

Seminar on "The Musician as listener" Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent, Belgium 22-23 May 2008

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**Lend Me Your Ear: The Musician as Listener in a Postmodern Age**

The power of discourse about music to influence the way we listen to music should not be under-estimated. For most of the twentieth-century expert musical discourse was dominated by a Modernist perspective that valorized formal structure as music's pre-eminent element. According to this view whose exponents include Igor Stravinsky, Theodor Adorno and Arnold Schönberg if one is to listen *properly* it is vital to focus primarily on music's large-scale structural organisation. It is unlikely that these influential men would be perturbed by musicians' testimony that for them expressive, communicative, and other performative elements are equally vital to the listening experience. For Adorno and Schönberg the performer is anyway dispensable. Structural listening is best achieved with the *visual* aid of the score and Adorno even envisions a time when 'the silent, imaginative reading of music could render actual playing superfluous'.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, for Schönberg the only reason performers are needed at all is to 'make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print'.<sup>2</sup>

We now live in a postmodern, post-structuralist age where fresh modes of musical discourse promise to open up and bestow respectability on alternative ways of listening. As a professional orchestral musician turned researcher and conservatoire lecturer in music history and aesthetics I am concerned with finding ways of opening the ears, minds and imaginations of my performance-oriented students and colleagues to new interpretive pathways. In this paper I propose a dialogical way of listening, so-called because it involves the listener's active two-way dialogue with music as opposed to structural listening's passive one-way method of reception. After a brief introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue, from which my model is derived, I will illustrate dialogical listening with excerpts from Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time*. Recently I have realized the potential for dialogical listening to directly influence music performance. I will show results of this preliminary research in recorded excerpts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet K. 581 and the Allemande from Bach's solo violin Partita No. 2 BWV 1004.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981) 169.

<sup>2</sup> Dika Newlin, *Schoenberg Remembered: Diaries and Recollections (1938-76)*, (NY: Pendragon, 1980): 164.

### Mikhail Bakhtin's Philosophy of Dialogue

Modernism's persistence is vividly illustrated by a survey of appropriations of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue in the musicological literature. In most cases the term dialogue is used to describe interactions between, and the composer's organization of musical voices in the score. In fact, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is far more profound and wide-ranging than such text-based applications imply. Bakhtinian dialogue refers to language's capacity to bear multiple meanings that vary and fluctuate according to context and the identity of the receiver. Dialogue is best illustrated through the simple model of a verbal utterance based on two people speaking with one another at a certain time and place. It is this model of dialogue that I have adapted to music and which I will first demonstrate with reference to my own utterance here today.

Even though it is my voice that you hear now my utterance resonates with the voices of many others. Besides explicit references to the words of others my utterance has been directly and indirectly influenced by past personal and professional encounters and experiences. I use formal academic speech to suit our immediate context and my contemporary vocabulary reflects the times in which we live. In this international community, even if we generally agree on my meaning, certain words will have slightly different implications in other languages. In planning my utterance I attempt to anticipate responses from you, my listeners, and these are inscribed in my speech. But even your responses that I have not anticipated, whether silent or spoken, imbue my utterance with dialogic richness and meaning of which even I as the speaker might remain unaware. My speech therefore resonates with the implications of contexts from which it has emerged and in which I speak today. Bakhtin's basic model of the utterance, two people speaking together at a certain time and place, seems straightforward enough but its semantic potential is infinite; it is never just two people speaking. Musical utterances are the same.

### Dialogical Listening

Dialogical listening rejects Modernist claims to musical autonomy. It also challenges Modernism's valorization of structural unity, the score, the 'music itself', and the composer's hermeneutic authority. Dialogical listening aims to account for the cultural and social voices that are inscribed in music, for example, in fugal passages, courtly or folk dance styles, and even in musical structures themselves. When music is bound in this way to the contingencies of time and place it is brought closer to the same worldly plane as listeners who are invited to respond actively adding their own voice

to music's dialogical mix. Because of dialogical listening's emphasis on context and the individual receiver the interpretations that follow can only be suggestive rather than prescriptive. My cultural approach to music aims to historically inform the listening practices of students and performers, to promote their critical engagement with music, and ultimately to empower them to make their own interpretive choices.

#### Example No. 1

A demonstration of how I might teach dialogical listening in an advanced history class with excerpts from Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time*.

#### Example No. 2

A demonstration of the influence of dialogical listening on a clarinetist's interpretation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement from Mozart's Clarinet Quintet K.581.

#### Example No. 3

A demonstration of the influence of dialogical listening and historically-informed metaphor on a student's interpretation of the Allemande from J. S. Bach's Partita No. 2 for solo violin.

The examples will be followed by conclusions and discussion.