EN) CORPS SONORE: JEAN-LUC NANCY'S 'SONOTROPISM'

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Abstract

This article offers a critical, feminist, and interdisciplinary account of the question of listening in Jean-Luc Nancy's 2002 text, *À l'écoute*. Nancy's text is at once an auditory counterpart to his larger philosophical project; an articulation of the specifically sonorous subject; and a more expressly musicological contribution to his other work on the literary and visual arts. While Nancy's — among others' — attempts at steering philosophy away from or beyond a visual bias proliferate, considerably less commentary has been devoted to the way in which inherited ideas about aesthetic 'objects' — in this case music — already inhabit certain conceptions of the senses. By paying close attention to the characterization and inclusion of music in the *corps sonore*, and by tracing the genealogies of Nancy's thought on music (and sound), this article will finally offer a rereading of Nancy's oto-iconographical reading of Titian's *Venus and Cupid with an Organist*; one that highlights the ethical and political dimensions of Nancy's position. I shall argue that problematic and preconceived notions about the supposed nature of music abound in Nancy's philosophy of listening, revealing a metaphysical (sono)tropism that is all too familiar.

[L]a jouissance phallique est l'obstacle par quoi l'homme n'arrive pas, dirai-je, à jouir du corps de la femme, précisément parce que ce dont il jouit, c'est la jouissance de l'organe.¹

At the end of Jean-Luc Nancy's extended essay, *À l'écoute* (2002), we find a short coda based on his reading of Titian's painting *Venus and Cupid with an Organist*.² This musical tableau depicts an organist gazing at a nude Venus; she appears to pay him no attention, instead attending to Cupid who is embracing her. Behind these figures we can see out to the fairly modestly landscaped garden of the villa in which the musical scene presumably takes place; the pipes of the organ in the upper left blend almost seamlessly with the lines of trees outside demarcating the limits of the garden. In an appropriately musical fashion, this 'tail' is more or less inessential to, and independent of, the preceding text, yet ultimately serves to bring it to a more satisfactory close. In effect, Nancy's short oto-iconographical analysis allows for a more lucid recapitulation of the key claims of the short but dense text: firstly, that sound is always already a *resounding* that folds into itself any distinction between subject/object and inside/outside. Secondly, that sound subsists as a kind

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: le séminaire, livre XX*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 15.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *À l'écoute* (Paris: Galilée, 2002). Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

of opening or sharing, and in a privileged relation to all the resonances of *sens* (as perception, intelligibility and direction). Finally, in bringing these observations together, Nancy is able to articulate a sonorous theory of the subject — frequently referred to as the *corps sonore* — to complement his broader political-philosophical project based on a singular plural ontology. In the organist's sensuous gazing at the naked Venus, we learn how 'l'oreille ouvre sur le ventre, ou bien même elle l'ouvre' (p. 84). The resonant chamber of Venus' belly is both, Nancy claims, 'le lieu où vient retentir sa musique' and where the inside and outside open up to one another, an opposition also echoed in the externality of the garden scene in the background of an otherwise intimate indoors scene (p. 84).

Given both the emphasis Nancy places on the sensuous presentation of the world (on sense *as* meaning(ful) rather than *having* meaning that needs to be located 'elsewhere') and the obviously auditory nature of sensuous lived existence, it seems perfectly logical to offer an acoustemological complement to his other work on the sensuous subject. In addition, it is not only sound that is theorized in *À l'écoute*, but the specifically musical. As Roger Grant notes, it also offers an explicitly 'musicological counterpart to his work on the visual and written arts' as a consequence of the inclusion of precise references to music (composers, works, etc.) rather than restricting its focus to abstract, environmental, ecological, or non-musical sounds.³ However, despite a more sustained interest in this short but wide-ranging text in France, the critical reception of *À l'écoute*, both within anglophone French studies and within music and/or sound studies, has been notably lukewarm. In comparison to the rest of his substantial œuvre, even Nancy scholars seem to have been reluctant to engage with this text (a small number of notable exceptions notwithstanding⁴) and thus, despite its being a rich text that adds a significant sonorous dimension to his broader philosophical project, it has remained somewhat sidelined. At the same time and for, perhaps, historical disciplinary reasons, scholars in music departments — despite a short-lived initial flurry of excitement — have also been reluctant to engage with the text. In general, within musicology, it has often been concepts seen to have use value as interpretative tools when applied to particular musical works, processes, or genres that have been imported from critical-theoretical or continental philosophy, while engagement with theoretical-philosophical works that seek to deal with music or sound 'itself' is notably less prominent.

There is, however, 'a new body of work' at the intersection of music studies and philosophy which, as Martin Scherzinger describes, 'instead of bringing philosophy to musicology [...] critically analyzes how music inhabits philosophy itself and then assesses the ethical and political dimensions of these philosophical positions

³ Roger Mathew Grant, 'Review: Jean-Luc Nancy's "Listening"', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 62.3 (2009), 748–52 (p. 748). Of course, this is a glib generalization that ignores a much larger debate as to what we define as 'music' in the first place. Nonetheless, Nancy's reference to composers and works demonstrates a clear intention to include what is conventionally understood as music within the text. What is less clear is the positioning of the musical versus the 'simply' sonorous.

