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Disciplinary Brief

MUSICAL LISTENING AS AN ACT OF LOVE

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Music and Love

Music and love share a deep connection. The ubiquity of love as a musical topic resonates in the famous words of Shakespeare's Duke Orsino, who seeks a cure from romantic affection in an overindulgence of music, 'the food of love'. If religious activity can be defined as a form of devotional love, then music's connection with love would seem to be universal as, according to ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, 'all known cultures accompany religious activity with music' (Nettl 2005, 46). Love, according to Oliver O'Donovan, 'gives affectionate direction to action; it fills us with something we feel and steers us to something we may do.' O'Donovan's definition suggests a dynamic movement between experience and action that is common to music. He also allows for a full range of possible love actions: one of which, listening, is particularly pertinent to music.

Musical Listening

Scholars of music have long struggled to adequately define their object of study; however, listening persists as a core tenet. Taken at face value, John Blacking's classic definition of music as 'humanly organised sound' seems to point to a discrete cultural artifact independent of the listener, but Blacking's point is rather that the organising faculty is located in the listener(s), as much as in the creator(s) of music (Blacking 1976, 10). Blacking places a radical importance on the role of the listener in musical ontology: 'The continuity of music depends as much on the demands of critical listeners as on a supply of performers. […] music cannot exist without the perception of order in the realm of sound.' (Blacking 1976, 11). Following Blacking, it is clear that although music is a ubiquitous part of practically all human societies, these different societies tend to have different opinions about what they regard as music, and how the sounds of music should be organised. Similarly, for Jean-Jacques Nattiez, '[…] just as music is whatever people choose to recognize as such, noise is whatever is recognized as disturbing, unpleasant, or

both. The border between music and noise is always culturally defined […] there is rarely a consensus.' (Nattiez 1990, 47–48). When listening is allowed a role at the base level of musical reality, the standard framing of the question of music's ontology "what is music?" is subtly inverted, becoming instead: "what can be heard as music?".

In the musical thought of Augustine, listening is similarly important. For Augustine, music can be defined as 'the science of mensurating well [modulandi]': a cosmological principal of harmony and beauty that finds its source in God (Augustine 1947, 172). The Augustinian order of love advanced by O'Donovan argues that all things are ultimately loved for the sake of God, who alone is loved 'for his own sake'. The challenge of perceiving and loving properly runs through Augustine's own application of this order to the subject of music; hearing sound as music fundamentally depends on the listener's ability to hear it in relation to God, the true source of its beauty and harmony. Everything, even imperfect creaturely music, can be heard in relation to the supreme "music" of God. This, Augustine believes, is possible both for the scholar of music, who seeks to understand it through reason and study, and the believer, whose listening is enabled by faith and knowledge of God (Harrison 2011, 40–41).

Musical Listening and Neighbour Love

Like the love claim of the neighbour which, according to O'Donovan, is a reflection of God's claim, music comes to us from many sources, and the specifics of these sources are important. Just as there is no ultimate 'mode' of love that trumps all others, there is no universal 'music'; diversity in creaturely music is an integral part of God's creative act. O'Donovan invokes the music of composer J. S. Bach to argue that love requires the recognition of 'personal singularity'. For O'Donovan, something of Bach is to be found in his music; his personality appears in his art. Careful scholarly work is required in this area, as musically constructed images of composers risk developing idealistic and mythic characteristics. The tension between music's "subjective" revelation of person and "objective" revelation of something more absolute has dogged the reception of Western Classical Music across its history (Chua 1999; Bonds 2014). Nevertheless, O'Donovan is right to suggest that attending to the music of others can constitute a vital act of love towards a neighbour.

