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Citation: Armstrong, N. (2015). Listening as a material. Paper presented at the Troisième Biennale d'Analyse Musicale 2015, 26-27 March 2015, Conservatoire royal de Mons.

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Newton Armstrong: **Listening as a material**
Conservatoire Royal de Mons - Ecole Supérieure des Arts
Friday 27th March, 2015

I'd like to begin today with a brief consideration of the term *material*. It's a word that composers use with some regularity, but often without regard for what, specifically, the term encompasses. This lack of specificity has a certain convenience — it allows us to evade any singular *object* of composition, and to shift freely and without apparent contradiction between categories such as harmonic structure, motivic identity, rhythmic pattern, text, and recorded or digitally-generated sound. The term is at once vague and inclusive. This has implications for how we conceptualise the actual *matter* of music.

We may take this a little further and ask a very basic question: in what way can music be said to have *materiality*? We find here that the common notion of musical material is in conflict with the equally common (though entirely problematic) notion of music as an ultimately *immaterial* art form. I'm certainly not the first person to address these kinds of contradictions, and I'm not particularly interested in arriving at a solution to what is fundamentally a philosophical problem. Rather, I'm interested in how questions such as these shape the attitudes that we bring to the creation of music, and how, in turn, these attitudes shape our understanding of what it is that we think we're dealing with when actually *doing* composition.

I find these questions salient because, as a listener, I've often had the experience of finding myself in a state of mild irritation at music which seems to take for granted how it is that I should listen. This is music that is directed towards a *passive* listener; the role of the listener involves little more than receiving and interpreting the *message* of the work. My strong sense is that this kind of music often arises as a result of an uncritical and unquestioning attitude towards the specific constitution of musical material.

I would set this music in contrast to a music that *requires* a listener in order to be complete. In this instance, the act of listening becomes a constitutive element of the work itself. When listening takes on this constitutive aspect, one could say that it also takes on the attributes of a *material*.

The process I'm describing here — of *listening becoming material* — may play out in any number of ways, and there's no single concrete method for making it happen. However, it is one of those things that one recognises when it does happen; there's a charge in the air as we become aware that a particular musical experience has intensified our listening focus and sensitivity. In these moments, the coordinates of our perception have become — if only temporarily — expanded and unfixed.

These kinds of ideas become particularly interesting when they are brought into focus in composition itself. It's at this moment that tacit, non-specific, but at the same time normative and pervasive notions of what constitutes musical material no longer determine compositional decision-making. In my own work, taking full account of processes of aural perception and cognition in the conceptualisation of musical material has led to thinking in new ways about the sounds that comprise the music, the relationships that pertain between those sounds, and the ways by which

those relationships mutate in listening perception over time, constituting the emergent sensation of form. This may seem a rather subtle shift in priorities, but it has had enormous implications for my work.

There are of course precedents to this way of thinking about the *matter* of music — that is, a way of thinking that prioritises listening before all else in compositional acts — but it's not an exaggeration to say that these precedents are few and far between. Peter Ablinger recently said that "there has never been a Cézanne of music". It's difficult to disagree with him.

Ablinger's comment put me in mind of Merleau-Ponty's article on Cézanne. A key aspect of Merleau-Ponty's argument is that it is with Cézanne that the act of seeing becomes central to and constitutive of the artwork; that is to say, a painting by Cézanne requires an engaged viewer before it can be said to come into being. There's a quite particular process by which this happens, and here it's worth quoting Merleau-Ponty at length:

[Cézanne] ne veut pas séparer les choses fixes qui apparaissent sous notre regard et leur manière fuyante d'apparaître, il veut peindre la matière en train de se donner forme, l'ordre naissant par une organisation spontanée ... le génie de Cézanne est de faire que les déformations perspectives par l'arrangement d'ensemble du tableau, cessent d'être visibles pour elles-mêmes quand on le regarde globalement et contribuent seulement, comme elles le font dans la vision naturelle, à donner l'impression d'un ordre naissant, d'un objet en train d'apparaître, en train de s'agglomérer sous nos yeux.

[Cézanne] did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form ... it is Cézanne's genius that when the overall composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.

What we see here is material taking on substantive form only as the perceiving subject orients attentive focus towards the perceived object. To my mind, it's difficult to overstate the significance of the shift in approach that's described here. It's the transitional moment at which *sensation* overtakes *idea* and *representation* as the *matter* of art. The specificities and particularities of vision become the material of painting, leading to a revolution in approaches to form, composition, and colour. Entirely new modes of visual perception follow shortly thereafter.

It may be interesting to modify Merleau-Ponty's words as he might have written them had there been a theoretical "Cézanne of music". He would describe a music which, as it unfolds, creates "the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of materialising, organising itself before our ears" ("l'impression d'un ordre naissant, d'un objet se matérialiser, en train de s'agglomérer sous nos ouïe").

This would be a music that takes the act of listening as its material; a music concerned not with the combinational mechanics of notes and rhythms, but with the primary mechanics of sensation and perception. It would be a music that is incomplete without an active listener, requiring engaged participation before it could be said to take on form and structure.

I'd like to talk about the ways in which some of these ideas play out in my own work, and specifically the way in which the materiality of listening is foregrounded in the piece that you'll hear this evening, *making one leaf transparent and then another*.