⁴ See, for example, Adrienne Janus, 'Listening: Jean-Luc Nancy and the "Anti-Ocular" Turn in Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory', *Comparative Literature*, 63 (2011), 182–202; and her 'Soundings: The Secret of Water and the Resonance of the Image', *Senses and Society*, 8.1 (2013), 72–84.

and their relation to lived history'.⁵ This article contributes to the emerging area of scholarship that Scherzinger identifies, a field that, to borrow Andrew Bowie's words, is committed to 'rehabilitating the claim that philosophy should be concerned with the idea of what constitutes a meaningful world'.⁶ Beyond this initial aim of critically (re)positioning the text in relation to two more or less disparate disciplines, this essay also pursues a further — feminist — critique, which locates *À l'écoute* within a problematic genealogy of thought on sound and/or music. By attending to the specifically musical in Nancy's text, and then returning to his reading of Titian's musical tableau, this article locates some of the tensions arising from what appears to be a fairly uncritical engagement with music, suggesting that there are consequences beyond the explicitly musical moments in Nancy's theory of philosophical listening.

From 'sonotropism' to sonorous ontology

A philosophical attempt to think about, characterize, or describe music, whether in metaphysical, spiritual, aesthetic, or ethical terms, is prevalent in Western thought since Plato. In particular, much philosophical commentary has focused on music's seemingly privileged relationship to both emotions and subjectivity. The genealogy of such a privileged linking of music and the subject runs all the way from Plato's characterization of music as the only non-mimetic art — the only one that doesn't require mediation — through to the lofty metaphysical reflections of German idealism and beyond. In this substantiation of the perceived nature of music — its supposed metaphysical power to reveal some 'essential' facet of human existence — Scherzinger has located what he describes as philosophy's 'sonotropism'. He notes the way in which sonotropism 'proceeds as if music held a metaphysical valence in excess of the usual mediators of language, culture and history'.⁷ The trajectory of sonotropism continues, then, to the Schopenhauerian idea of music as will and, arguably further, to poststructuralist attempts to pattern politically engaged philosophical thinking on a kind of musicalized imaginary or virtuality — even a liberating musicalized ontology, such as with Deleuze and Guattari's *ritournelle*. Nevertheless, despite the '*unspeakable wealth*'⁸ that music has afforded philosophical thought, the very attempt to theorize the audible is centred around a conflict; the inherent visual bias of theory (*theōria*, from *thea*, 'a view', and *boraō*, 'I look, see') leaves the (im)possibility of theorizing music, or sound, in perpetual debate. Indeed, this is precisely Nancy's starting point when he states that 'figure et idée, théâtre et théorie, spectacle et spéculation se conviennent mieux, se superposent, voire se substituent avec le plus de convenance que ne le peuvent l'audible et l'intelligible ou le sonore et le logique' (p. 14). Or, more simply, 'l'écoute, est-ce une affaire dont la philosophie soit capable?' (p. 13).

⁵ Martin Scherzinger, 'On Sonotropism', *Contemporary Music Review*, 31.5–6 (2012), 345–51 (p. 345).

⁶ Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 46.

⁷ Scherzinger, 'On Sonotropism', p. 350.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), p. 199 (emphasis mine).

In apparently stark contrast, Nancy's sonorous counterpoint to his broader ontological project instead finds common ground with a more general trend of critiquing the ocularcentric discourse of Western metaphysics, a move that has been termed an 'anti-ocular' turn.⁹ *À l'écoute* in particular endeavours to challenge the predominance of vision as central to knowledge, expounded and expanded genealogically from philosopher-king to philosopher-king, and, by focusing on sound and music, is able to consider other ways in which we might 'know', comprehend, or find/make meaning in the world around us. However, Nancy's work at large does not eschew the visual in favour of the auditory; indeed, he has written extensively on the cinema, and references to specific music in *À l'écoute* are notably mediated through some kind of visual — the film through which we 'listen' to Mozart's clarinet concerto, or the Titian painting to which Nancy responds with the theatrics of Wagnerian music drama. Rather, he is interested in the distribution, or the (re)routing of the senses, a move that nonetheless displaces the singular authority of the visual in traditional theorizing. Influenced in particular by Derrida, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and in line with the anti-ocular turn in general, Nancy moves against a traditional metaphysical position that had tended to locate in music (and in 'great art' more broadly) a transcendental reserve (of spirit, will, and so on) that neutralized the cultural and historical implications or ramifications — in short, the situatedness — of these aesthetic 'objects'. In this way, it is evident that the anti-ocular turn (or, perhaps more precisely, an anti-ocularcentric turn) comes hand in hand with an implicit commitment to a broadly materialist position that acknowledges how seemingly abstract thought necessarily relates to economic, social, and cultural conditions. Furthermore, by dissociating himself from the shackles of representational thought that identifies Being (and, therefore, the dualisms of subject/object and idea/representation) through reference to a predetermined ground or transcendental reserve, Nancy is able to formulate his own radical anti- or post-metaphysical ontology, articulated as *être singulier pluriel*. For Nancy, there is no difference between meaning and the material world in which we find ourselves; the fact of the world just *is* sense 'on the grounds that there could be nothing else. Sense and the world are coextensive, perfectly commensurate, with no superfluous meanings overhanging this coextensivity'.¹⁰