Music is bound up with particular ways of understanding and being; as Jeremy Begbie argues, it has 'an irreducible role to play in coming to terms with the world, in exploring and negotiating the constraints of our environment and the networks of relationships with others, and thus in forming human identity' (Begbie 2000). As such, listening attentively to music – especially the music of others – can be a loving act of attention. George Steiner writes of how artistic forms such as music are expressive of worldviews, and describes the 'courtesy' that artistic forms demand of us: 'Face to face with the presence of offered meaning which we call a text (or a painting or a symphony), we seek to hear its language. As we would that of the elect stranger coming towards us, …the movement towards reception and apprehension does embody an initial, fundamental act of trust. It entails the risk of disappointment or worse […] But without the gamble on welcome, no door can be opened when freedom knocks' (Steiner 1989). Similarly, for Tillich,

artistic forms ‘cannot help but betray [the artist’s] ultimate concern, as well as that of [their] group, and [their] period […] in every style the ultimate concern of a human group or period is manifest’ (Tillich 1959). Musical listening allows a courteous hospitality and develops an empathetic understanding of others (both individual and corporate). In listening, we can attend to personal and cultural singularity at multiple levels of musical action including composition, performance and reception of music (where these categories exist and are separable), and can do so across the span of history. In my own research, I found that attentive listening to the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams offered insights into the contested relationship between music, science, and theology in the early twentieth century. Similarly, I believe that careful listening to music of all sources and contexts offers a vital way of understanding, empathising, and showing loving attention to neighbour as defined by O’Donovan.

Musicking as Love

There is something inherently dynamic in O’Donovan’s definition of love, where ‘feeling’ and ‘doing’ become inherently related. A similar dynamic, blurring the lines of experience and action, observer and participant, is also core to the dynamics of music. Musical listening, as a form of love, is not a directionless action, but leads to further musical responses. As listeners, we entrain with the rhythms of music. We tap our feet, hum along, and move our bodies; responding in resonance to what we hear. This dynamic underpins an important point in the theology of music: all human music-making is a resounding of God’s “music”. In the supreme example of this, humans respond to the “music” of God in kind, using their God-given musical faculties in outpourings of worshipful love. Martin Luther expounds on an Augustinian order of music to make this very point. For Luther, music is ‘prime matter’, called into being at the beginning of the world. The natural music of the world – most prominently seen in the properties of the human voice – can be ‘tempered and polished through artistic endeavour’; in such an act of love, God’s creation resounds back to him as praise. For Luther, this enables worshippers to ‘see and perceive in part with great wonder the immense and complete wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music’ (Loewe and Firth 2022).

In ethnomusicology and many quarters of musicology, Christopher Small’s idea of ‘musicking’ has become an accepted definition of music; it explicitly includes all ways of taking part in music; ‘whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing’ (Small 2010, 18). Defining music as ‘musicking’ – and thus as a verb, rather than a noun – also allows focus on its ethical dimension. This ethical focus resonates with the third part of Augustine’s definition of music: ‘the science of mensurating *well*’. Following Augustine, O’Donovan points out that love can be disordered and, in the same way, it is clear that music can be used and engaged with unethically. Ethnomusicologists Mark Porter and Nathan Myrick expand on this, arguing that ‘music is neither ethically neutral nor inherently morally loaded in one particular fashion. Rather, it is able to take on a variety of different ethical significance as part of a variety of different musical activities’ (Porter and Myrick 2021). The definition of musicking highlights the ethical stakes of the musical act but, if guided by the principles O’Donovan expounds, this ultimately expands the ways in which music can be thought of as an act of love. This includes the capacities music has to act as a socially generative force (Ingalls 2018), to

be a resource for peace-building (Begbie 2015), and participate in an ethics of care and restorative justice (Myrick 2021).

Thus, music is implicated in both aspects of O'Donovan's definition of love: it truly 'fills us with something we feel', and 'steers us to something we may do' as a response. Musical listening, and the responses it engenders, can be seen understood as an act of love when directed to God, and when directed to neighbour as pointing to God. Understood in this way, music offers us a chance and a challenge to engage responsibly and holistically with the created order– to tune our ears to, as Hildegard describes it, 'the sacred sound through which all creation resounds' (Hildegard and Atherton 2001, 7).

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