

## **Collective Attunements: Listening Against the Matrix of Domination**

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Writing about music can mean thinking beyond purely aesthetic questions. A common bias of traditional musicology in the Westernized humanities has concretized an essentialist approach to listening subjects: Separated from the power relations and mechanisms of domination associated with issues of race, class and gender, listening has often been isolated from its societal becoming and socio-political implications.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many scholarly discourses on music often reflect only its aesthetic production. Specifically, this means focusing mainly on the musical material itself, on “sound for the sake of sound,” and on its aesthetic structure. This form of engagement with music consequently leaves aside the socio-political issues related to the heard and the unheard. Furthermore, it has led to a belief in an illusory artistic autonomy that separates music from its context of production – its historical, cultural, social, and societal interconnections – and thereby avoids the complex conditions and relations associated with the production and reception of organized sounds. To address these issues critically is one of the possible tasks of the current field of sound studies.

### **When music fades out socio-political situatedness**

Classical music, with its Western-centric, Christian, aristocratic and bourgeois traditions, has been constitutive of the creation of musical canons and of a Western sonic mythology representing idealized forms of harmonic development, melodic clarity, tonal beauty and artistic achievement. All these specific sonic qualities have led to a constellation of canonized compositions that have helped to establish a belief in a kind of universal excellence.

However, with the development of the so-called avant-garde in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tradition of classical music slowly transformed into “new” aesthetic experiments in which noise, dissonance, and masses of textures replaced well-tempered compositions, increasingly calling for new definitions of “high art.” This progressive shift towards different forms of sonic exploration, focusing noise and dissonance, helped to broaden the perception of what has been conceived as “music.” This eventually involved a shift from purely melodic structures to a more inclusive understanding of all organized sounds. Nevertheless, this shift toward the inclusion of noise within musical practices did not negate the problematic construction of an essentialist listening subject. Indeed, even though the so-called Western avant-garde created new canons of musical abstraction over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tradition of New Music for a long time seemed unwilling to reflect on how power relations led to exclusion. In short, both Western classical music and its tumultuous successor, the avant-garde, focused on an essentialist, universalist, body-less understanding of the listening subject.<sup>2</sup> This listening subject engaged with the “nature” of sound, or sound in-itself, where music is heard from everywhere and nowhere, separating the listening experience from specifically situated subjectivities. While adapting to the aesthetic canons as they were being transformed, this essentialist listening subject also systematically excluded voices that did not correspond to a normative understanding of music or did not belong to a specific artistic field.

At this point, it could be argued that the tradition of Western classical music has been mostly written by white men, as is also the case with the avant-garde, favoring an experience of listening from the normative perspective of a patriarchal, Western-centric subjectivity often based around the individual figure of the composing “genius.” What are the consequences of such an assertion? Whose music, voices, bodies, and subjectivities have been (and still are) excluded from these narratives, histories, discourses, listening practices, and institutions?

Jazz music (sometimes also referred to as Afro-American classical music), with its evolution into Black avant-garde forms like free jazz in the 1960s, has certainly concretized an alternative perspective to the whiteness of Western classical music. However, the great tradition of jazz has also been marked by ongoing racist dynamics within its production apparatus, often resulting from tensions between the white hegemony of the music promoters, funders, record companies, and producers, and the precarious, exploitative labor conditions of Black musicians.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, even when engaging with the emancipatory possibilities of jazz, women and LGBTQIA+ artists still have to suffer from patriarchal, heteronormative, and sexist violence within this professional field today.<sup>4</sup> From its creation until now, jazz music, just like the classical avant-garde, has been subjected to its appropriation by a capitalist economy reproducing its dynamics of power and exclusion.

### **Intersectionality: An interrogation of the matrix of domination**

To gain a complete panorama of the conditions of music production and reception, we need to situate them in their historical, socio-political, societal, and biographical contexts. One possible tool for such an analysis is the concept of intersectionality,<sup>5</sup> along with its entanglement with sound and listening. To embrace music in its complexity, one might therefore want to engage with its relations with intersectional discourses. In the context of the topics discussed in this volume, an intersectional perspective can indeed reveal many blind spots when engaging with music production and reception.

