Music penetrates the human soul more deeply than words. Music appeals to the emotions, the unconscious desires, and the non-cognitive dimensions of our being as well as to the intellectual, analytic aspects of ourselves. Music has a synthetic and holistic effect beyond what the intellect alone can achieve. Music is subliminal and superliminal. It has been fundamental to human existence for perhaps more than 40,000 years. I am by no means an expert on music, but as a philosopher and lover of music I wish to offer a few speculations about the place of music within human life and as music as a metaphor for the deepest truths that encompass our lives.

1. Introduction

Because music is so fundamental to human beings, it serves a vast multiplicity of purposes in human life. Music can call people to war and activate a martial, fighting spirit in them. Music can soothe tired people, serving as relaxation. Music can function as a diversion, perhaps especially for the young, who turn on the radio or the digital player every chance they get, especially when they are alone. Music can activate in us a primal spirit, a desire to dance and celebrate for the sheer joy of it. It can induce sadness and reverie, happiness and lightness of spirit. And it can serve a meditative function in human life, as the history of Buddhism and other meditative religions demonstrate. It clearly appeals to the emotions, but, because it often has a complex form in its embodiment, it can also appeal to the intellect.

Music has often played a fundamental role in Western philosophy. As Philip Alperson recalls, in the book he edited called *What is Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (1987):

It is one of the great paradoxes of the history of music that the limited capacity of music to represent particular objects and events in the physical world has not prevented many from thinking that music can convey profound insight into the world of things. As Francis Sparshott notes, music has from its beginnings been connected with philosophical theory. Sometimes the connection has been implicit, as when music has been associated with the divine in the context of magical incantations and dances and sacred music. Other times this connection has been more explicitly theory-linked, as in the case of many
philosophers who have relied on musical concepts, experiences, and practices to elaborate theories of ethics, metaphysics and philosophical psychology as well as other philosophical inquiries into the general order of things. (p. 195)

This generalization also applies to my own thought in this paper. I see the unique qualities of music as a metaphor or pointer to profound truths about our human situation regarding temporality, the listening self, and the absolute, unsayable mysteries and silences encompassing our lives. It is not as if these profound truths cannot be discerned throughout other aspects of our lives, independently of music. For once they dawn on awareness, they become, as it were, the self-evident framework for everything we say and do. The unique qualities of music, I believe, can serve as a special pointer to these truths and the existential realities they illuminate. Yet in this modern world, where music has paradoxically become electronically available in nearly all times and places, it may be that music is less likely to serve this illuminative function.

In the modern world music has become electronically reproducible and functions primarily as a commercial commodity. Because of this, it may be that music most often also functions within this world as a diversion from silence. It fills a void in our lives because we perceive silence as nothingness, as an emptiness, as a void that can lead to disintegration. Silence is what we fear, a threat that may bring into question the reassuring yet illusory ideologies and fantasies with which we distort our lives. The ordinary person in today’s world, like the propagandists and ideological managers of this world protecting imperialism, ethnocentrism, and capitalism from all challenges by liberating forces, uses music as a distraction and protection against the redeeming and enlightening potential of silence—and music’s possible role in pointing to that silence. Max Picard, in his well-known book The World of Silence, expresses this point in the following way:

When language is no longer related to silence it loses its source of refreshment and renewal and therefore something of its substance.... In the modern world language...springs from noise and vanishes in noise....that is what silence is today: the momentary breakdown of noise..... Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as this lack of relationship to silence.... The invention of printing, technics, compulsory education–nothing has so altered man as this lack of relationship to silence.... Man who has lost silence has not merely lost one human quality, but his whole structure has been changed thereby. (1952: 40 & 41)

The pervasive “noise” generated by our modern world of technology and commercialism functions to obscure the depth dimensions of existence associated with silence. Yet modernity is only part of the problem. The problem also presents itself as a problem of growth, a problem of liberation, a problem of what I called in Millennium Dawn “planetary maturity.” Human beings live and act within a temporal structure between past, present and future, and are confronted, in the dynamic, living present, with immense possibilities, possibilities for transformation, liberation,
illumination, peace, justice, and truth. We encounter the deep possibilities of becoming what we know we can and should be: loving, compassionate, world-embracing creatures living with harmony and joy. As Michael David Levin expresses this: “In listening to others, accepting them in their irreducible difference, we help them listen to themselves, to heed the speech of their own body of experience, and to become, each one, the human being he or she most deeply wants to be....Our realization of the capacity as a communicative praxis—is at the same time the development of a utopian-emancipatory potential” (1989: 88). It is that utopian-emancipatory potential that is the real meaning of existence.

