

On Trying to Conceive of Music

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I have arrived at a point where I want to come to terms with the concept of music. I cannot rely on a given basis: there is no universally accepted definition of the term music. The concept of music changes in the course of historic time, as well as during the time a piece of music is performed and/or listened to. Subject to change is also the language that is used to describe music. In addition, there are discrepancies in the understanding of music among contemporaries of a given period. Perhaps music is simply what people label or understand as music. The statement implies tolerance of any individual conception of music. For my own view of music, however, such a statement is too vague. If everything can be labelled or understood as music, then the term music becomes inflated with meaning to the extent that it loses its capacity to denote something specific and, ultimately, renders itself redundant.

In my understanding of music I differentiate between the actual material of music on the one hand and the conceptual content of music on the other. The actual material has a shape that can be perceived through the senses - it sounds, I can hear it. The conceptual content does not have a shape that can be perceived through the senses, it must be discerned intellectually. The actual material of music - its physical manifestation - is sound. Silence - and I refer to absolute silence, the sonic nothing - has no physical manifestation. Silence can only exist where sound as a physical reality is excluded. But a human being with the ability to hear cannot perceive silence through his/her senses. In this context I am thinking of John Cage's experience in the anechoic chamber:

For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation.¹

While a person who is in command of a functioning organ of hearing is trying to become conscious of silence, s/he will always hear something. Absolute silence therefore does not constitute an element of music's actual material. Silence, as intended by the composer, is part of music's conceptual content. Any interruption of the flow of musical sounds that may be contained in a composition is discernible only by means of the listener's intellect. The listener distinguishes between the musical sound and that type of sound, which s/he interprets as musical silence. The continual sound - indicative of life itself - constitutes the backdrop for the musical, conceptual silence.

When music sounds, time passes. A period of time, however, is not a given premise, i.e. it does not exist as a given mould which could be filled up with music. While the conceptual tracing of a certain time span presents an attribute of musical composition, it is the sounding shape which realizes the intended duration. Events which can be perceived through the senses, such as sound, can function as mediums for the cognition of the flow of time. The continual sound presents such a medium in the case of musical silence.

When does sound begin to be music? As soon as a person labels or understands sound as music. Here, it is not potentially everything that could be labelled or understood as music, but only the combination of the actual material and the conceptual content. As the case may be, the conceptual content simply could be established through labelling or understanding a sound as music.

The next question refers to the domain of communication: when does sound begin to present itself as music, revealing thereby at least part of its conceptual content? It is the respective listener who distinguishes between musical and non-musical sounds on the basis of individual criteria and/or cultural conventions. From this follows that even sounds which are not intended as music, can be heard and understood as music. In this case, the listener enriches the actual material with a minimum of conceptual content

through understanding a particular sound as music, and thereby removes the distinction between composer and listener.

In most cases, however, it is the sounding shape itself which presents its conceptual content by means of a more or less conventional disposition of the actual material. Of course, in order to discern a conventional disposition, the listener must possess a corresponding repertoire

of conventions. In such a situation, music holds a linguistic quality; it can say: I am music.

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¹ *Silence* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p.8.

