

Special Issue: “Listening: Cultural Histories and Comparative Phenomenologies”: Editorial Introduction

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Bernd Brabec (ed.), Special Issue, “Listening: Cultural Histories and Comparative Phenomenologies”

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Surprisingly, musicology has not yet treated the topic of listening in depth, despite century-long prolific writing on musical works, composers, and traditions from all over the world and analytical approaches to scores, soundings, and music production, as well as its sociological, anthropological, historical, and artistic implications. Maybe listening has slipped past many scholars due to an implicit assumption that listening is something basic and simple we all do all the time and that the thing we do when listening intuitively appears to be self-evident, a process that goes without saying. Importance has been given to the objects of listening rather than to the act. Furthermore, much research into hearing and listening has taken place in the “always other” musicological subdiscipline—music psychologists investigated psychoacoustics, ethnomusicologists collected non-modern taxonomies of sounds, and historians looked for reports from past centuries, but they seldom spoke to each other. The main aim of this special issue is to

enable dialogue, to bring together different perspectives and methodologies, and to profit from listening to each other.

Apart from the path following the ear, the cochlea, and the auditory nerve, there are more ways to perceive sound vibrations—via bones or the skin, for example, or even via transmutations from the visual domain: deaf people report that they “hear” the flapping of birds’ wings while observing their movement and vice versa, and blind people can learn to “see” sonic reflections in space.^[1] What cognitive processes transform neuronal stimuli into melodies, rhythms, emotions, and meanings? Nowadays, many people use wireless headphones for listening to playlists that are generated in real time by a kind of artificial intelligence. What consequences emerge from new hearing practices for future research in musicology? These are questions that go beyond the scope of this collection of articles but nevertheless need to be asked when inquiring about listening.

During the twentieth century, authors like Walter Graf, Theodor W. Adorno, or Pierre Schaeffer found that we listen differently to sounds from the environment, to speech, and to music.^[2] Difficulties arise, though, when we try to trace and define the boundaries between environment, speech, and music. At least since John Cage’s 4’33,” it has become debatable whether “music” is a kind of “object” that can be defined by its own properties, or whether it depends rather on the attitude, or position, of the listener whether a certain stream of events is interpreted as musical. Similarly, formalized speech ranging from children’s rhymes to poetry, chanting, recitatives, invocations, or magic formulae can be listened to as speech or as music—depending again on the attitude or the mode of attention obtained by the listener: hearing poetry recited in a language one does not understand, for example, suggests a much more musical note than attending to the content of verses in an intelligible language. Furthermore, *musique concrète* and soundscape arts exploit the ambiguity of environmental and musical perceptions of sound. Phenomena like gesture-calls, motherese, and animal or multispecies communication blur any clear definition of speech that seeks to build on its sonic characteristics.^[3] In tackling these difficulties with the porosity of the boundaries between environment, speech, and music, it is sensible to depart from the idea that there are different sonic objects out there that are listened to and to instead analytically approach the process of listening in itself and the active engagement with the world that this process entails.^[4]

Human listening beyond the basic physiology of hearing has mainly been targeted in two major research disciplines: On the one hand, scholars working in phenomenology and the philosophy of perception—mostly building on Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty^[5]—strive for an understanding of the process of listening, including listening to music, as a temporal and spatialized perceptual act.^[6] On the other hand, music psychologists seek, mostly on the basis of a strictly scientific understanding of the human being, to decode basic psychoacoustic processes and to understand the human perception and cognition of musical phenomena, from neuronal correlates of sonic processing to the relatedness of music listening with human emotionality.^[7] All these outstanding works, though, focus on a way of listening confined to the present and to the modern world. They mostly focus on a naturalized, Eurocentric idea of hearing. Probably many authors have been implicitly biased by their own understanding of sound and listening, and others have had to control variables in order to maintain a reproducible procedure within the scope of their studies. What is at stake here is both a cultural history of listening and an ethnographically informed treatment of listening in a cross-cultural sense, ideally based on a decolonized methodology that can go beyond these temporal, cultural, and ontological limitations.

Hearing is a basic requirement for the existence of music. Auditory imagery unfolds even when one reads a score—a process causing the reading person to experience something that is “heard,” an auditory imagination, a form of “listening” beyond acoustic waves.^[8] Music, however, is much broader (and hard to delimit, as demonstrated above) than what is composed and conserved in written works. In many traditions, music is aurally transmitted and learned, and the music that does not sound within the moment is stored in an unknown place—does it exist, slumbering in the mind of some singer who is right now neither performing nor thinking in the tune but rather occupied with cooking food or even sleeping? Possibly yes: personally, I have heard music in my dreams, and I know of many historical and ethnographic reports of elaborate musical performances that were originally received from or taught by dreamworld personae.^[9] Much is still unclear when it comes to listening, musical or otherwise.

