Sound or Expression: Dilemmas in the Phenomenological Aesthetics of 20th Century Music

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Phenomenology, as a philosophy of the twentieth century, is often confronted with music of the same period, which in contrast with the classical-romantic repertoire recedes from previously codified means for the organisation of musical structure (namely tonality) and holds up the actual matter of the music – sound – for admiration. So musical experience dwells more at the sound and its direct appearance rather than rushing to the musical meanings intended through sensuous moments. From this aspect music in the first decades of the twentieth century complemented the other arts undergoing a similar development. Romantic art was replaced by artistic creativity relying on the objectivity of the musical material and not on the emotional quality. The paper considers circumstances under which some of the phenomenological approaches adopt a positive approach to the music of the twentieth century (those which stress the immediacy of the perceptive presence) and some of which tend to reject it (those which apply the requirement of expressive intentionality).

Keywords: 20th century music, phenomenology, sound, expression, intentional and non-intentional music.

Phenomenology and music of the twentieth century should go together well – in his *Logical Investigations* from 1900 Edmund Husserl presented phenomenology at a time when western European music was undergoing a fundamental change. [1] And so one can draw a parallel here between the principles of new art and the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology attempted to restore the value of authentic knowledge of sensuous experience on which art is based. And so aesthetics and art theory began to apply phenomenological approaches, and musicology soon joined in. Aesthetic experience then constituted a significant field of application for phenomenology, from which many valuable philosophical observations were born in return. Phenomenologists took a particular interest in the specific objectivity of artworks and in aesthetic experience.

Phenomenological inspirations in musicology were formulated primarily on the basis of intuition, thus in terms of a method, which should ensure knowledge of essential traits. Here intuition stands in contrast to deductive reasoning, which disregards the empirical state of reality, and on the other hand against inductive reasoning, in which there is a danger of large amounts of chaotically gathered data lacking support for their arrangement.[2] Phenomenological intuition does not accept the standpoint of the intellectual premises and wishes to be guided by experience alone. It is not satisfied with the positivist stance – the arrangement of a certain concrete set of data does not create a possibility to apply findings about this arrangement elsewhere in the world because there is
no generalising formulation which would define in what circuit of phenomena or things such an arrangement could also occur. In contrast with this, phenomenology believes that experience does not merely slides over the surface of things, and that perception itself ensures reliable knowledge, and it actually provides it with maximum evidence.

In art there has been a decline in the interest in depiction, in communication operating on the basis of a reliable tradition. Art has shifted away from its ability to refer beyond itself, and instead of this it has raised up for admiration sensuous material, which has ceased to be arranged according to means previously ensuring understanding. Sign lost its ability to signify, it asserted itself through its appearance alone - it has become opaque.[3] Artists and art theoreticians themselves were aware of the changes in art.[4] Some of them directly conducted a parallel to phenomenology which wanted to be a philosophy concentrating on “how” rather than “what”. It did not want to work with meanings as they were prepared for use according to tradition, but it was seeking to observe how the meanings of things are constituted in consciousness. Phenomenology focuses on everything through which the object is given, but at the same time only on that. The contexts, which are not essential for apprehension of the object, are set aside during philosophising.

*Impressionism and expressionism* belong among the last musical trends to cover a large part of musical culture. In the musical environments both followed on from the romanticism of the nineteenth century, but they both moved it in different directions. In spite of this they were linked in some traits: both loosened the tenets of tonality, which up to that time had been the main factor in building musical form and musical understanding. Both also moved to the foreground musical resources, which had previously tended to complement musical expression, that is to say, *timbre*. [5] The abandoning of tonality was soon completed in the case of Schönberg, and significant independence from tonal thought marks the creativity of a great number of twentieth century composers. It appears that the abandoning of tonality can remind the phenomenological abandoning of a general thesis of the world. Tonality always ensured musical meaning reliably, but what constitutes it? We know tonality as a developed system, but if we truly want to understand the initial grounds of musical significance, we should not consider them to be obvious.[6] Tonality is a framework that does not allow one to discern the expressive force of delicate musical qualities from which it may have been originally constituted but which it has irreversibly swallowed up. It is no longer possible to see how musical meaning is born, how it arises. Similarly phenomenology also wants to monitor the conditions under which the object is constituted in its meaning in consciousness. Though this juxtaposition is somewhat exaggerated,[7] we can meet with phenomenological reasoning making it germane: “We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakably. Cézanne’s painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself.”[8] Merleau-Ponty especially accentuated the phenomenological nature of modern art. Horia Bratu and Ileana Marculescu, remaining more faithful to the Husserlian perspective, spoke explicitly of “a sort of radical reduction of all previous aesthetic meanings” that took place in the early 1920’s artistic creativity.[9]

