
Music, listening and philosophy

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La Monte Young. *Conférence 1960*, Paris : Eolienne, 1998

Boudinet, Gilles. *Des Arts et des idées au XXe siècle : Musique, peinture, philosophie et sciences humaines : fragments croisés...*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998

Ramaut-Chevassus, Béatrice. *Musique et postmodernité*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, (Que sais-je ?)

Szendy, Peter. *Musica practica : arrangements et phonographies de Monteverdi à James Brown*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998

- 1 La Monte Young's *Conférence 1960*, which has been published in its most complete form to date in a translation by Marc Dachy, is a valuable document. The context is that of a group work in Ann Halprin's dance studio in Kentfield (California), in the summer of 1960, a period during which Young carried out his first continuous sound tests, aimed at enabling the listener to "enter into sound". He was then 25 years old, and was pursuing his training on the West Coast, where he had just discovered the work of John Cage at Darmstadt. What he had in mind was an exploration of the principle of a "theater of singular event", rather than the praxis of the multiple event as applied at Black Mountain College. As it happened, the *Compositions 1960* series, contemporary with this lecture, gave form to a minimal reduction of the artistic phenomenon, which lies at the root of the Fluxus "no category" spirit, and at the same time formed the arena of Young's subsequent investigations to do with his search for natural sound and the creation of permanent environments such as the *Dream Houses*. The best-known examples of this series are: making a fire in front of the audience (*Composition 1960 N° 2*), and freeing a butterfly or two in the auditorium area (*Composition 1960 N° 5*), a piece which the author justifies as follows: "Isn't it wonderful to hear something that you're usually meant to look at?". *Composition*

1960 N° 10, dedicated to Bob Morris, also offers a dual reading, both acoustic and visual: “Draw a straight line and follow it”. This is precisely where Henry Flynt would talk in terms of “Concept art” a year later.

- 2 When it is the intent of musicology (in its turn) to annex the field of ideas, it has two solutions on offer. It can adopt a comparative standpoint, combining the study of music with the study of artistic and philosophical domains, and the like—a choice implying, to differing degrees, the transfer of terms and concepts from one specialized field to another. Or, on the other hand, it can try to involve a diversified introspection, by representing the musical experience in its entirety as an object of reflection, over and above the history of forms and styles—and this from the gestation of the idea to the way the work is broadcast and received.
- 3 Gilles Boudinet’s essay would seem to respond to the first of these opportunities as soon as we read the title, which is in every way exemplary: *Des Arts et des idées au XXe siècle—Musique, peinture, philosophie et sciences humaines: fragments croisés...* This work pursues a didactic target—which is not reached—and tries to list “phases” in the development of modernity, from the predictable triad of Debussy-Monet-Husserl to Art brut and Concrete Music. The principle of a transdisciplinary conception of history might constitute a valid theoretical proposition. In this expectation, it is far more preferable to become involved with the undertaking of the philosopher Christian Godin, an encyclopedia of Hegelian inspiration in eight volumes devoted to “Totality”, which broaches every area of human thought from the year dot.¹
- 4 The attempt made by Béatrice Ramaut-Chevassus is more circumscribed. Her essay, *Musique et postmodernité*, strives to define the typical changes of creative musical work from the 1960s on, when this art seemed to be turning its back on the claims of modernity, and even avowedly calling them into question. She proceeds by way of a comparison between the theories of postmodernity (Lyotard, Habermas, Eco, Ferry) and the new techniques of music, complete with its functions and its challenges. The renunciation of avant-garde experimentation is thus analysed from the viewpoint of a refusal of “élitism and hermeticism”—in other words, as a desire for reconciliation between composer and audience. The work does have certain qualities in terms of clarity and information, but the author tends to fight a little shy of any real philosophical questioning. The book clings to a limited definition of postmodernity as an “overall return to tradition regarded as a heritage, and thus [contrasting] with modernism”—on the principle, accordingly, of a category. It thus adopts a line that compromises any innovative thinking about issues such as quotation, collage and even the permeability between lesser genres and scholarly forms.
- 5 Peter Szendy’s book, *Musica Practica: arrangements et phonographies de Monteverdi à James Brown*, takes off in a quite different direction. Having first, and at several junctures, dealt with the relations between music and philosophy, based on his two-pronged training and an important body of work as a translator², the author fuels his thinking on a close dialogue with the writings of Adorno, Benjamin and Derrida, as well as with writings by composers. *Musica Practica* is an innovative essay in its own genre. It leads the reader through chapters that are to all appearances independent, by discreetly distilling a proposition which borders on the ontology of music. Music is that “language that has no words”, and its specificity has to do with a promise uttered but not kept, in other words, with expectation. The itinerary here conjures up examples that are as diverse as they are relevant, dealing turn by turn with incidents of improvisation, interpretation and

arrangement, with the status of sketch and “erasure”, with the historiographic matter of invention, and with the compulsive forms of smithereened listening permitted by the disk. Szendy affords the “practical” experience of listening a decisive pride of place, so as to push two essential themes of the philosophy of 20th century music into their uttermost entrenched positions. The first has to do with the connections between verbal language and musical language, taken in their many forms of lapses and dysfunctions. The second involves upsetting auditory praxis by the phonographic recording. From this latter, the author draws a generalized theory of arrangement: arrangement by the disk, offering a sound that has invariably already been modified, arrangement by the listener, who, sooner or later, turns into the disc jockey of a fragmented listening. In a subtle way, *Musica Practica* thus suggests “arranging (phonography)”³, a philosophy of music contrasting with all manner of specialization.

NOTES

1. Godin, Christian. *La Totalité*, four volumes published thus far, Champ Vallon, Seyssel, 1997-1999. See in particular the “Fourth Section”: *La Totalité réalisée, Livre I, Les Arts et la Littérature*, 1997.
2. Among others, Adorno, Theodor W. *Sur quelques relations entre musique et peinture*, writings compiled and translated from the German by Peter Szendy, with the assistance of Jean Lauxerois, Paris : la Caserne, 1995.
3. This is the title of one of the chapters, which was originally to have been the title of the book.