The Sound of Music

(not the musical)

Sound and Music

What is it to experience sound as music? To experience sound musically?
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- To experience the distinctive aesthetic satisfaction we take in music, whatever that is.

- Some kind of organization—a vital form, in Langer's view. Maybe this requires intentional organization.
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- But there are other things to say.

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- To experience the distinctive aesthetic satisfaction we take in music, whatever that is.
- Some kind of organization—a vital form, in Langer’s view. Maybe this requires *intentional* organization.
- But there are other things to say.
- Even if you don’t find compelling the project of saying what is and what is not music, by thinking through the question, we reveal things that we do and don’t listen to, refine our listening, etc.
Tones vs. Sounds

What's the difference between these (potentially) musical sequences:

\begin{align*}
1 & \quad 2 \\
\end{align*}

In (1), we have a **musical** experience of sound. We experience the sound as music.
Tones vs. Sounds

What's the difference between these (potentially) musical sequences:

1 2

In (1), we have a musical experience of sound. We experience the sound as music.

In (2), by contrast, we experience the sound as sound. We do not experience them musically.

A musical event is “an acousmatic event, which is heard ‘apart from’ the everyday physical world, and recognized as the instance of a type. This isolation of the pure sound event leads to a peculiar experience, which I have called the experience of tone. No longer does it seem as though the middle C that sounds is caused by someone blowing on the clarinet. Instead we hear it as a response to the B that preceded it, and as though calling in turn for the E that follows” (The Aesthetics of Music, p. 19).
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“The example illustrates three important distinctions: that between the acoustical experience of sounds, and the musical experience of tones; that between the real causality of sounds, and the virtual causality that generates tone from tone in the musical order; and that between the sequence of sounds and the movement of the tones that we hear in them (*The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 19).
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In (1):
- a) The musical experience of tones
- b) The virtual causality that generates tone from tone
- c) The movement of tones we hear in the sound

In (2):
- a) The acoustical experience of sounds
- b) The real causality of sounds
- c) The sequence of sounds
Acousmatic Thesis

Scruton is suggesting features that distinguish *acousmatic* from *non-acousmatic* experience:

- In acousmatic experience, sounds are heard as tones, as exhibiting movement rather than sequence.
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Focusing on this last informs what Hamilton calls the *acousmatic thesis*:
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“to hear sounds as music involves divorcing them from the worldly source or cause of their production” (2).

Sound is experienced musically only in acousmatic experience.
Acousmatic Thesis?

Is sound experienced musically only in acousmatic experience?

Do we only experience sound musically when we experience it as divorced from its worldly causes?
Acousmatic Thesis?

Is sound experienced musically only in acousmatic experience?

Do we only experience sound musically when we experience it as divorced from its worldly causes?

I.e.,

Does appreciating distinctively musical aesthetic values require acousmatic experience?

Does the distinctively musical aesthetic satisfaction happen only through acousmatic experience?

Hamilton wants to argue no – primarily on grounds that have to do with music performance.
Musique Concrète

We can think through the acousmatic thesis a little more by thinking about musique concrète.

- Pierre Schaeffer, “Etude aux chemins de fer”
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“Schaeffer is concerned not just with how listeners should perceive sounds, but the attitude which composers should adopt towards their material. In both cases, he maintains, one should ignore the physical origin of the sounds employed, and appreciate them for their abstract properties” (6)

Musique Concrète

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It may be that Scruton thinks the following:

If $S$ is experienced acousmatically, then it is experienced musically.
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It may be that Scruton thinks the following:

If S is experienced acoustically, then it is experienced musically.

Maybe musique concrète shows we can divorce sounds from their worldly causes, but this is not necessarily to hear them as music, or to appreciate their musical value.

-A more general question: can we experience non-musical sounds acoustically?
Musique Concrète

For Hamilton's argument, we need only the following:

If $S$ is experienced musically, then it is experienced acoustically.
Musique Concrète

For Hamilton’s argument, we need only the following:

If S is experienced musically, then it is experienced acoustically.

If we experience something as music, then we divorce it from its worldly causes.

We do not use it as a way of gaining information about the world, for example.

“The person who listens to sounds, and hears them as music, is not seeking in them for information about their cause, or for clues as to what is happening...the notes in music float free from their causes...What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object: the organization that can be heard in the experience” (quoting Scruton, 9)
**Musique Concrète**

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If $S$ is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

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We do not use it as a way of gaining information about the world, for example.