When writing about new music and putting it in the context of the phenomenological approach to music, Paul Bekker emphasised “a tendency towards joy from the appearance as such”. José Ortega y Gasset,[11] whose philosophy displayed a considerable closeness to phenomenology, expressed the change in artistic creativity through a more complex concept of *dehumanization*. And so phenomenological apprehension came to music. But this occurred on a relatively general level, and it is also interesting that it resulted in different consequences for phenomenological evaluation of some concrete composers. So when, for example, Moritz Geiger wrote that in the case of Debussy’s music there is a tendency for listeners to grasp it inauthentically - when listening to it, they do not
allow themselves to be guided by the artistic value closely interlinked with the structure of the work, but rather they tend to use music to kindle their own emotions, just as in the case of music of the essentially romantic Wagner.[12] Ortega evaluated Debussy fundamentally differently (and also in contrast with Wagner for example). Influenced by certain aspects of his reception in Spain[13] and also the view of certain other areas of art, he saw in Debussy a personality announcing a new epoch of musical creativity. In music he pointed out the emphasis on material and welcomed the sense for the pure artistic character of new art. According to him romantic art cannot get by without overt references to extramusical reality, to experienced emotions linked with human life, and so it loses its own artistic character. New art can be dehumanized and can focus on the “how” (style) and not the “what” (eventual subject-matter). And so according to Ortega art formulates a certain manner by which we apprehend the world. Either we are drawn into the world, by which it is imperative for us (this bears a resemblance with the natural attitude according to Husserl), or we bracket that understanding which offers itself so easily (we enter Husserl’s phenomenological attitude), and we discover the foundations of our relationship to the world. For Ortega this involves the romantic (only slightly artistic) and new (authentically artistic) music of Debussy and Stravinsky.[14] But he also stressed similar differences between human and dehumanized art in other art forms while emphasising mainly Mallarmé’s poetry.

**Aesthetics and intentionality**

Phenomenology asks what is the relationship of man to the world, what does the world mean, what does it mean to be in the world? At the beginning Husserl’s phenomenology understood this question more narrowly as being focused on knowledge – on the possibilities of cognitive acts of consciousness, the conditions of every possible knowledge. Intentionality then became the central concept, representing the basic quality of consciousness – that it has some object to which it is directed, that perception or thinking is always perception or thinking about something. The acts of our consciousness bare various aspects of the perceived object, but of course it is intentionality, which ensures their joining, which is governed by the sense of the object. So the object does not appear to us as a sum of various sensuous moments but as a whole thing. The moment of unity of an object being governed by its meaning is fundamental. In this holistic aspect phenomenology approaches experience with unprecedented respect. Moreover it examines how the meaning of this object is constituted before our very eyes.[15]

How can we view the relevance of the concept of intentionality in relation to music? Primarily it is necessary to understand that music (and other arts) is the domain of perceptive experience, which in the case of Husserl has a privileged position in a certain sense because it represents “a consciousness of the own presence “in person” of an individual Object”.[16] Such a meeting with an object in the mode of its “self-givenness” ensures evidence of knowledge, so “every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition”.[17] And so it is perception, which performs the original, exemplary form of intentionality.[18] So one must understand that aesthetic perception is the purest perception of all, which Mikel Dufrenne emphasised in his writings: “Aesthetic perception is, in effect, royal perception, perception which whishes only to be perception without being seduced either by imagination, which invites to wander around the present object, nor by apprehending which invites to reduce it or encompass toward conceptual determinations”. [19] Instead of “truth about the object”, which can even bear a connection to real practises and to other objects, “truth outside of the immediately given”,[20] aesthetic experience provides “truth of the object, truth, which is immediately given in the sensible”,[21] and so the aesthetic object is also “given in presence and reduced to the sensible”, “sensed as real without referring to the real”. [22]