Listening to music has its own history:^[10] How did people listen to liturgical chants in a medieval church, to baroque concerts, or to the first jazz records, and how did they communicate their experience? What sources can we draw from today in order to understand listening in the past? How did social processes and technological innovations effect changes, and what medical and physiological concepts influenced the discourse about the aesthetics of listening and musical praxis in the past? Various authors of the present issue open historical perspectives in order to outline a cultural history of musical listening, namely Ina Knoth, Benedikt Leßmann, and Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo.

When listening to *ilib* drums, the indigenous Kaluli of Papua New Guinea report hearing the lament of a dead child sung by a bird.^[11] Such concepts are often perceived as pertaining to belief systems rather than to epistemological toolsets that produce knowledge. This should be reconsidered, though: The correlation of deceased or divine beings with sounds and musical tunes extends much further. Like a spirit that is ensounded in the voice of a shaman creates real effects in the world,^[12] isn't God conceived as the primary listener of Christian liturgical chanting, thus obtaining social reality through performance? What can be heard in such circumstances, who can hear it, and who can't? How can one learn to listen to and focus on what is heard in a way that reveals spirits, gods, or birds in the sounds of drums or a song? Do specific listening habits or techniques determine the perception of sound? The deer dancers among the Mexican Yoreme people report that they “saw the music”—and in fact, EEG analyses show that their visual cortex is remarkably more active when they are “watching” the sound.^[13] Listening in indigenous contexts often defies Eurocentric notions of the phenomenon. Rafael José de Menezes Bastos, for example, describes and analyzes the way the Brazilian Kamayurá attend to the “apparently inaudible” through their ears via an extended indigenous taxonomy of sounds and listening processes.^[14] Among indigenous people, and in ritual and liturgy all over the world, listening closely opens the path to interaction with invisible beings like spirits, the deceased, or deities.^[15] In the present issue, Mèhèza Kalibani, Matthias Lewy, and Victor A. Stoichiță address listening to people and entities that may inhabit different cultural worlds, dwell out there in the animal kingdom, or exist in a mere metaphysical sense.

In 2021, the Annual Meeting of the Austrian Society for Musicology (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Musikwissenschaft or ÖGMW) was hosted by the Centre for Systematic Musicology in Graz. The conference theme was “Focusing—Listening—Ignoring.”^[16] One aim of the meeting was to invite contributors from across the musicological sub-disciplines (historical musicology, ethnomusicology, popular music research, and systematic musicology) in order to engender an interdisciplinary dialogue about the topic of listening. A selection of outstanding contributors from among the thirty-seven talks, posters, and roundtable discussions presented at the conference

were invited to submit their papers. Six of them were ultimately accepted and form the present special issue. The volume is framed by the two original keynote speakers, Ina Knoth and Victor A. Stoichiță.

(1) Ina Knoth

In her article “[Diverse Music Listening Modes: Exploring the Historical Interplay between Social Structures, Repertoire, and Cultural Organization of the Senses](#),” Ina Knoth focuses on listening to music in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a focus on women who wrote and corresponded about specific situations and artists. She focuses on how listening skills were developed and communicated. She sets out from the observation that listening is not only socially informed but highly dependent on social structures the involved individuals are embedded in. Social stratification implies the availability and accessibility of a certain musical repertoire, which may remain inaccessible to people in certain social circumstances. Finally, she argues that both social aspects and repertoire are organized in current theories and practices of how to perceive and understand the world, what she calls the cultural organization of the senses. Within this methodological framework, she presents examples from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, specifically, reports by Marchioness Margaret Cavendish and Lady Jemima Yorke. The examples strengthen the claim that specific forms of how to listen to music emerge from specific historical educational practices.



Ina Knoth, [Diverse Music Listening Modes: Exploring the Historical Interplay between Social Structures, Repertoire, and Cultural Organization of the Senses](#)

(2) Benedikt Leßmann

Benedikt Leßmann follows up these accounts with his article “[From the Ear to the Heart: Music Listening, Pleasure, and the German Reception of Du Bos](#).” He outlines the aesthetic environment of eighteenth-century authors, taking as his point of departure the French writer Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, whose accounts suggest that music enables the audience to be emotionally moved and thus paves the way for understanding listening as a direct path to the heart. His influential writings were important for the movement known in German as *Empfindsamkeit*. German author Christian Gottfried Krause, in his book *Von der musikalischen Poesie*, draws from Du Bos and provides contemporary instructions for poets and composers of vocal musical lyrics. Leßmann shows how Du Bos’s ideas were translated into German and thus draws a picture of international and intertextual transfers of knowledge in Europe.



