

# The Body as Ear

## Six Tones for a Cluster

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*Persons listening to music are actually not concentrating at all but they concentrate the sound waves arriving in the inside of their body. This means that when listening to music the body becomes music, and music becomes the body.<sup>1</sup>*

A cluster is a set of simultaneously produced tones, which stand in close neighborhood to each other and overlap in sound.



## Body

Point of departure is the body as existential source.

The nature of our bodily contact with the world is rooted in its perceptual capacities: when I sit on a chair, I can focus my attention on the chair or on me sitting on that chair. Having a world of objects and a world of bodily sensations, the body is the medium which enables the double structure of the internal and the external world. On the basis of cultural, historical and individual predispositions, both perceptual modes constitute the specific characteristics of the lived body. The lived body perceives the external qualities of an object as well as the associated sensations. This double structure opens up the lived body towards two functions: for the individual, it is possible through the lived body to objectify himself and turn towards the world of objects. It is also possible for the individual to express himself through the lived body, because it is the source of sensations, which can be experienced and presented in gestures. The unity of the lived body both precedes and emerges out of the dialectical interaction and reciprocity between the body and the objective world.

In the context of the phenomenology of the lived body, Erwin Straus<sup>2</sup> elaborates furthermore a fundamental distinction between perception and sensation. *Le sentir, die Empfindung*, the sensation, is immediate and intuitive corporeality and the primary dimension of experience. Within his concept of sensation, Straus develops the idea, that the sensing mode of experience includes a specific relation of the individual to himself, which not only differs from other modes of knowledge and cognition, but which also belongs to a specific, different communication with the world. In the mode of sensation, Straus states, we live in a symbiotic unity of understanding, in a pre-lingual and pre-logical psychic state, a non-conceptual quality of living-with.

Within this framework, sensing in the example with the chair integrates the chair into the presence of the body in the moment of connection. Within the sensed contact, embedded in its textures and qualities, chair and body are fused together, the body

becomes part of the object of sensation, and the object of sensation becomes part of the body.

Following Straus, sensing also directs our sympathetic system and designs the quality of contact through connecting or separating, affiliating or losing. The sympathetic tendencies of the sensation contain the implicit movement towards an object or away from it; thus, movement and sensation are linked together. Movement lives within sensation, sensation lives within movement.

Perception, as a secondary mode of organization and structure of experience, detaches from the primary event and opens up towards new possible relations with the world. Sensation focuses the *how*, perception the *what* of an experience. The distinction between sensation and perception is obvious in one's awareness of the chair as an external object. Identifying the chair as object is already a perception; is caused by and the result of a change of relation. Perception also manifests as cognitive processes and conscious thinking. In order to pass from sensation to perception, the individual cuts off the immediate quality of sensing. It is not a change of function, but a jump into a different perceptual relationship.

Sensing and perceiving are intertwined. These pathic and the gnostic moments of experience both are present in our daily lives, one in the background of the other. They involve the sensing and perceiving subject actively in the reception of the world. Embedded in the multiple experiences of the world, sensing is the core of contact.

Tone **B** is the very base of the cluster. Keeping in mind the complexity of the body as a whole, the following tones refer to different aspects of sensing music. Music is conceptualized as formed sound.

## Hearing

The majority of disciplines that deal with listening and hearing define listening as a cognitive act which leads to understanding, while hearing is represented as a sensory

event based on the physiological functioning of the ear. The reception of sound has been located in the ears and the understanding in the brain. Thus, the body-mind dualism lives on. Hearing then is part of listening, but listening not necessarily part of hearing. In addition, most disciplines establish a temporal, linear progression that moves from the stimulus to the response and understanding.

But we don't hear just with the ears. The whole body is permeable for sound and affected by it. We hear with the whole body as sensing organism. This scenery allows for several aspects. The ears emerge out of the sensitive skin, which also receives the sound waves and transports them into our body, our nervous system and our sensing. Sound enters as irregular (noise) or regular (tone) waves the body constantly and thereby influences and changes our state of being. Sound penetrates the visible boundaries of the physical body and leaves traces behind.

Another aspect of bodily hearing is the disposition to be affected by and involved in rhythm. When we hear it, due to our temporal matrix, the polar momentum of rhythm finds resonance within us and implements its movement. The hearing of the pulsations directly influences our internal motions and the performance of movement. It takes active action to move against or out of a heard rhythm.

And finally, the emotions of being intersubjectively heard and answered by other people read themselves into our musical receptivity and our communicative styles and relationships. Several components have been researched and conceptualised.<sup>3</sup> From an ontogenetic point of view, for example, emotions are formed and shared through interactions, which have been called our "communicative musicality"<sup>4</sup> - at the level of primary intersubjectivity, the mother-infant communications show significant musical patterns of timing, vocal and melodic gestures. Mother and child tune in to each others moods and exchange feelings non-verbally. These bodily and acoustic gestures "follow typical rules of musical performances with distinct timing and melodic narratives."<sup>5</sup> Without question, it is these echoing interchanges that build the contours of our emotional, relational and empathetic competences.