**“Non-intentional” music**[23]

So from what aspects can we draw a parallel between (new) music and phenomenology? In simplified terms some authors (Ortega, Bekker) consider new music – that which has freed itself of
tonality and exposés bare sonority, and is mostly “autonomous” – to be close to phenomenology. But in later writings we also see opposing opinions. Roger Scruton[24] views atonal music with suspicion because it should be possible to apprehend all music as meaningful, i.e. as an intentional object. But atonal music provides few intentional clues. Ernest Ansermet, a harsh critic of Schönberg’s dodecaphony, had expressed even earlier such opinions of preference.[25] And in the same vein serial music is devoid of the ability of emotional expression according to Alfred Pike,[26] who could only imagine expression here in the second place as a reaction to the detection of syntactic relations. In their apprehensions music is intentional when it is based on comprehensible expressivity carried by tonality. Thus it does not surprise that Dušan Plavša directly described new music as non-intentional.[27] We could say that these authors adopt the standpoint of expression. They understand music as sounds which are transformed into a meaningful formation, an independent world which we experience primarily due to the understanding of expressive musical qualities: “if music is emotive, it is also intentional”. [28] So according to Plavša intentionality includes music with specifying extramusical references (syncretic intentionality) and also absolute music (expressive intentionality). Then according to him non-intentional music “is a product of the artist’s creative relationship with the acoustic material matter as such and his exploration of its form-making potential.”[29] It does not in any way lead toward the extra-musical world, but it is created by “those formal factors whose aesthetic effect is directed at the work itself and not at the subject matter outside it”. [30] The non-intentional approach had been applied in previous centuries, but naturally it is typical for recent music and was implemented in an exemplary manner in Schönberg’s dodecaphony. There exists a certain agreement on the fact that new music goes against expressive musical meaning consisting in emotional expression, i.e., leading beyond the work, beyond its sound structure, close to human feelings.[31] Could it be phenomenology, which helps apprehend the new, i.e., non-intentional music? One of the ways would be to suppose that if the arts reflect or express man’s approach to the world, the so-called new music (and other arts as well) has not changed in this regard and is not as different as we tend to presume. It is possible to meet with this opinion concerning modern art in Patočka: “S’il ne désigne pas, s’il ne décrit pas le monde de la quotidienneté qui est le monde de tout le monde, il ne l’en exprime pas moins, par l’intermédiaire de l’artiste.”[32] And when he tries to specify his premise, he says that what new art suggests, comes from the realm of negation because such is the attitude of a man in today’s world: “[…] il n’y a pas de «salut», pas de centre unique et ultime de signification auquel l’on puisse tout rapporter.” On the other hand it is quite difficult to suppose that the whole mission of modern art can be reduced to revolt and negation. Though the early 20th century saw often such motivations, later they were not pronounced so strongly or even at all, they seem to have been replaced instead by efforts to find new expressive possibilities, which is quite far from being understood as a denial. Moreover there is something in the music: musical pieces exhibit unique qualities and the notion of negation can hardly convey them sufficiently.[33]

Music and intentionality
The function of intentionality is to apprehend an object – to bind the sensual data in a whole according to the style in which the object appears to us. If we understand intentionality as a unified presentation of an object, then in relation to music two basic concepts can be suggested. Music is traditionally classified amongst temporal arts, and in Husserlian phenomenology we could then say that musical objects are temporal objects which “[…] are not only unities in time but also contain temporal extension in themselves.”[34] And so temporality represents a core concept of musical intentionality – consciousness is directed in many acts to the incoming music, to elapsed, sounding and anticipated tones. But of course these acts proceed according to musical meaning, intentionality joins together tones with various temporal traits into a meaningful whole. But naturally in this sense music rejecting tonality loses the fundamental means by which currently sounding tones bond with the elapsed ones. And similarly the anticipation of future events is weakened. So in the music of the twentieth century the temporal dimension and musical continuity is weakened. Then according to
Adorno some music takes on the elements of painting and its spatiality increases, in particular in the Debussy – Stravinsky line. Whereas in traditional music the temporal dimension could be well apprehended with the help of tonality, which is founded on tonal functions or tensions between the individual tones, in the case of new music it is necessary to seek out new principles. And so in the twentieth century certain theoreticians close to phenomenology (e.g. Ernst Kurth and Hans Mersmann) introduced concepts based on tectonics, on a form created from the projection of temporal element into space (on categories more clearly derived from unsophisticated musical experience). Musical temporality also makes specific demands for musical experience. Although music expands in time, this quality results in a great role of the actually present moment: it is necessary to detect each sounding tone so that its relating to the previous ones is possible, as well as their evaluation generating the anticipation. Musical presence generates a temporal field, which in the case of tonal music is more extensive compared to rather punctual structure of atonal music. The temporal progression of tonal music, labelled by Mersmann as force, was specified as motivation by Helmuth Plessner, who assumed that musical “flow is motivated through the tones themselves”. The impulse thus comes from within, it is not imposed upon the tones – there opens an inner world of the aesthetic object, for which it is characteristic, that it “is a world unto itself.” So from the aspect of musical time, in the case of atonal music it is more difficult to identify the clues for the constitution of musically meaningful wholes.