Thus, *À l'écoute* offers a way of thinking about sound and/or music beyond inherited binaries; commensurate with his singular plural ontology, Nancy resists re-inscribing a listening subject and a listened-to object. Instead, the audible appears affirmatively as the perpetual flux of a shared, sonorous world. Nancy's position suggests a potentially radical avenue beyond a dualism that has often seen music considered in either wholly immaterial terms — the closed, positivist approach to score-based analysis or 'purely' formal procedures — or as a mere product of a particular sociocultural context, with no specificity of its own. Nancy

⁹ See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁰ B. C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 6.

either refuses or exceeds this distinction, and instead positions music as a shared space of resonance; as the auditory distribution of sense (*sens*) in which 'se met à l'écoute simultanée d'un "soi" et d'un "monde" qui sont l'un à l'autre en résonance' (p. 82). He also notes how all the senses have both 'passive' and 'active' states (for example, seeing and looking, smelling and sniffing) and uses this observation to draw a distinction between hearing (*entendre*) and listening (*écouter*), noting how *entendre* is not just 'hearing', but also 'understanding', and even 'intention'.¹¹ In order to pursue his philosophy of listening, rather than hearing, he posits that the auditory pairing subsists in a privileged relationship to intellectual or intelligible sense; in short, while *entendre* preserves the dichotomy between a perceiving subject and a perceptible object, Nancy's philosophy of listening demands that 'le sens ne se contente pas de faire sens (ou d'être *logos*), mais en outre résonne' (p. 19). This allows him to challenge the traditional philosophical pursuit of 'truth', or the 'hidden' meaning of sense (as making sense or *logos*), and instead to pursue a dynamic, resonant philosophy that subsists in the space of the *renvoi*; in sound that exists only as a *resounding*. As Nancy states, '[t]out mon propos tournera autour d'une telle résonance fondamentale, voire autour d'une résonance en tant que fond, en tant que profondeur première ou dernière du "sens" lui-même (ou de la vérité)' (p. 19). While it may appear that the *renvoi* reinstates a kind of fundamental ground or essence towards which we can turn, the emphasis on the 're' negates any claims of foundationalism; any sounding is always already a *resounding*, with no recourse to an originary or 'pure' sounding.

In particular, the auditory articulation of a sonorous *renvoi* allows Nancy to (re)theorize in ontological terms the ocularcentric aspects of the oppositional pairing of subject–object. Nancy's subject, described as 'un diapason', is one which is 'réglé sur soi', but is nonetheless a self without substance; it is only a self in so far as it exists in the sonorous *renvoi* itself (p. 37). Only through this 'return' can the self be said to come into being; through feeling oneself feel (*se sentir sentir*) the self feels itself, and is only a self in this feeling. As Nancy himself describes — insisting on the non-metaphorical nature of this sonorous ontology — listening is theorized 'pas comme une figure de l'accès au soi, mais comme la réalité de cet accès, une réalité par conséquent indissociablement "mienne" et "autre", "singulière" et "plurielle"' (pp. 30–31). Nancy also develops his account of subjectivity through his conceptualization of the *corpus sonore*, where both the object and the subject of listening resonate: 'Lequel est toujours à la fois le corps qui résonne et mon corps d'auditeur où ça résonne, ou bien qui en résonne' (p. 22 n. 2). The remarkable corollary of this, as Adrienne Janus has noted, is that all objects 'insofar as they resonate' are able, therefore, to be listening *subjects*; this has the consequent (and no doubt intentional) effect of making Nancy's 'human' subject less properly "subject"-like, less human'.¹² Finally, then, despite the essentially rhythmic constitution — the resonance created by the fundamental *renvoi* — of the *corpus sonore*

¹¹ See Nancy, *À l'écoute*, p. 18. Brian Kane explores these distinctions in depth in his article on *À l'écoute*, 'Jean-Luc Nancy and the Listening Subject', *Contemporary Music Review*, 31.5–6 (2012), 439–47.

¹² Janus, 'Listening', p. 194.

that might lead us to think of it in purely temporal terms, Nancy's *corps sonore* also opens onto a spatiality: 'il se propage dans l'espace' (p. 22). This temporal movement even seems to constitute, be a pre-condition of, or afford the manifestation — which Nancy has been keen to insist on as an inherently visual domain — of a spatial dimension, and thus to a relation with others. Or, as Wagner's Gurnemanz, cited by Nancy, sings in *Parsifal*: 'Ici, le temps se fait espace' (p. 33).