In the woods hearing a creaking sound above me:

1. Acousmatic: “That’s a very interesting high-pitched sound.”
2. Non-acousmatic: “Is that branch about to topple on me?”

**Against the Acousmatic Thesis**

If $S$ is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

Hamilton offers various potential objections to the thesis, only some of which land.
Against the Acousmatic Thesis

If $S$ is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

The Objection from Timbre

• “the quality or tone color of a musical note which distinguishes different types of musical instruments, or the individual qualities of different vocalists” (11)
Against the Acousmatic Thesis

If $S$ is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

The Objection from Timbre

- “the quality or tone color of a musical note which distinguishes different types of musical instruments, or the individual qualities of different vocalists” (11)
- “Timbre comprises those qualities of a musical sound which relate it most directly to its source. [...] Experience of timbre must therefore be regarded as non-acousmatic.”

1. $S$ is experienced musically.
2. Part of this is an experience of timbre.
3. An experience of timbre is non-acousmatic
4. $S$ is not experienced acousmatically
Against the Acousmatic Thesis

**If S is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.**

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- However, Hamilton claims that an experience of timbre can be acousmatic.

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- However, Hamilton claims that an experience of timbre can be acousmatic.
- In virtue of the “structural” role it plays in especially 20th century music.
- When it plays this structural role, it is sufficiently divorced from its worldly causes.
- Ex. Debussy, “Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest”

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Hamilton rejects this objection.

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• “Acousmatic experience [...] is not sufficient for the appreciation of those kinds of music which aim to achieve spatial effects through placement of groups of performers or sound-producers.”
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- However, these spatial effects can reflect “structure” in music, too, just like timbre.
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The Objection from Virtuosity
Against the Acousmatic Thesis

If S is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

The Objection from Virtuosity

- “Acousmatic experience cannot involve awareness of virtuosity in performance, so it will not allow for appreciation of music where this is a significant element of the listener’s appreciation.”

- “A recording of Liszt’s pieces where the right-hand part was overdubbed using two hands would lose the elements of devilry, risk, excitement and relief.”
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If $S$ is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

The Objection from Seeing Gesture

- “The visual aspects of performance creates tension, as when we see the percussionist raise the beater to strike the drum, or a pianist perform a daring leap. The gyrations of the conductor and pianist are vital to the audiences comprehension, and an accept accompanied by an outflung arm seems to become more intense.”
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| 1. | S is experienced musically. |
| 2. | This experience is shaped by sight. |
| 3. | “Where sight is involved, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to experience sounds while abstracting from their causal origin” (Schaeffer) |
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(3) and (4) both show cases in which we experience sound as music

- we grasp distinctively musical value
- we enjoy distinctively musical satisfactions
Against the Acousmatic Thesis

**If S is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.**

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(3) and (4) both show cases in which we experience sound as music

- we grasp distinctively musical value
- we enjoy distinctively musical satisfactions

But our experience depends on appreciating the particular cause or source of the sound

*namely, some performer*
Against the Acousmatic Thesis

If S is experienced musically, then it is experienced acousmatically.

1. The Objection from Timbre
2. The Objection from Space
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It isn’t true, then, that to experience sound as music we need to divorce it from its worldly source.

The acousmatic thesis is false:
“Real-life causality is a genuinely musical part of musical experience.” (19)
Hamilton’s Proposal

What Hamilton proposes in the wake of his argument is that musical experience is twofold in a particular way, modeled on Wollheim’s account of seeing-in.
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I am (a) visually aware of the surface, and (b) visually aware of the dog.

In musical experience, I (a) experience the sound as having physical properties and origin, and (b) as part of a musical world tones.

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What Hamilton proposes in the wake of his argument is that musical experience is twofold in a particular way, modeled on Wollheim’s account of seeing-in.

In musical experience, I (a) experience the sound as having physical properties and origin, and (b) as part of a musical world tones.

Hamilton notes that Scruton has something like a twofold view like this. But Scruton denies that (b) is part of any genuinely musical experience.

In the surface, and (b) visually aware of the dog.

Questions

1. Are these aesthetic values of performance, rather than music? Is it possible to distinguish the two?
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1. Are these aesthetic values of performance, rather than music? Is it possible to distinguish the two?

2. Do we want to add to Hamilton’s case by rejecting the claim that our experience of timbre is acousmatic?

3. What is really at stake here? How important is the claim that non-acousmatic experience is or is not part of “genuinely musical experience,” a source of “genuinely musical satisfaction”? 