This is not the place to follow all the traces, but all aspects feed our living with and

understanding of the audible world from a bodily perspective. When we replace the chair in the example with sound, hearing in the mode of sensation means we become sound. We resonate simultaneously from moment to moment with what we hear. Sensation arises from resonance. What we receive shows itself where hearing and listening meet: in the responses of the lived body.

And if we take the model of sensing and perceiving as been described by Erwin Straus, listening in the first place is based on sensing the impact of sounds and perceiving and understanding the responses. Understanding sound is embodied in the interdependent relations of sensing, affective contact and perceptive notion. Understanding sound “is not a process in the brain, but a kind of skilful activity of the body as a whole.”<sup>6</sup>

Tone **H** (in German musical terms) shows some of the radius of bodily hearing. Emotional, physical, sensual and cognitive responses communally work together. They synchronize in the mode of sensation.

### **Auditory space**

The auditory space fosters the pathic moments of experience. Whereas the optical space is visually separated from us and presents structures and limits, sounds dissolve spatial contours completely. Sounds fill and homogenize the space. Sounds have their own activity; they leave the source of their production. They strike us, approach us, do not demand active attention. Sound arises, spreads out, surrounds us, lasts and fades. Sound streams overlap, move simultaneously or against each other. We are drawn to participate in the flow of their movements and are involved in the actuality of their momentum. Thus, the auditory space allows an attitude of letting go of intentions to grasp something. We can sink into the space around us, lean into the atmosphere and become part of it. In addition, in the auditory space, we are socially united in the *now*. In the the example with the chair, the qualities of the auditory space are the *conditio sine qua non* of hearing.

Standard pitch **A** ties them all together.

## Feeling feedback

How do we feel the sensations of sound in the body? How do we access the impact? How can we experience what is only subtly perceptible?

Sound touches the skin, a vague and discreet forming of an “envelope”<sup>7</sup> around the surface of the body. This could be cold or warm, small or large, close or airy. Temperature is one of the possible sensations. Intensity we can feel through muscular and visceral tensions: contracted, relaxed, expanded, tight or loose. Musical pulse, tempo and rhythm influence the temporal status of heartbeat and breathe, change the energy level and often cause spontaneous concurrent movements or vibrations.

Melodic and harmonic streams, patterns and layered combinations of musical elements process emotional messages. Our physical and affective sensitivity adapts us to the sound; the bodily sensations correspond to the message heard with internal tensions and movements. Generally, we seem to be able to follow the affective content immediately and recognize internalized enactments of gestures, movements and interactions. We emotionally tune in, attach and react. Musical messages modulate our moods.

According to Straus, the principle, even psychic sympathetic disposition of our system reveals its answer right here in the bodily feedback. Even though different emotions can cause similar symptoms, a *yes* to an experience is an opening and expanding sensation, a *no* shows itself in contraction and tightness. The sensing reveals the answers.

Tone **F** stands for the felt self-referred qualities of sensing sound.

## Gestures of participation

Leaving aside the aspects of producing music for exploring the unity of body and sound in the mode of sensing, a strong vehicle is the body itself, precisely in its kinaesthetic sense. Its different qualities give a multi-faceted picture.

According to Straus, kinaesthesia is the joint between the physical and the phenomenological body. The subject in Straus' concept does not *have* sensations, but experiences himself sensing through moving. Perception becomes noticeable and thus sensation. Unlike other senses, kinaesthesia enables us to be present in sensing. We can only move on the base of the kinaesthetic feedback, and because it moves so slowly, we can take part in it. We can feel that we move and how we move. Physiologically, this is based on the very slow stream of neuronal information of the kinaesthetic sense. When we touch a hot stove, for example, it takes a moment until we feel the pain.

The kinaesthetic sense regulates timing, force, direction and motives of movement. In the example with the chair, the kinaesthetic sense enables us to walk to the chair and to sit down, without having to think about which part of the body to use when, and in what kind of an order. The kinaesthetic sense also adjusts the appropriate use of force for that movement and delivers information about the position of the body in space. It feeds the body scheme (physiological part) and body image (psychological part) of the self with information.

Furthermore, the kinaesthetic sense acts as intermediary between the functional and expressive aspects of the body, and it communicates between the body as acting and the body as perceiving source. The functional character allows us to use the body economically in moving from point to point. In expressive movement like dance, the body slips into a different manner and changes its habit. The body twists, bends, stretches, moves on the spot. In dance, we move *in* space, not *through* space.

While moving, the body simultaneously perceives in a receptive and productive way, senses and expresses at the same time; it is neither active nor passive, but exists in an undivided connection.<sup>8</sup> As perceiving source, the body acts as ear, takes in and seizes the incoming information. It incorporates new experiences through acting them out.