Origins

Though unacknowledged in *À l'écoute*, the genealogy of the *corps sonore* returns us directly to the Enlightenment and specifically to Rameau, who coined the phrase to describe the 'natural' and 'scientific' basis for music that he claimed to have found through experimentation. As Rameau states, '[l]a Proportion Harmonique peut bien être regardée comme un principe en Musique, mais non pas comme le premier de tous; elle n'y existe qu'à la faveur des differens Sons qu'on distingue dans la résonance d'un Corps Sonore [...] c'est de là qu'il falloit absolument partir: l'Hypothese annoncée, & toutes les expériences possible sur ce sujet le confirment unanimement'.¹³ As well as being a significant composer of the Baroque era, Rameau was also a music theorist, and the 'individual who first recognized that all those components [of music] interacted to create a sense of tonality'.¹⁴ Rameau's project was significant in the way it codified, for the first time, what was later seen to be the dominant harmonic practice in literate (high art) European traditions. By 1737, Rameau was able to publish *Génération harmonique*, which fully exploited the *corps sonore* as the theoretical basis for his harmonic theory and, via Dortous de Mairan's theories of sound propagation, was closely patterned on Newtonian optics.¹⁵ Furthermore, as Christensen continues, Rameau's prefatory material to the *Génération harmonique* is a calculated emulation of Newton's *Opticks*, which was seen as the paragon of empirical Enlightenment science.¹⁶ The *corps sonore* itself was 'Rameau's term for any vibrating system such as a vibrating string which emitted harmonic partials above its fundamental frequency'.¹⁷ For Rameau, music was a matter for the sciences, and his agenda held at its core a belief not in the creative invention of a system to explain harmonic procedures, but a commitment to the identification of the principle from which this apparently 'natural' system can be seen to arise. What interests us here is not the linking of music and science; that, of course, has a much longer history. Rather, what Rameau's *corps sonore* seeks to provide, via Newton's optical theories, is a purportedly objective account of a harmonic practice divorced from the social and historical context in which it emerged; as asocial, pre-cultural, 'purely' scientific and naturally occurring.

¹³ Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Génération harmonique, ou Traité de musique théorique et pratique* (Paris: Prault fils, 1737), Préface.

¹⁴ Joel Lester, 'Rameau and Eighteenth-Century Harmonic Theory', in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. by Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 753–77 (p. 753).

¹⁵ See Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 139.

¹⁶ See Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*, p. 145.

¹⁷ Thomas Christensen, 'Eighteenth-Century Science and the *Corps Sonore*: The Scientific Background to Rameau's "Principle of Harmony"', *Journal of Music Theory*, 31.1 (1987), 23–50 (p. 23).

Not insignificantly, it would seem, despite his almost obsessive commitment to the *corps sonore* (which by the end of his life was so loaded with metaphysical excess that he saw it to be the generative principle not only of music but also to assume 'cosmic proportions [...] as] the progenitor of all the arts, sciences, and even religion'¹⁸), the *corps sonore* was actually no more capable of offering an explanation for subdominant harmony or the minor triad in standard tonal procedures than was any other theory.

In contrast to Rameau's scientific approach, we find points of correspondence also in Rousseau — another Enlightenment progenitor of many contemporary discourses on music and/or sound — who takes an anthropological approach towards the question of sound. In the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781), Rousseau focuses on the voice as that privileged threshold between music and language, or song and speech, and locates in this liminal space between meaning and materiality the originary link that allows language to connect sound and idea — the sensory with the symbolic. For Rousseau, music is seen as an originary 'proto-language' that allows him to posit, as Downing A. Thomas demonstrates, the anthropological missing link that connects semiotics to origins, culture to nature, and man to animal; the origin of the origin of culture.¹⁹ Similarly for Nancy, *diction*, 'la constitution matricielle de la résonance lorsqu'elle est mise dans la condition du phrasé ou du sens musical', precedes both music and language, even though it is common to both (p. 72). In Rousseau's originary scene — a scene of communal cultivation in the fields or around the water fountain — he finds that everything, including the origin of art, 'se rapporte [*sic*] dans son principe aux moyens de pourvoir à la subsistance'.²⁰ He differentiates between needs — which he claims lead to 'mediate' communication through gesture or movement — and passions which 'arrachèrent les premières voix', finding the idea that the communication of needs lie at the root of language, 'insoutenable'.²¹ Furthermore, although Rousseau is quick to chastise Rameau's ultimately harmonic conception of the *corps sonore* for effectively universalizing an ethnocentric conception of music (because harmony 'ne flate à nul égard les oreilles qui n'y sont pas exercées', or 'c'est une langue dont il faut avoir le Dictionnaire'²²) Rousseau's conception remains problematic for different reasons. It is clear that Rousseau insists on a logocentric investment in voice as presence; indeed, Derrida famously accorded Rousseau a privileged and singular position in the history of metaphysics as the 'détermination de l'être comme présence' and devoted much of *De la grammatologie* to unpacking the subterranean but ultimately constituent logocentrism of Rousseau's thought.²³ As a result of this and, more precisely, because of the way in which he articulates the relationship between

¹⁸ Christensen, 'Eighteenth-Century Science and the *Corps Sonore*', p. 23.

¹⁹ See Downing A. Thomas, *Music and the Origins of Language: Theories from the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 9. The origin of the origin in the sense that 'music' is prior even to the split from which culture originates.

²⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues; où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*, ed. by Charles Porset (Bordeaux: Ducros, 1970), p. 107.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²³ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 145.

music and language in this logocentric formulation, he invests music with a pre-cultural, transhistorical essentialism.