But the growing self often fears and rejects the structure of perpetual change that constitutes the human self-experience, and the silence at the bottom of the soul and the heart of the world is mistaken for an abyss of nothingness threatening to the self. The defense of most people against this apparent abyss is deafness, the refusal to listen with openness and unguarded attentiveness to the dynamic in which sound arises out of this pervasive silence. Levin writes:

There is also a deafness which shields us against a deep-seated ontological anxiety—little deaths from moment to moment; and this is a deafness to silence, a listening which constantly insists on making noise, or surrounding itself with other people or audio equipment, in order to fight off the horror of a ‘deathly silence’. For many people, silence is the sound of death; its open quality, a clearing where there is nothing for hearing to hold on to, is an experience of unbearable anxiety, not the gift of a resting-place.... (Ibid. 79)

There is a reason why many monasteries of different religions around the world insist on a regime of silence. Silence breaks open the closed-off ego-encrusted self and cultivates the ability to listen deeply and attentively to the silent sound of Being. Perhaps most people in the modern world are locked into this ego-encrusted closure reinforced by political and commercial propaganda designed to enslave people to systems of power, domination, and exploitation.

I do not want to address the issue of whether music is a language but rather focus on the fact that music can fill in the background activity when language itself (and hence the users of language, human beings) have lost their grounding in silence. Picard says our “whole human structure” has been changed because of this pervasive “noise”—whether the noise be the incessant televisions playing in every corner of the globe, the background music in the supermarket, or the radio playing when we are driving in the car or preparing dinner at home. These phenomena are not innocent accidents of technology development. They serve a very real function of locking people into immature complicity with systems of power and domination. Music can serve the purposes of this repressive system, or it can serve the process of awakening and liberation.
What can one say philosophically about something, such as music, that is so deep and pervasive in human life and that serves so many purposes, both as a diversion from the silent depths encompassing our lives and as a pointer to those depths? Spiritual growth in human beings is in many ways growth in awareness of the unsayable silence. What is sayable has form and is repeatable and discernible in terms of universals, just as music is always manifest as an individual score or performance that is discernible in terms of its form. This is why we recognize the same piece when played again—because of its form, which is repeatable and recognizable. Human knowledge rests with discerning the forms of things: their repeatable, recognizable patterns. On the other hand, the great Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, expressed the trajectory of human growth to which I am referring in the following way:

The majority of men in every generation, even those who, as it is described, devote themselves to thinking,...live and die under the impression that life is simply a matter of understanding more and more, and that if it were granted to them to live longer, that life would continue to be one long continuous growth in understanding. How many of them ever experience the maturity of discovering that there comes a critical moment where everything is reversed, after which the point becomes to understand more and more that there is something which cannot be understood. (1959: 172)

Music has the protean character described above. It can serve dozens of functions in human life: distraction, lust, greed, hate, love, compassion, gentleness, loyalty, patriotism, kindness, reverie, whimsicality, serendipity, etc. Yet perhaps precisely because music is so fundamental, it can also serve as a pathway to that which cannot be understood. And it can tell us that growth in maturity can take the form of understanding more and more precisely that there is something which cannot be understood. It can open us to the world of silence.

At the same time, I hope to clarify below that music is inescapably connected to human temporality, and that temporality is also fundamental to our being human. If silence represents the eternity beyond temporality that encompasses our human situation, and if music can point to that silence, then music, as inherently temporal, forms an existential link between our dynamic existential temporality and the silent depths that encompass all of existence. Music links heaven and earth. It opens up the awareness of eternity at the same time that it embodies form and temporalized individual expression. To use Martin Heidegger’s expression, it binds together “earth, sky, gods, and mortals.” Levin describes the musician as a paradigm for the listening process in the following way:

The musician cultivates a different dimension of our listening skillfulness. Listening to sounds, chords, melodic lines, and the different instruments of sound, the musician cultivates her ear for pitch and timbre, tonal register, harmonies and discords, changes in key, subtle inversions and quotations. Allowing her body to become, itself, a medium, an instrument, for the resonance of sound, the musician can hear sounds, fields of sound, choirs of sound, that the rest of us will never hear. Listening with well-trained ears, the musician breathes in an atmosphere that is filled with music: each thing, each being, has its own distinctive sound—even the heavenly spheres. The skilled listening of the musician also requires an inner and outer silence:
without that silence, more silent than the silences to which everyday living accustoms us, the musicality of beings, and the voices of our man-made instruments, will not give themselves to be heard.