Another aspect allowing for the formulation of musical intentionality is musical expression. The temporal structure clearly captures important musical properties, but the inner time-consciousness by which we can describe it comes within the sphere of mental acts. If we understand music as an object which speaks to us via its meaning, we should suppose another level of musical experience which would conceive of music more as objectivity.

On the basis of a sound structure consciousness constitutes a musical object and where these acts of bestowing meaning do not occur, there arises a doubt as to whether we are truly meeting with music. And Scruton expressed just this approach to atonal music and set-theoretical music analysis: “for if it is an analysis of the intentional object of the listener’s experience, it may set that experience outside the musical sphere, or at any rate, on the margins of it. If, on the other hand, it is an analysis of the material matter organization of the sounds, regardless of our musical experience, it is not an analysis of the music. In fact, set-theoretical analysis offers a striking proof of the eccentricity of much atonal music. For it aims to describe the actual order of the music: and the result is a description of nothing that it would be interesting to hear.” In short, expressive intentionality assumes a difference of sensuous data and the object intended through it. Adorno also polarised music of the twentieth century via expressive intentionality on the figures of Stravinsky and Schönberg. According to him Stravinsky’s music presents an absence of intentionality – it consists in the objectivity of structure, it does not allow subjectivity as the basis of expressivity to speak. Frequent musical blocks of music marked by mechanical temporality are evidence of this. In contrast with this, Schönberg’s music is founded on such a type of expressivity, which is so individually conceived, that the intended meanings are essentially incomprehensible to anyone, although the music is meant to touch the listener most urgently. In the case of Stravinsky the meanings are accessible (with regard to the publication date of Philosophy of New Music it can be noted that Adorno based his appreciation on Stravinsky’s tonal music), but they are so collectivised or even stereotyped that his music loses the intended meaning. Schönberg on the other hand conceives music as being so deeply spiritual that it is not embedded into the musical material, so that it could be apprehended by the listener. In his writings Ernest Ansermet also offered a comparable polarity of the over-aesthetized Stravinsky and Schönberg, who had too much in his heart.

Conclusion
However great the twentieth century music’s difficulty in attaining intentional comprehensibility, the aesthetic context represents a challenge to make attempts at intentional reading. With its perceptive aesthetic character, musical experience reveals the structure of intentionality and allows us to experience the presence of the world, which is all the stronger for being given as a temporal object. In the description of the twentieth century music phenomenology heads primarily in a dual direction. On the one hand, it focuses on the articulation of musical meanings in terms of intentional unities, understood as transcending the sensuous hyle. Then it conceives a significant portion of music as non-intentional, which calls into question this music as music. Or it plays with intentionality itself – with the process of constitution – and focuses on the immediacy of musical experience and the search for those moments, which just seem to offer promise of the intentional clues that could arise during listening to music. The extralinguistic nature of a large part of the musical repertoire bursting with perceptive experience, and the absence of another privileged model for the explanation of atonal music as was the theory of tonality for tonal music, make the phenomenological approach attractive for apprehending music, as it declares openness to that which is immediately given in consciousness (with the exhibition of the sensuous), as well as to meanings transcending the sensuous matter.

References
ORTEGA Y GASSET, José: The Dehumanization of Art, and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and