Perhaps, though, Rousseau's influence on Nancy's broader philosophical-ontological project is felt much more obviously elsewhere, and in their shared conviction that politics originates from the shared space of communal activities. In *La Communauté désœuvrée*, Nancy recognizes Rousseau — most obviously the Rousseau of the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, but the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* is no doubt relevant here too — as the first properly modern thinker of community. Rousseau's nostalgic characterization, or experience, of community is as 'une rupture (peut-être irréparable) de cette communauté'.²⁴ Rousseau puts this modern conception of society — founded on a fundamental loss — in contrast to a (fictive) state of nature where natural man in his originary unity has 'amour de soi' and 'pitié', and no (need of) language proper yet. Nancy, however, as Ian James has shown, inverts Rousseau's supposition.²⁵ Nancy argues instead that it is not this rupture or loss that impedes our return to an idealized and desired community, but conversely that 'une telle "perte" est constitutive de la communauté elle-même'.²⁶ The thought of or desire for a 'return' to community that can be traced from Rousseau, Nancy claims, through to many other philosophers, poets, and composers including, of course, Wagner, is perhaps nothing other than 'l'invention tardive qui tenta de répondre à la dure réalité de l'expérience moderne'.²⁷ Structurally, then, this illusory 'return' — the always already lost community as the condition of the possibility of community — plays an analogous role to the *renvoi* in *À l'écoute*; the dynamism of the sonorous *renvoi* that subsists only ever as a *resounding* or *return*, thus aims to resist at every turn any claim of originary sounding, just as Nancy's inversion of Rousseau denies an originary community. Finally, as Thomas notes, in Rousseau the aesthetic domain emerges as a relation between an individual and a collective; in the end, just as a musical aesthetics silently emerges — as an apparently neutral by-product — in Rousseau, the specifically musical appears in Nancy as a folding back on itself of the more essential resonant space of the *renvoi*.

With all this in mind, Elizabeth Tolbert's assertion that any 'critique of contemporary ideas about music and language must begin with an awareness of their intellectual history, specifically of their roots in Enlightenment discourses about human nature and the origins of human culture' seems compelling.²⁸ As we have seen, music's innate expressiveness led many Enlightenment philosophers to posit that '[l]anguage, music, and knowledge were all unified in a single divine origin'.²⁹ This means that language, having subsequently split from a shared origin with

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Bourgois, 1990), p. 29.

²⁵ Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 175–76.

²⁶ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p. 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁸ Elizabeth Tolbert, 'Untying the Music/Language Knot', in *Music, Sensation, and Sensuality*, ed. by Linda Phyllis Austern (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 77–95 (p. 79).

²⁹ Thomas, *Music and the Origins of Language*, p. 34.

music is still, nevertheless, directly connected to the passions and thus allows for an explanation of how language is able to traverse the non-parity of sound and idea. Accordingly, music is then comprehensible — if not properly utterable — as a more immediate and affective proto- or not-yet-language, connecting the natural and non-semantic to the semantic and cultural.³⁰ Thus music — characterized as 'not (yet) language' — becomes inextricably linked with certain other ideas; a genealogical glance at the philosophy of music demonstrates that it has been consistently characterized as essentially 'feminine' — sometimes dangerously so. Music is, as Tolbert states, 'elided with the subordinate term in oppositions such as culture/nature, human/animal, mind/body, or reason/emotion. Implicit in music's feminization is its opposition to language, exhibiting qualities such as non-referentiality, syntax without semantics, pure form, the music "itself"'.³¹ Western thought's logocentric emphasis on voice (and the materiality of sound) as presence, has the corollary of also privileging 'referential meaning [...] and] metaphorical, as opposed to metonymic thinking'.³² Consequently, music is castigated as lacking propositional content and is therefore aligned with the 'lesser' term in the corresponding binarisms: as emotional, primitive, and certainly feminine. As this dualist thinking demonstrates, debates that seek to position music in a particular way are necessarily involved in (re)articulating all kinds of other (op)positions at the same time.

Renvoi à Jean-Luc Nancy

In the second section of *À l'écoute* the *corpus sonore* is theorized more precisely. We find Nancy's articulation of an acoustic plural ontology replete with maternal metaphorizations: 'Constitution matricielle de la résonance [...] qu'est-ce que le ventre d'une femme enceinte, sinon l'espace ou l'autre où vient à résonner un nouvel instrument, un nouvel *organon* [...]. L'oreille ouvre sur la caverne sonore que nous devenons alors' (pp. 72–73). Or: 'le bruit de son partage (d'avec soi, d'avec les autres): peut-être encore une résonance plus ancienne dans le ventre et du ventre d'une mère' (p. 79). Janus has considered *À l'écoute*, and particularly Nancy's conceptualization of the *corpus sonore*, to be compatible with the kind of 'otocentric' feminist genealogy that she finds in the anti-phallogocentric philosophy of Luce Irigaray. She draws a parallel between the 'dynamic multiple resonances propagated by the embodied female self' and Nancy's *corpus sonore* as an 'organ of acoustic parturition from which is born the multiple resonances that give birth to sense'.³³ However, it provokes an uneasy tension with Irigaray's playful but critical re-appropriation of the link between the womb and the *matriciel* (via *la matrice*) and ultimately to what she sees as Plato's foundational gesture of meta-physical matricide.³⁴ Too often, and in spite of the careful destabilization of a

³⁰ See Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, p. 54.

³¹ Tolbert, 'Untying the Music/Language Knot', p. 77.

³² Ibid., p. 81. In the sense that the 'vertical' axis of metaphor presumes a reference *to* something, whereas the 'horizontal' axis of metonymy suggests a potentially infinite deferral of contiguous meaning.

³³ Janus, 'Listening', p. 187.