In moving with music, music and movement are intermodally united. The body responds to all the levels of the musical gestures. What has been associated through hearing is directly embodied and materialized in movement. Movement clings to music, synchronizes with it and follows intensity, rhythm, shapes and pattern. Music-induced movements significantly correspond with musical gestures through the shared categories of timing, force, direction and motive. The symbiotic relationship between music and dance is conditioned by this causal constitution. The common opposition between subject and object is suspended in dance. The resulting mode is expressive and impressive at the same time. What has been understood through sensing reveals itself in a direct connectedness with the behaviour. This works both ways: what has been incorporated, finds its trace into the musical gesture.

It is self-evident, that we experience emotions through listening to music.

Tone **G** stands for the unit of sensing and moving in being music.

## Experiences

*“Thinking about music touches the very mystery of the world, precisely because music does not map the appearing world, but is unmediatedly that, whereof the world is appearance.”<sup>9</sup>*

-Arthur Schopenhauer, 1818

The overlapping dimensions of the tones in the cluster metaphorically exemplify the layers of our musical experiences. Musical experience in relation to the phenomenological understanding of sensing undergoes conscious conceptualisation. What comes into the presence of sensing is the momentum of sound, which enters us. Only in a second step, in retrospect, can we defend ourselves against the impact of



sound. This process is filtered and regulated through the psychic disposition of the individual, the age, the experiences, the knowledge, and the present situation. The second step conceptualizes and defines what has been heard. This can only be a reduction of what has already been understood.

To experience music with musical understanding a listener must perceive various kinds of musical processes, structures and relationships. But to perceive phrasing, cadences and harmonic progressions, for example, does not require the listener to conceptualize them in musical terms. A listener can experience these phenomena whether or not he hears them under the description they are given in a correct analysis of the music. This description applies to the experience of a listener who experiences the music with understanding; but the listener does not need to recognize this fact in order to have the experience it describes.<sup>10</sup>

The unfolding narratives of music express and communicate individual, social, cultural and spiritual experiences. Yet, the meaning of music is not merged in that alone. For Helmut Lachenmann, a German contemporary composer, music in the first place is a phenomenon of perception, whose realisation is a communal event of composer, interpreter and listener.<sup>11</sup> The surplus of musical sounds does not end up in its structures nor in the psychic dimension of perception. According to Lachenmann, the source of musical expression is, as well, embedded in the material itself, not only in sociological, psychological or other explanations outside of music.

The meaning lives in the momentum of the musical material. Within this, the aesthetic qualities of sensing music give rise to a moment, in which the asynchrony of thinking, feeling and acting is abolished. Following the body as ear in the mode of sensing, we leap into the unknown.

Tone **E** takes an phenomenological view on the sensing aspects of the musical experience .

## Conclusions?

Listen and sense.

## Endnotes

1. Vilém Flusser (1994): *Die Geste des Musikhörens*. In: *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. Frankfurt am Main, p.151 – 159. Translated by Elisabeth Mortimer (2011): *The gesture of hearing*. Salzburger Festspiele Journal, Salzburg 2011, p.22.
2. Erwin Strauss (1963): *The primary world of the Senses. A Vindication of Sensory Experience*. Fre Press of Glencoe, and Erwin Strauss (1966): *Phenomenological Psychology: The Selected Papers of Erwin Strauss*, New York: Basic Books.
3. Major contributions have been made by Daniel Stern (1985): *The Interpersonal World of the Infant. A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. New York: Basic Books., and Didier Anzieu (1989): *The Skin Ego*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
4. Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen (eds.)(2009): *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. *Communicative Musicality*, back cover.
6. Alva Noë (2005): *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, p. 33.
7. This is a term used by Didier Anzieu (1989): *The Skin Ego*. New Haven. Original edition (1985): *Le Moi-Peau*. Paris.
8. Viktor von Weizsäcker (1997): *Der Gestaltkreis. Theorie der Einheit von Wahrnehmen und Bewegen. Gesammelte Schriften Band 4*, Frankfurt am Main.

9. "Das Nachdenken über die Musik rührt ans Geheimnis der Welt, und zwar gerade deshalb, weil die Musik die erscheinende Welt nicht abbildet, sondern selbst unmittelbar das ist, wovon die Welt Erscheinung ist."

10. Malcolm Budd (1985). 'Understanding Music'. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 59, p. 247.

11. *Ausklang und Abgesang, Helmut Lachenmann im mGespräch mit Max Nyffeler über die Alpensinfonie von Richard Strauss*, in: *Programmheft Lucerne Festival zum KoKonzert am 24.8.2005*, S. 34-38, and Helmut Lachenmann (1996): *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*. Schriften 1966-1995, Wiesbaden.

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