The concept of intersectionality marks a specific analytical and political perspective within which complex structures of discrimination and privilege may be made visible and audible, with the aim of contributing to social change. When approached through this prism, what human beings do is not seen or heard as neutral events, but as social practices that are embedded in a complex “matrix of domination”<sup>6</sup> and are structured by power relations. This matrix of domination unfolds at the intersection of multiple power relations while working on different levels.<sup>7</sup> Power relations, namely the asymmetrical orders of capitalism, classism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, racism, colonialism, and Eurocentrism, are considered to produce oppression and inequalities on the levels of societal and institutional structures, discourses and representations, individual scopes of action, and positionings.

We should be able to approach music as a social practice while taking into consideration the intersectional effects of power relations, as this means going beyond purely aesthetic concerns. Music, sound, composition, publication, rehearsals, live performances, cultural venues, sources of funding, etc., cannot be understood as neutral, self-evident, and controllable by authors. Instead, the field of music production and reception should be thought of as practices that are permeated in complex ways by relations of power and domination. In this

perspective, practices of music production and reception might be interrogated according to the following questions:

- Who makes music, and under what social conditions is music production possible? In what violent, discursive, and normative contexts are music production and reception embedded? How do the structures of music production and reception, the discourses around sound, music, and listening, plus the societal positionings of actors involved in the musical field, reveal intersecting power relations?
- What is (un)heard and composed, how, by whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences for whom? What forms of artistic practices, and whose voices, are given a public space (and thereby the possibility of recognition)? What and who remain outside of social recognition?
- What and who represent the hegemonic norm? Whose voices are silenced, and what consequences does this have for whom?
- What concrete efforts are being made to challenge, shift or even break through intersecting relations of power and domination?

In attempting to apply such questions to a specific musical context, one might gain a more complex view of the conditions of music production and reception. However, these questions underline the fact that listening is never neutral, but always situated within specific contexts of production that are intertwined in their associated mechanisms of domination and discrimination. These mechanisms could be understood as politics of sounds.

### **Between aesthetics and politics of sounds – two examples**

There have been several historical moments documenting the ambivalent confrontation between aesthetics and so-called politics of sounds. Through his groundbreaking works, John Cage, one of the grandfathers of the musical avant-garde, certainly contributed to inviting listeners to display an openness towards all sounds. However, his understanding of the “nature” of sound has helped define essentialist positions that approach sound for the sake of it, eluding its socio-political potential.<sup>8</sup> We shall now briefly discuss two instances involving him.

The first exemplifies John Cage’s dissatisfaction towards the cellist Charlotte Moorman’s feminist interpretation of his piece *26’ 1.1499”* in 1964. Although the composer and the cellist worked together extensively, at certain points during her European tour of 1964, Moorman decided to incorporate spoken texts in Cage’s score. To this end, she selected several “cultural objects” or testimonies of everyday life: The instructions from a box of Tampax tampons, an excerpt from an advertisement for a brand of comfortable panties, a confidential notice for birth control pills, a headline for the movie “How to Murder your Wife”, and a short newspaper article about a case of attempted rape of a woman, plus other more or less “politicized” textual sources. All these fragments constituted textual inputs to be incorporated in her interpretation of John Cage’s *26’ 1.1499”*. The entanglements of themes such as menstruation, women’s underpants, abortion, contraception, murder, and rape did not please John Cage, whose musical perceptions were essentialist.<sup>9</sup> His approach to sound, even when embracing sonic abstraction, was mostly concerned with the sound in itself and not with its socio-political potentiality. However, this specific musical moment in the avant-garde

underlines how Charlotte Moorman brought feminist perspectives to the core of music production, underlining how subjectivity and situatedness directly rely on the knowledge production of a musical performance. In that very moment, the musical practice becomes entangled in a complex network of socio-political and historical dimensions, and we have to listen to them attentively in order to fully situate and understand the implications of Charlotte Moorman's artistic gesture in 1964.