2. Temporality

The existential structure of human life is manifestly temporal, a fact that has been phenomenologically described by Kierkegaard in various writings, by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), and others such as Charles Sherover in *Time, Freedom, and the Common Good* (1989). In the living present moment (the only moment anyone ever experiences), I anticipate a future and move into that future using my knowledge and memory of the past as a counsel and guide. This living present, therefore (as St. Augustine first pointed out in his *Confessions*), contains, in some mysterious way, both past and future. Every person moves from an imagined and remembered past into an imagined and anticipated future through a perpetual living present. This temporality, and its perpetually creative synthesis of past, present, and future is perhaps most apparent in the experience of music. As philosopher Eliot Deutsch puts this in his book *Creative Being: The Crafting of Person and World*:

> And as Husserl also showed, each now of that stream of lived experience presents itself as the unity of which it is a part. When we listen to a melody (a favorite Bergsonian and gestaltist example), each and every note, as we attend to them, shows the melody. It is not that the notes are heard simply as isolated contents that are then added up at the end to constitute the whole, which would make the melody only an act of remembrance or an ideal construction; rather the melody gets revealed, is disclosed, and presents itself, in and through every moment of the temporal configuration that is part and parcel of its being. (1992: 121)

As Heidegger pointed out, this temporal structure in human life is always “toward death,” moving from youth to middle age to old age and death, a fact that, for Heidegger, demonstrates our radical finitude. He paints a rather grim picture of human authenticity as “being toward death,” an authentic person is one whose life becomes a self-aware project in the face of one’s death.

Yet our finitude, underlined by the abstraction called “death,” does not necessarily mean that the subjectivity of the living present is finite, nor that it is causally determined, nor that it is merely an epiphenomena of brain tissue. Leone Vivante, in *Essays on Art and Ontology*, is one of those philosophers who understands subjectivity as infinite, thereby giving our temporality an entirely different cast. For the living present is structured as *potentiality*, not merely as a substance causally determined by the imagined past. The reality of our subjectivity is precisely this potentiality, according to Vivante, and this means that it is infinite:
Potentiality as actual reality presents a twofold inner infinite: the infinite of an intimate exigency fundamentally incompatible with measure, that is, with its objectively given and measurable being; and, on the other hand, the infinite of its profound intrinsicality of nature, always original—felt as an unlimited possibility and likelihood and as a value of universality....

We know the actual inner infinite intimately, through often only implicitly, in any reality of thought or of the psyche. Also, the finite, as a reality of thought, as an infinite possibility of itself, a principle of interpretation. Every line, every point, inasmuch as it is a reality of thought (I mean, of the psyche in general), is subjectivity, unity, undivided presence, active potentiality, an active indeterminate—inefinite....

Art lets us discover—it is understood, in our own thought—a delicate positivity of reality that is not grasped by the abstract intellect and that is not reached through successive extensions. And there is no reason why this secret of freshness, of lightness, and of limpidity—of simplicity, of chastity, of virginity, of silence—should not be latent in the most fleeting glimmer of light....

The soul of song encloses and discloses an immense mystery, something autogenous, in itself purposive and causal, fertile with ever-new truths. (1980: 115-122)

Scholar and guru of mysticism and spirituality, Ken Wilber, in his book The Integral Vision, characterizes the mystery of subjectivity somewhat differently. He focuses on what Immanuel Kant called “the transcendental unity of apperception”: the unity of consciousness that is the ground of subjectivity and never changes despite the constantly changing multiplicity of the contents of consciousness. Wilber associates this transcendental unity with the tremendous I AM of the Hindu mystical tradition, the vast, contentless I AM of Brahman which is identical with the deepest I AM of the Atman within. The same I AM was the “watcher” five minutes ago, Wilber says, as it was five hours ago, as it was five centuries ago. It is you; it is eternal and changeless, and “in all the known universes, the overall number of I AMs is but one” (2007: 205).