It may be useful to begin with a hypothetical experiment. Imagine that a pianist sits at the piano on stage here, and with the pedal depressed plays a middle-C at around a *mezzo-piano*. Now imagine that the pianist repeats that same tone at a regular interval of 10 seconds, continuing for 20 minutes. As listeners, we have two basic options in this situation. We may allow our minds to wander, letting our focus become unfixed. There will be a progressive dulling of the sensation of the actual sounding event; it will shift into the background as we contemplate other matters.

Alternatively, we may listen ever more closely, magnifying our auditory focus and intensifying the perceptible sensation. If we choose this option, the object of our perception, while remaining objectively unchanged, will undergo a peculiar transformation; after a certain time has passed, we will begin to scan the inner structure of the sound, discerning the spectral components of which it is made, the irregularly undulating patterns enfolded into the decay, the violent, noisy action of the hammer on the string; we might even begin to wince at the out-of-tuneness of the sound, as we respond to the piano's natural state of sharpness. In short, the sound will become ever more strange and unfamiliar as our perception shifts from the outer to the inner aspect, from hearing the sound as a *note* towards hearing the sound as a *sonority*.

There are two key principles at work here: firstly, that as listeners we are able to shift between varying degrees of listening focus; and secondly, that a certain musical event — in this instance, a single *mezzo-piano* middle-C — may remain constant in its objectively considered form, while the subjective perception of that event undergoes an extensive process of change.

The treatment of material in *making one leaf transparent and then another* is less extreme than in the example we've just considered, but it operates along broadly the same lines. My main concern in the work is with effecting an intensification of listening focus — a progressive shift from the perception of *notes* towards the perception of *sonority* — without changing in any significant way the sounding surface of the music. Another way to put this would be to say that while the music may superficially present itself in a more or less consistent manner, my hope is that the listener will be drawn more intensively towards the intrinsic materiality of the sounding events as they are progressively unfolded.

In many respects, the piece is concerned with establishing a field of focus around a primary or referential sonorous image. That image, however — much like the shifting objects of Cézanne — is never presented in a complete form. Over the course of the work, the listener has the sense that the referential sonority is drawing closer, the working idea being that in the next-to-last section, we are effectively put *inside* the sonority, before somehow passing through to the other side in the final section. This impression is effected through a progressive shift from a predominantly figurative musical surface, moving very slowly towards a semblance of sounding resonance, and finally towards a kind of liquidation or filtration of that resonance.

A number of processes are at work here. At the beginning of the piece, the referential sonority is dispersed across several overlapping interval fields; it exists only in a kind of 'exploded' or 'scattered' state. These fields progressively coalesce, folding inwards towards the primary image. Over the course of the piece, there is a gradual shift in registral focus: low tones are introduced slowly and progressively, providing harmonic grounding and context for the scattered interval fields, and creating an incrementally stronger semblance of sonorous fusion. There is also a very gradual shift in the means by which individual sounding events aggregate into sequential chains, moving from fairly traditional forms of extension and development in the first half of the piece, towards extended repetition and, finally, erasure, in the second half. As in the example of the repeated middle-C discussed earlier, it's primarily through repetition (or near-repetition) that listening focus is able to scan ever more deeply into the interior of the sound.

It's also only in the second half of the piece that electronic sounds emerge. The role of the electronics is deliberately minimal. A single loudspeaker is placed face-down inside the piano, with the drivers directly above the resonance holes. The piano effectively 'filters' the electronic sounds; the soundboard and strings acting as resonators. This results in a fusion and blurring of acoustic and electroacoustic identities.

My interest in using electronics lies precisely in the ways in which they can transform the listening experience. Rather than entering into an oppositional or dialogical relationship with the 'natural' sound of the piano, they serve to transform the inner qualities of the resonance, denaturalising the spectrum, the tuning, and the spatial image. When used to subtly deform individual elements within chains of repetitions, they have the effect of making strange those sounding objects with which the listener has established a previous familiarity. When the electronics fail to sound in a subsequent repetition, the effect is often of subjectively produced 'phantom' sounds; that is, the listener hears electronic sounds that are not there. This is the result of a focussing in on spectral detail that takes place involuntarily and unconsciously when we are unable to unambiguously establish the source of a sound that we thought we knew.

It's in moments such as this — moments of intensified perception — that we become aware of the concretely embodied actuality of listening. We 'catch ourselves in the act'; struck by the immediacy and exigency of our perceptual disposition towards the world. To borrow a formulation from Deleuze, we "*become* in the sensation". In this becoming, the *things* of perception present themselves in their primary *unthingness*; in their unfamiliarity, impermanence, and contingency.

Helmut Lachenmann has said that we live in an era in which listening is at one and the same time "overtaxed and underchallenged". The great bombardment of auditory information with which we must contend every day ultimately leads to a pervasive but largely unnoticed process of desensitisation; a gradual curtailment of our innate capacity to engage in meaningful acts of perception. In bringing the materiality of listening to the centre of compositional decision-making, and in implicating the listener in the construction of sounding form, I hope to find one brief moment that serves as reminder of the extraordinary possibilities of our capacity to perceive.