³⁴ See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974).

straightforward subject–object dichotomy and Nancy’s insistent rejection of any original sounding, this mapping onto the maternal-feminine womb-belly risks figuring the *corps sonore* as a receptacle — or at least a space, a ‘somewhere else’ (*ailleurs*) than the resonance itself, a risk that is fully exposed later when Nancy asks ‘ce ventre qu’il regarde n’est-il pas *le lieu où vient retentir sa musique*’ (p. 84; my emphasis)? Certainly, it is a considerable limitation that Nancy’s sonorous ontology, in spite of itself, requires the resonant chamber of a mother-womb matrix for its articulation, and resonates with Irigaray’s critique of the dominant specular economy, which reduces feminine and maternal sexuality to an ultimately unproductive womb, and the illusory ground upon which the male philosophical fantasy is staged. The recurrent slippage between the morphological and the metaphorical maternal reinstates a kind of (gendered) foundationalism that seems to be so at odds with Nancy’s larger, anti-foundationalist thinking. Furthermore, he equates the possibility of sense with sound; resonance and sonority become the precondition of significance, while somehow also being beyond meaning (*l’outré-sens*). In one of the most problematic passages of *À l’écoute*, where Nancy encourages us to turn ‘à nouveau vers la musique, par-delà le sonore abstrait’, he asks us to heed three demands (p. 58). Firstly, that we treat “‘pure résonance” non seulement comme la condition mais aussi comme l’envoi même et l’ouverture du sens’ (p. 59). Secondly, we should ‘traiter le corps, avant toute distinction de lieux et de fonctions de résonance [...] comme] caisse ou tube de résonance de l’outré-sens’ (pp. 59–60); he also compares this to the sound board of a violin and the ‘petit trou’ in the clarinet (p. 60). And thirdly, from this point, to consider the subject as (the echo of) ‘l’outré-sens’ (p. 60). Given that this has been theorized around the resonant chamber of the maternal belly-womb, we might want to question how it is that ‘avant toute distinction de lieux’ (or functions) — the Artaudian-Deleuzian *corps-sans-organes*, to which Nancy refers — the sonorous body is *already* feminine? We are left to assume that the womb-belly matrix does not count as a function or a specific distinction. It is instead, like the resonance Nancy theorizes, both anterior and posterior, elsewhere or beyond, and timeless.

Nancy also invokes the auditory dimension of the not-yet-subject through the birth-cry of the vagitus — or even the infant still *in utero* — to insist on the materiality of sound as meaning. In many respects, it closely resembles Julia Kristeva’s theorizations of *le sémiotique* — the gestural and communicative ‘space’ of the pre-symbolic (ergo pre-linguistic) — through the (somewhat more conscious, if still problematic) appropriation of Plato’s maternal-feminine *chora*. Just as with Nancy’s *corps sonore*, the *chora* is both spatial and temporal, and as ‘[n]i modèle, ni copie, elle est antérieure et sous-jacente à la figuration donc à la spécularisation’.³⁵ We might wonder, then, whether Judith Butler’s well-known critique of Kristeva — that she ‘defends a maternal instinct as a pre-discursive biological necessity, thereby naturalizing a specific cultural configuration of maternity’ rather than seeing the maternal body itself as ‘a production of a given historical discourse, an effect of

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 24.

culture rather than its secret and primary cause' — would apply to Nancy too.³⁶ It certainly seems that Nancy's *corps sonore*, while introducing bodily materiality as indissociable from meaning in a certain sense, also goes a fair way towards obscuring — even de-materializing — the maternal-feminine body as a 'lived' body, instead identifying it, as Butler claims of Kristeva, as 'bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself'.³⁷

Along with the tendency to describe or articulate music in reference to an uncritically 'fixed' conception of the (maternal) feminine, Nancy also maintains other aspects of the inherited discourses on music and sound (although, no doubt, they are articulated in relation to the feminine as well). For Nancy, as a result of women's assumed reproductive capacity, 'woman' ceases to articulate a clear distinction between inside/outside, internal/external, subject/object, and so on, and this is more or less homologically mapped onto music's (or sound's) liminality — its ability to traverse the supposed borders or boundaries of a 'subject'. Nancy often characterizes music as an uncontrollable invasion; 'la présence sonore arrive: elle comporte une *attaque*' (p. 34; Nancy's emphasis). While this co-mingling of sound is figured, also, positively — as the inherently 'shared' nature of sound, or the essential sonority of the being-with — it is also recast in alarmingly familiar terms. He asserts that 'le visuel serait tendanciellement mimétique, et le sonore tendanciellement méthexique (c'est-à-dire dans l'ordre de la participation, du partage ou de la contagion)', thus preserving a line of thought directly from Plato that sees music as the only non-mimetic art (p. 27); a lineage that doubtlessly assists — persists — in also keeping other inheritances in play. In Jonathan Sterne's compelling Introduction to *The Audible Past* — an interdisciplinary and thought-provoking history of sound that avoids many of the pitfalls of musicology or theory working independently — he cautions against invoking such assumptions, which he sees as stemming from a kind of otic essentialism. As he points out, the difference between sight and sound has often been preconceived as emerging from naturally occurring 'biological, psychological, and physical facts', and it is from this implied assumption that even supposedly 'cultural' analyses of sound (and music) emerge.³⁸ Sterne constructs a compelling 'audio-visual litany' that demonstrates the inherent dualities in our sound-thinking. It includes, among others, observations such as: 'hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective'; or 'hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect'; or 'hearing tends toward subjectivity, vision tends toward objectivity'.³⁹ All of this, he goes on to say, 'idealizes hearing [...] and thus voice as speech and as presence] as manifesting a kind of pure interiority'.⁴⁰

With this in mind, it becomes somewhat easier to explain how quiet — perhaps even silent — the *corps sonore* is. While certain sounds have theoretically been

³⁶ Judith Butler, 'The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva', *Hypatia*, 3.3 (1988), 104–18 (pp. 104, 106).