A further moment of confrontation between John Cage's sound-for-the-sake-of-sound approach and its consequences occurred at Buffalo University in the 1970s. The Afro-American, queer composer Julius Eastman proposed an interpretation of Cage's *Solo for Voice Number Two*. Cage's original score features only verbal indications to orientate the performer and therefore allows for a more open interpretation than would be the case with precisely notated pitches on a staff. Eastman's interpretation featured his very own lecture-performance on stage, two performers and musicians of the SEM Ensemble. While lecturing about a new system of love, Eastman addressed both racialized and sexualized issues, thematizing the bodies of the two figurants on stage, a woman from Haiti (whose origins were mentioned and addressed critically during the performance by Eastman) and a male performer (probably Eastman's lover at the time) who was eventually undressed by Eastman on stage. In that artistic moment, Julius Eastman concretely addressed the impossibility of removing an artistic action from its socio-political potentiality. Cage was present in the audience and notoriously lost his temper. He strongly criticized Eastman's performance during a lecture he gave on the day after. Cage underlined the fact that there were limits to the freedom of interpretation for his pieces, and that his music wasn't about being politicized, but was more concerned with focusing the "nature" of sound, that is to say, sound for the sake of sound. In that performance, Julius Eastman critically addressed his "place" within the avant-garde of that time by challenging John Cage's dominant position, and by making political dynamics audible that had been unheard or hidden.<sup>10</sup>

### **Listening otherwise – a call for critical listening practices and collective attunements**

These two exemplary artistic moments within avant-garde music underline the ambivalence of bringing questions of gender, class, or race into the reception of music in order to reveal a specific situatedness of music production. Moreover, these moments underline the necessity of not separating aesthetic dimensions from their societal, social, and historical entanglements. Approaching music through the specific prism of intersectionality might help us to understand sonic practices as socially meaningful and thereby support us in re-writing past and present artistic histories from a different perspective. However, it should be added that this shift in how to approach sound and listening does not mean erasing the traditions of Western music, but addressing its ambivalence regards completing and complicating current narrative positions and discourses in this field. Classical contemporary music and its continuation within the avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were indeed saturated by exclusions, mechanisms of domination and discrimination.<sup>11</sup> Besides its tremendous artistic achievements and its numerous musical outputs and experimentation, the history of Western classical music is also a history of violence: after the hegemonic and normative positions of aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in pre-20<sup>th</sup> century forms, the avant-garde proceeded to echo the transformations of capitalism. These transformations brought a cohort of new musical tastes, practices, mythologies, technologies,

and normative discourses around the teleological imperatives of progress and innovation with which music and other artistic practices have been continuously and closely associated.

Nowadays, even though the artistic field is increasingly fluid and the differences between the musical mainstream and niche scenes have become blurred and ambivalent, current fields in music are still concerned with power relations, precarity, and mechanisms of exclusion. Since the avant-garde and all its marginal, musical subgenres have long been incorporated in the society of the spectacle, becoming subject to managerial imperatives and to the digitalized economy of attention, music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century calls for attentive and critical listening practices. These practices of “listening otherwise” could unmask the violence present within current creative economies. In so doing, they would make power relations and mechanisms of exclusion audible while further raising the possibility of different political conditions. To reduce the violence of the antisocial and extractive politics of global, neoliberal, technologized capitalism, sound and music might help us to listen attentively to all voices, and to address the complexity of social dynamics involved in critical listening. Beyond music, practices of sounding and listening to past, present, and future histories might contribute to collective attunements, focusing on possible alternatives to the current systems of domination.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the sound studies debate about whiteness and listening practices, see Gustavus Stadler, *Sounding Out! On whiteness and sound studies*. (July 6, 2015), <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/07/06/on-whiteness-and-sound-studies/> (accessed July 19, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Marie Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies”, *Parallax*, 23/3 (2017), 266–282.

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive analysis of these relations, cf. Philippe Carles, Jean-Louis Comolli, and Grégory Pierrot, *Free Jazz/Black Power*. Jackson MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> For further insights into questions of jazz and gender, cf. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr, *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> This concept originated with Kimberlé Crenshaw, who in 1989 revealed how legislation failed to recognize the intersection of race and gender with regard to Black women’s experiences of discrimination. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalising the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139, 139–167.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Riegel, *Bildung – Intersektionalität – Othering: pädagogisches Handeln in widersprüchlichen Verhältnissen*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Piekut, “Sound’s modest witness: Notes on Cage and Modernism,” *Contemporary Music Review* 31/1 (2012): 3–18.

<sup>9</sup> For an extensive analysis of Charlotte Moorman’s interpretation of this work of John Cage, see Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011, 151–153.

<sup>10</sup> Georges E. Lewis, “Foreword” in *Gay Guerrilla, Julius Eastman and His Music*, ed. Mary Jane Leach and Renée Levine Packer. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2016, xi–xii.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003, 332.