Benedikt Leßmann, [From the Ear to the Heart: Music Listening, Pleasure, and the German Reception of Du Bos](#)

(3) Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo

Advancing diachronically, the next article, by Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo, traverses the long nineteenth century and focuses on the interaction of then progressive musical compositions with the environment of the Industrial Revolution. In "[Sonic Affinity and Aesthetic Metamorphosis: The Nineteenth Century as a Turning Point in the History of Musical Thought](#)," he builds on earlier writings on the concept of "Sonic Affinity" he developed as a methodological framework in order to guide the reader on the noisy paths between machines and increasing orchestral and instrumental loudness. He argues that the sonic environment in nineteenth-century European cities was so distinctively new to their inhabitants that music composers and performers translated these listening experiences into longer, louder, and more intense compositions. Emerging musical ideas are related to the changing sonic environment, a methodological take that may extend to prior and later epochs as well as to different regions and traditions of musical practice.



Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo, [Sonic Affinity and Aesthetic Metamorphosis: The Nineteenth Century as a Turning Point in the History of Musical Thought](#)

(4) Mèhèza Kalibani

When extending concepts of listening and understanding to different regions, though, it is

necessary to consider historical and persisting power relations, as shown by Mèhèza Kalibani in his contribution entitled “[Discourse Analysis of the Historically Audible: A Cultural-Historical Approach to Sound Recordings from Colonial Contexts.](#)” Kalibani argues that little can be learned (but much can be misunderstood) by listening to recordings from colonial contexts without precaution (but with inevitable prejudice). Not unlike Ina Knoth, he highlights the importance of attending to social circumstances and available repertoires when trying to understand historical listeners and recordists, their selection of recorded sound, and especially the recordings and their content themselves. Criticizing some prior approaches to colonial recordings, he outlines how to apply discourse analysis to contemporary ways of listening. His methodology stands out as an example of a specific mode of listening developed for the understanding of a specific repertoire, exemplified by a recording made in 1906 in the historical German East Africa colony.



Mèhèza Kalibani, [Discourse Analysis of the Historically Audible: A Cultural-Historical Approach to Sound Recordings from Colonial Contexts](#)

(5) Matthias Lewy

Extending further requires the transgression of more boundaries. Stephen Blum once noted^[17] that “a musicology that excludes ‘non-Western music’ and ‘non-art music’ cannot describe the attributes of ‘Western music’ and ‘art-music’”—and Marcello Sorce Keller built on that by suggesting “that musical scholarship excluding non-human animals cannot ultimately describe ‘how musical is man.’”^[18] Matthias Lewy includes the non-human domain and crosses the boundaries between species when investigating “[An Auditory Anthropology of Birds’ Postures of Listening.](#)” Like all animals, birds are endowed with the capacity to listen to, perceive, and interpret sounds they detect in the environment. In certain situations, humans make sounds that target birds and that are intended to be “understood” by birds. Lewy compares sound-making among the Pemón indigenous group in Venezuela with the sonic techniques applied by European bird watchers and ornithologists. He highlights that the deep conceptual and ontological divide between animist collectives—as exemplified by the Pemón and their (avian) environment—and modern societies that embed birders and biologists results in highly different understandings of how birds are conceptualized and how their listening capabilities are addressed. Overall, Lewy intends to foreground the very way the birds listen to various human sounds addressing them. Overall, animist interpretations of listening birds appear more consistent than modern narratives.



Matthias Lewy, [An Auditory Anthropology of Birds' Postures of Listening](#)

(6) Victor A. Stoichiță

The special issue is concluded by Victor A. Stoichiță, who was invited together with Ina Knoth to contribute a keynote address. With his article "[The Ethnography of Enchanted Listening—How Sonic Beings Become Social Facts](#)" he delves into the ontology of sound. Basing his argument on prior collaborative work (with Bernd Brabec) on postures of listening, he examines the listening posture he calls "enchanted listening" and subjects it to criticism. By adopting this posture, a listener adds a certain degree of subjectivity to the sonic occurrence; we commonly do this when listening to music. Stoichiță introduces his fieldwork among French musicians learning how to play Greek makam mode-based music. By analyzing dialogues and musical vignettes performed during class, he shows that certain aspects of the makam in question are perceived (or at least uttered as such) by the musicians as subjects, as agentive entities. By being learned and performed, such sonic beings are transmuted into a different ontological domain: starting from sound, they become "real" through performance and social interpretation.



Victor A. Stoichiță, [The Ethnography of Enchanted Listening: How Sonic Beings Become Social Facts](#)

In my duty as guest editor of this special issue, I wish to thank first and foremost the authors of this special issue, the anonymous reviewers who devoted their time and knowledge to strengthening the arguments, and Vasiliki Papadopoulou and Alexander Wilfing, the patient and helpful editors of *Musicologica Austriaca*. The conference this issue resulted from was only made

possible through the dedication and endurance (during repeated COVID-19 lockdowns) of Richard Parncutt, then head of the Centre for Systematic Musicology at the University of Graz, and his team.

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