³⁷ Butler, 'The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva', p. 105.

³⁸ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 15.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

allowed in — certainly the vagitus departing from the womb and the borborygmus of the digesting belly — the remainder comes primarily from the canon of high-art music. We have a reference to Mozart's clarinet concerto (though, rather interestingly, heard only through the spectacle of a film, *Le Concert de Mozart*) and, above all, several references to Wagner (p. 63). In spite of the invasive nature of sound that Nancy theorizes, Janus observes how the *corps sonore* 'never takes on the substantiality and volume of the noises that both attack and envelop us in a world where we increasingly use the noise of one technology [...] to block out the other'.⁴¹ As Janus continues to ask, '[h]ow much does the relative suppression of noise in his space of listening resemble a nineteenth-century concert hall? Why does he not make use of concepts associated with recent developments in music that would potentially be productive [...] the concept of "renvoi" as reverberation, offering and return, as the subject sensing itself sensing, is never linked to the notion of a feedback loop.'⁴² We might wonder whether there really is any sound in the *corps sonore* at all. While examples of sounds are invoked, they are instrumentalized in articulating not a philosophy of sound, but the (maternal) space of its endless return, the *renvoi*. It is not the 'beat' itself, but that rhythm, as he states elsewhere, 'n"apparaît" pas, il est le battement de l'apparaître en tant que celui-ci qui consiste simultanément et indissociablement dans le mouvement de venir et de partir des formes ou des présences en général, et dans l'hétérogénéité qui espace la pluralité sensitive ou sensuelle'.⁴³ Perhaps the title of the middle section, 'Interlude: musique mutique', is rather more revealing than at first it might appear. Finally, through his etymological meditation on the word *mot* (from *mutum*, then, variously, *mu*, *motus*, *muô*, and *mouth*) we find the same pull towards a story of origins as in Rousseau, replete with an evocation of an originary scene of harvest and cultivation (p. 48).

Nancy's collaborator and colleague, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, suggests that philosophy 'depuis son "commencement"' has dreamed of 'un *dire pur* (d'une parole, d'un discours purement transparent à ce qu'ils devraient immédiatement signifier: la vérité, l'être, l'absolu, etc.)'.⁴⁴ We might wonder here whether Nancy is guilty of entertaining the dream of a 'pure listening', upon which an anti-ocular philosophy could be built? De-historicizing listening in order to think of it as a 'natural' phenomenon to which we can legitimately turn simply buys into a problematic essentialism, rather than understanding the inheritance of our ears as always already cultural. As Sterne asserts, '[t]here is no "mere" or innocent description of interior auditory experience. The attempt to describe sound or the act of hearing in itself — as if the sonic dimension of human life inhabited a space prior to or outside history — strives for a false transcendence', and reinstates the kind of philosophy against which Nancy is trying to turn by asserting a sonic, but nonetheless 'universal human subject'.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Janus, 'Listening', p. 198.

⁴² Ibid., p. 200.

⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Les Muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 46.

⁴⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le Sujet de la philosophie: Typographies I* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Sterne, *The Audible Past*, p. 19.

Coda

Finally, this essay (re)turns to Titian's painting. Nancy concludes his meditation on listening by reading this painting as a manifestation of the specifically musical *corpus sonore* in action. He asks: 'ce ventre qu'il regarde n'est-il pas le lieu où vient retentir sa musique, et n'est-ce pas aussi bien de la résonance de son instrument qu'il est à l'écoute?' (p. 84). He argues that this properly theatrical scene, in the way in which the perspective of the trees and the supposedly 'outside' space, against which this more intimate scene of music-making is played, intermingle so that 'le dedans et le dehors ouvrent l'un sur l'autre' (p. 84); the trees outside expand the pipes of the organ, and thus the 'resonance' of the scene as a whole. Nevertheless, why does Nancy require the naked body of a woman — and Venus, as the archetypal image of feminine sexuality, no less — to propound his musical theorizations? Janus suggests, in her reading of the same moment in *À l'écoute*, that Nancy both offers 'the embodied mass of Titian's fleshy Venus as a buffer' and also that the scene presents a 'visual image of a mode of listening that is different to that of Schopenhauer, Wagner, and the early Nietzsche, indeed different to the whole Western (Helleno-Christian) tradition of musico-theological listening since Plato'.⁴⁶ As Janus acknowledges, in this sacrificial tradition of musical listening, auditors are required to sublimate their bodily responses to the music and instead attend to primarily structural or harmonic features in order to ideate the sonorous in visual or spatial terms. However, while Venus's fleshy body is instrumental in suggesting, even demanding, that listening be conceived in corporeal and not just intellectual terms, the role of Venus's body in facilitating the organist's bodily response — his (and our) experience of a 'sensual excess' — is, nonetheless, contestable. In so doing, the female body is simply (re)aligned with the apparently sensuous, methexical, 'watery' (to follow Janus) nature of sound, and all in music — the properly *musical* — that is irreducible to *logos* or sense (as meaning).