What Vivante calls “infinite” Wilber calls “Unborn Spirit itself shining in and as you” (ibid.). But Vivante’s understanding brings in something fundamental left out by Wiber. From the exclusive point of view of the I AM (the eternal silence of the watcher—since all sound is but changing content of consciousness), the infinite variety and changing temporal multiplicity of the universe is but the “play” of the Infinite, simply a dream that Brahman dreams, a “passing show” to which we must be non-attached. This understanding, while containing some profound truth, tends to vitiate the immense existential seriousness and commitment of temporalized existence understood as infinite potentiality and absolute ethical obligation. The enlightened mind requires both: the eternal transcendent and the absolute significance of the living present.

Eternity and temporality go together in the absolute mystery that is existence. One does not trump the other. Perhaps this is best thought of in terms of the synthesis of East and West. In the East (with Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist versions), Brahman, the I AM, (or the Buddhist Dharma<ref<kya>) transcends all name and form in some fundamental way
and may result in the world appearing as *maya* (in some sense as illusion). In the Western religions (with Islamic, Jewish, and Christian versions), God created this world with an absolute ethical command and purpose. Temporalized existence takes on a “once only” significance. The world is under an absolute command to transform itself from a fallen or forgetful state into the “kingdom of God.” Temporality here is absolutely significant and more than just a “passing show.”

Perhaps music, as suggested above, is the best analogue of this temporalized existence, a temporalized existence that in its ‘hearing’ must be open to the silence. Unlike most other arts, music is there to be played or encountered in the living present, drawing on memory and anticipation as the sounds recall themes and the themes harmonize within melodies and the melodies coalesce into a living, artistic whole, a whole that is perpetually completed within the time of the piece, from the first note to the last. The other arts, architecture, painting, sculpture, etc. (excepting dance) also carry a unique temporality intrinsic to art, yet they most often create an enduring object that can be viewed at a distance as it remains relatively constant through time. Music, perhaps intrinsically (the score notwithstanding), is played in the living present and can only be accessed in this radically temporalized fashion. Yet its temporality is not a mathematically linear process of one thing after another, but requires the listener or player to continually synthesize a wholeness within the dynamic living, temporalized present of the encounter. Something of this is described by Deutsch:

> It is, of course, in music (and music-related arts such as poetry) that the achievement of temporal articulation is most evident. The ordering of temporal relations is one of the dimensions in listening to music of which we are most immediately aware. But the manner in which any artwork (in painting, in architecture, as well as in music, poetry, or dance) controls the discernment of its intrinsic rhythm and ordering of relationships discloses the temporality that is created uniquely by the work in a primary way. (1992: 255)

In the creative act, whether the act of listening, playing, or writing music, we encounter the infinite potentiality of our subjectivity recognized by Vivante. The utter mystery of what philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called “thatness” (*that* the world exists), informs our awareness, beyond all language and form. The thatness is filled with an ever-changing content to which it gives meaning: awareness of it contributes to the absolute ethical seriousness of the content, and of existence itself. Yet at the same time, we may encounter this utter mystery of our temporalized existence as it vibrates within the complementary dimension of mystery that may be called the “eternity of silence.” These are not two kinds of reality, but rather two aspects of the absolutely unitary whole often known as God or Brahman or Dharmakaya. As Eric Gutkind (1969) expressed this: “the world is the body of God.”
3. The Listening Self

The experience of carefully listening to music can perhaps form an analogue for all forms of listening. Deutsch distinguishes “listening for” from “listening to.” The former anticipates the meaning that is forthcoming. The latter forms an openness to the other that is heard, to the speech of the other, to the depth of the music, to the song of the bird, to the sounds of the water lapping on the shoreline. Quality music seems to call us to listen to it with this openness and inner silence: the mind becomes quiet, we become one with the music, a dimension of the truth of being seems to open, encompassing both listener and music. This openness to the other (whether music, nature, or another person) means that listening to takes place within silence: the self that is listening must be silent and the sounds listened to emerge into the stark clarity of the truth of being insofar as they emerge from silence. This appears to be what Max Picard is saying in the passage quoted above. Our “whole human structure” is related to silence and the truth of being. With the commercialized and technological “noise” of the modern world, that structure is covered up, distorted, perhaps lost forever. Deutsch writes:

When speech manifests ontological power, there is a creation as well as disclosure of a relationship between self and world. For here speech is as much a listening as it is a speaking. The listening is to the silence of being. Whatever is then said is grounded in that silence and takes on something of its power of being. When speaking manifests ontological power, it becomes a genuine performance—a bringing forth of self and world. (1992: 105)

The ancient philosopher Pythagoras was said to be so spiritually awakened that he was able to hear “the music of the spheres,” the music produced by the heavenly bodies in their orbits around the Earth. The listening that finds its paradigm in the attentive listening to music, is a listening that brings self, world, and God into an integrating and transforming harmony. Temporality then becomes no longer the fearful slipping away of life as we try to grasp security, pleasure, or wealth with our greedy, inattentive fingers, a condition Buddhism characterizes as Dukkha, suffering. Temporality becomes the meaning of the present harmoniously completing itself in the process of ecstatic actualization of its infinite potentialities. It becomes, in the words of Deutsch, a “value-constituted worldmaking”:

Value-constituted worldmaking, utterance whose meaning is inseparable from its presentational efficacy, and listening that yields and recovers a harmony between person and world—when thus combined these become the ground for truthful discourse, for speech that is right for itself and revelatory of being. Language here becomes not just a house of being but an architectural work that enshrines the multitudinous possibility of what we properly are—creative beings. When language is invested with value, when it is uttered in a manner that its meaning is inseparable from the style of its presentation, and when it is grounded in silent listening, it itself becomes a metaphor that allows us to open new dimensions of being. (1992: 107)
The creative engagement with the infinite potentiality of our temporalized existence is inseparably connected to a silent listening in which the unsayable and incomprehensible depths of existence participate in the value-constituted worldmaking that is our authentic human vocation. Perhaps because wordless music does not embody visual images and forms, it can serve as a paradigm for open, attentive silent listening that should be our primary mode of relating to all people and things.

Music, in the fact that it directly deals with the felt vibrations of sound, becomes a model for the harmony between person and world that arises when attentive listening begins to inform our lives. Pythagoras heard the “music of the spheres,” yet perhaps this is what we are all meant to hear. Systems of power, domination, and exploitation depend on the use of ideology and immaturity to block our utopian-emancipatory potential. If we want a decent world matrix, a world-harmony such as that envisioned by the Constitution for the Federation of Earth, for example, we will need to actualize the “infinite potential” given within the temporal structure of the living present as it dynamically synthesizes past and future in a process of realization. One key to this liberation involves the process of listening, epitomized by the process of attentive listening to music. Levin writes:

We lose contact not only because we ourselves are alienated from the matrix, but also because our forgetting of the matrix detaches the object from its ground. This is not without effects, for this detachment separates the object from the dimensionality of its resonance and causes it to lose much of its vibrancy, its atmosphere of music. This is the loss, then, which corresponds to the adult’s loss of joy as a being gifted with the capacity to listen and hear.

In listening, for example, there would be a continuous felt contact with the sheer vibrancy of the field: a deeply felt sense of the distinctive tonality, the music, of the auditory situation, and a deeply appreciative realization of the always present, always absent silence, inhabiting and encompassing all sonorous beings. And yet, not despite, but precisely because of this field-gathering awareness, there would be a listening to things exceptionally attentive, clear, free of inner and outer distortions, accurate, sensitive, and responsive. (1989: 210-211 and 227)

The loss of joy associated with our ego-encrusted, ideologically constricted, lives of greed, fear, and hate is a loss in life of “its vibrancy, its atmosphere of music.” Music symbolizes a harmony of the whole, a reception of harmony from attentive listening and resonating with that harmony in a corresponding vibration of our own. Music also represents a radical temporality, like that of human life itself, in which each passing moment, the hearing of each note, needs to receive not a part, but the whole—a perpetual temporalized vibrating with the whole. Authentic music, like authentic speech, also arises from attentiveness to the silence of being that embraces all existence. This happens when we are attuned, through attentive listening, to “the sheer vibrancy of the field,” so that we live freely and harmoniously within the ecstatic process of encountering, in each living moment, infinite potential, infinite harmony, and infinite being.
Works Cited