Notes
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[4] As early as 1907 Ferrucio Busoni proposed that music should be freed from the outdated tone system and from tonality. Cf. Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music. New York: G. Schirmer, 1911. The arrival of the epoch of new music was also announced by Schönberg, who expressed understanding for the arrival of new art characterised by greater objectivity and also example to sound as such. “As a reaction against the musical epoch that has just run its course, an epoch which carried to the limit the pathos of subjective feeling, one may expect a more un-pathetic kind of music.” SCHÖNBERG, Arnold. New Music [1923]. In SCHÖNBERG, Arnold. Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg. Ed. Leonard Stein. New York: St. Martins Press; London: Faber & Faber, 1975, pp. 137-139, here p. 137. “Evidently, in higher art, only that is worth being presented which has never before been presented.” “Art means: New Art.” SCHÖNBERG, Arnold. New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea [1933/46]. In: Style and Idea, pp. 113–124, here pp. 114, 115. Arnold Schönberg appreciated the linkage of musical thought with its acoustic portrayal and declared that he was aware of the value of sound: “‘Sound’, once a dignified quality of higher music, has deteriorated in significance since skilful workmen – orchestrators – have taken it in hand with the definite and undisguised intention of using it as a screen behind which the absence of ideas will not be noticeable. Formerly, sound had been the radiation of an intrinsic quality of ideas, powerful enough to penetrate the hull of the form. Nothing could radiate which was not light itself; and here only ideas are life.” SCHÖNBERG, Composition with Twelve Tones 1 [1941]. In: SCHÖNBERG, Style and Idea, op. cit, pp. 214-243, here p. 240.
[5] That’s also why in music publications during the first decade of the 20th century, we can encounter, under the heading of Impressionism, elements addressed to music, which were then subsumed under the expressionist branch of late romanticism. Cf. TROSCHKE, Michael von:


[7] Husserl considered aesthetic experience as similar to the phenomenological attitude, thereby realising the phenomenological reduction (or the neutrality modification).


[12] According to Geiger Debussy’s as well as Wagner’s music cannot be properly experienced in the so-called outer concentration, but invites toward the “inner concentration”. GEIGER, Moritz. *Das Bewusstsein von Gefühlen*. In: PFÄNDER, Alexandr (ed.). *Münchener philosophische Abhandlungen*. Leipzig: Barth, 1911, here pp. 125-162, here pp. 160–161. Later Geiger elaborated this notion into a revised form and explained that all music should be experienced in the outer concentration. But “subjective music”, which comes mainly from the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, is strongly exposed “to be misused as a stimulus to feeling” (Significance 83). Later he also did not mention Debussy in this regard and maintained only the example of Wagner’s music. But a similar typology – the listening concentration on the object or the inner experience of it, is maintained in Günther Stern who characterised impressionism with the inner listening experience. Cf. Stern, Günther. *Zur Phänomenologie des Zuhörers (Erläutert am Hören impressionistischer Musik)*. *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*. 1926–1927, 9(11–12), 610–619.


[17] HUSSERL, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, op. cit., p. 44.


[20] Ibid., p. 78.

[21] Ibid., p. 77.

[22] Ibid., p. 77.

[23] It has to be noted, that if something is music, then it is an aesthetically valuable whole of sounds (and pauses among them), e.g. a musical intentional object. And if we have sounds not bound with some musical (aesthetic) significance, then we can not speak of music, though we still have an
(intentional) object, but this time just a sound object. To speak of non-intentional music thus makes this difficulty: if we have music, it (always) is intentional music. Plavša’s notion of non-intentional music with regard to the twentieth century music and to our use of the term here could be taken as meaningful when following Kania’s definition of music: either we take as music something which has basic musical features (much traditional music) or is listened for them (experimental, new music), the extreme example of the second case being the situation of “intending people to attend to something for features it does not possess”. Kania, Andrew. Definition. In: Gracyk, Theodore, ed. a Kania, Andrew, ed. The Routledge companion to philosophy and music. London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 3-13, here p. 11. The constitution of the musical intentional object in the case of new music is an open process which can be compared to giving an incentive without necessary clues.

[24] “Most music that seems meaningful to us is tonal.” “Music then retreats from the intentional to the material realm; and what we hear, in hearing Stockhausen’s *Gruppen*, for instance, is precisely what we do not hear in a Beethoven symphony: a series of sounds, produced by many different sources in physical space, as opposed to a movement of tones which summon and answer one another in a space of their own.” SCRUTON, The Aesthetics of Music, op. cit., pp. 233, 281.


[28] Ibid., p. 74.

[29] Ibid., p. 65.

[30] Ibid., p. 73.

[31] This is apparent, for example, in the above mentioned treatises by Geiger, Ortega or Pike.


[33] This paradigm of positive qualities that are present in the world and exposed to our view is close to phenomenology, as can be drawn from Husserl’s otherwise critical treatment of the notion of positivism: “If “positivism” is tantamount to an absolutely unprejudiced grounding of all sciences on the “positive,” that is to say, on what can be seized upon originaliter, then we are the genuine positivists.” HUSSERL, Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy, op. cit., p. 39.


[37] DUFRENNÉ, Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, op. cit., p. 146.


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