Moreover, although Nancy is happy to acknowledge that the organist is certainly gazing sensually at the naked Venus, he contends that the gaze is directed towards her belly (presumably in order to make his argument that the musician's gaze merely directs us to the belly-womb matrix on, in, or with which the *corpus sonore* is able to make itself resound, and thus folds the visual aspect into a more essential relationship to sonority), it seems evident that the organist's gaze is actually directed towards Venus' crotch. Do we not find, rather more revealingly, a psychosexual scene of acoustic self-identification, whereby the male organist (read, also, philosopher) — effectively blinded by the threat of castration — has to continue to play his 'organ' in order to initiate an otic disavowal of what he has (not) seen. Furthermore, for all Nancy's emphasis on sound as sharing and opening, there is no reciprocity between Venus and the organist; he cannot solicit her (or Cupid's) attention, locked as they are in their pre-cultural dyad. While she is required for *his* hearing and/or listening, the painting suggests that she cannot hear anything at all. She is absent, elsewhere, not-whole; permanently beyond the phallic

⁴⁶ Janus, 'Soundings', pp. 79, 80.

circulation of law, language, and meaning, or, as Lacan famously put it in *Encore: le séminaire, livre XX*, 'il n'y a pas la femme, la femme n'est pas toute'.⁴⁷

Finally, and perhaps most curiously of all, Nancy is keen to insist that 'on fera répondre à ce tableau la musique de Wagner, au moment où Tristan, à la voix d'Isolde, s'écrie: "Quoi, j'entends la lumière?"' (pp. 84–85). Although the musical response undoubtedly enables Nancy to fold the implicit sonority of the painting into a more explicit relation with sound and/or music, why Nancy views this music in particular as an obvious response to Titian's painting is far from clear. Nonetheless, it is certainly revealing in terms of the musical framing to which it alludes. What Nancy offers us as 'proof' of his theoretical position is, as before, the libretto, and rather strangely the score of the vocal line from Isolde's last utterance ('[unbe]wußt höchste Lust' (unconscious supreme bliss)) at the end of the opera, with no mention of the music accompanying them. Neither the quiet tremolo strings accompanying Tristan's final words, nor the echo of the 'last consolation' motif in the woodwind, nor the timbre and texture of the voices and instruments, nor even the luscious minor plagal cadence — itself a *resounding* of the long-awaited resolution of the Tristan chord, only heard for the first time a few bars previously and coinciding with Isolde's death/transfiguration — appear to be of any interest.⁴⁸ Beyond the perhaps easy observation that Nancy is, despite appearances, not actually talking about music at all, he nonetheless offers us an interesting musical chronology of the *corps sonore*. Nancy's theorization of a philosophical listening takes us directly from Rameau's attempt at systematizing and codifying a nascent tonality, through to Wagner — and not just any Wagner, but Wagner's *opus metaphysicum*, *Tristan und Isolde*, where tonality begins its journey towards modernist disintegration and fragmentation. The 'Tristan chord', in failing to resolve, by resolving onto a dissonance — a dissonance only resolved properly and thus (temporarily) restoring tonality nearly four hours later, at the very moment Nancy cites — brackets our 'mute' musical scene of philosophical listening as synonymous with the reverently 'silent' reception of canonic, predominantly tonal works in the classical concert hall. The time-space of Nancy's *corps sonore* is an entirely tonal space, which serves, at the same time — as was Rameau's agenda in the original articulation of the *corps sonore* — to de-historicize and naturalize tonality. Indeed, if we return yet again to the supposed 'representation' of the *corps sonore* in Titian's painting, we find a third instance of the internal/external dichotomy with the trees also circumscribing what is private and public; a distinction that has been crucial to the history of music, and the precise example — the mansion garden — that Richard Leppert gives as a 'prototype of the modern concert hall, which delineates a physical space for a certain kind of music, whose sonorities are the acoustic signs of a certain privileged group of people'.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lacan, *Encore*, p. 14 (emphases original).

⁴⁸ For more on the motives in *Tristan und Isolde*, see Roger Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 32.

Concomitantly, then, if silence and the delimited space of the concert hall are one and the same — remembering that Nancy's philosophical space of *renvoi* does not refer to the articulation of a 'beat' but the gap *between* the beats that allows the temporal-spatial matrix to unfold — the heyday of the Western high-art tradition and its canonic works are also rendered neutral, transhistoric, and asocial.

Nancy's insistence that we should 'remonter du sujet phénoménologique [...] à un sujet résonant' thus appears to be founded on a fairly well-worn metaphysical sonotropism (p. 44). Although he claims that the move 'de l'ordre phénoménologique jusqu'au retrait et au recel ontologique, n'est pas par accident un pas qui passe du regard à l'écoute', this move necessarily resorts to an essentializing of sound and listening as somehow subsisting outside of time or culture and, more tellingly perhaps, still relies on the very traditional realm of the (erotic) male gaze directed towards the naked female body for its final exposition (p. 45). While it may be the case that what Nancy is trying to offer us in *À l'écoute* is a methodology for philosophy, one where, as Janus claims, we are asked to 'attend to resonances of perception and meaning yet to emerge and always passing away',⁵⁰ it nevertheless remains problematic to figure this in terms of an essentially 'natural' maternal-feminine, and to frame it against the apparently neutral backdrop of tonality figured *as* synonymous with music (in general).

⁵⁰ Janus, 'Listening', p. 189.