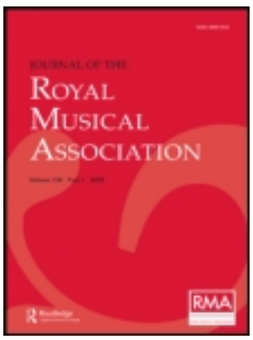

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Listening to the Other: A Counter-Cultural Ear in iPodic Times

Response to Bernd Wannenwetsch

DANIEL K. L. CHUA

To demonstrate that I have actually been *listening* in a transformative way, I offer a response to Bernd Wannenwetsch's paper that aims to 'resonate' with its spirit, amplifying and reinforcing some of the ideas; it is a kind of doxological response rather than a purely critical one. I want to begin by thanking Bernd.

First, thank you for bringing theology back to its sounding roots and, indeed, the meaning of music to its cultic function. Sound theology, it seems, is literally a sounding one. Perhaps it is not so surprising, given the ban on graven images, that the Judeo-Christian tradition should be a listening one, in opposition to the visual aspects of Greek philosophy. Theology's sound, by turning propositional claims into doxological truth, safeguards its practice as a living, transformative relation within a listening community. The question we have to ask is whether this listening is only the privilege of those whose ears have been opened by the call of Christ or whether it can be translated outside the community as an ethical model. I want to suggest this possibility later in this response.

Second, thank you for grounding theology, with all its speculative elements, in material reality and social practice. I am grateful that you did not return music to some Neoplatonic cosmos of musical spheres. That kind of music easily leads to a pantheistic world view in which one tunes in to nature's ambient sounds and drops out of empirical reality. No, Bernd's theology of music is entirely 'creaturely', as he puts it, and this-worldly. For Bernd, a sounding theology is material in as much as it is somatic, resonating in the particularity of my body. And yet I am glad that such empiricism does not result in a purely sentient music that seduces the body with its siren-like lure; that was precisely the type of music that Luther's counterpart in Geneva, John Calvin, was suspicious of and, if Carolyn Abbate's work is to be believed, is still in operation today as a sound that takes over the body as if the performer were merely an automaton.[1] I am

[1] Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 1–54. Also see Daniel K. L. Chua, 'Untimely Reflections on Operatic Echoes: How Sound Travels in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and Beethoven's *Fidelio* with a Short Instrumental Interlude', *Opera Quarterly*, 21 (2005), 573–96.

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thankful that Bernd's materialism is neither mechanical nor sensual; that its music does not simply get stuck in the body. Rather the materialism he espouses is transcendent in that it is ek-static, directed outward in the act of listening and responding to an-Other.

In moral terms, the recovery of this ecstatic dimension of music is particularly important at a time when the technology of listening has turned the human subject into an iPod; that is, a self made in the image of a pod in which the I is closed off from the outside world. Technology has made it possible for the subject to become the monad it already claims to be, a windowless self deaf to everything other than the sound of its own playlist; with its noise-cancelling earphones, the subject need no longer listen to anybody but itself. Music is reduced to a cocoon in which the subject projects its 'lifestyle' to control its moods. In this state, according to Bernd, we are no longer creatures (that is, as those who are addressed), sensitive to creation; indeed, we are no longer human, but individuals immersed in our own subjectivity. Of course, long before the iPod, music was already the vehicle for the exploits of a self-enclosed subject: for the early Romantics, 'absolute music' provided an inner audition of a subject that Kant had famously made inaccessible to knowledge: it was a non-representational sound for a non-representable self.[2] The autonomy of the musical work, which Adorno aptly describes as a monad, functioned as a mirror for the autonomous subject to see itself as object.[3]

As numerous commentators have pointed out, monads cannot relate.[4] They are incapable of listening. A monad can communicate only by imposing its will upon the world in order to assert its autonomy. The music of a monadic self, when it is not simply enamoured with its own voice, relates to the world in a manipulative and instrumental fashion.

In contrast to the monad, what Bernd offers us is a model of music that is not simply the self-expression or self-assertion of this pod-like self. To listen truly to music, he suggests, is to encounter an-Other that transforms the subject. Thus the mode of communication is no longer one of self-expression but one of doxology: to

[2] See Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge, 1999), 191–8.

[3] In his *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie: Zwölf theoretische Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1962), trans. E. B. Ashton as *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York, 1976), Theodor W. Adorno writes: 'The relation of works of art to society is comparable to Leibniz's monad. Windowless – that is to say, without being conscious of society, and in any event without being constantly and necessarily accompanied by this consciousness – the works of art, and notably of music which is far removed from concepts, represent society' (p. 211).

[4] For example, Edmund Husserl, in *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague, 1973), famously describes the self as an isolated monad, but notes that in Leibniz's thought each monad mirrors all other monads, implying that monads can empathize with each other (p. 150). Emmanuel Lévinas, however, argues that this kind of solipsism, which he regards as 'the structure of reason', merely reduces the Other to a reflection of the ego; see Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, trans Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA, 1987), 65–6. For a more detailed exploration of this issue see Daniel K. L. Chua, 'Beethoven's Other Humanism', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 62 (2009), 571–645.

worship is to listen; it is to allow an alterior affect – in this case, the scriptural word of God – to touch the soul.

But what are the ramifications of worship for the autonomous, iPodic subject? Can doxology, as a counter-cultural act, provide a critique of modern society? Doxological expression always presupposes submission to an-Other: what Bernd calls an 'under-hearing' implies that we hear *under* someone. In this sense, to submit is to sub-hear. But this submission is not simply an inversion of monadic domination in which the tables are turned against the subject: rather it must be a *mutual* submission, a dynamic arguably inherent within the Trinity, but quintessentially embodied in Christ. It is because of his example, states St Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians, that we should 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'; or, in the Epistle to the Romans, we are to 'prefer one another'.[5] Only in this condition of mutual underhearing can listening actually take place. In other words, doxology is not only the relation between the divine and the human but also a mode of communication that is required if we are to relate to another human as human, that is, as a unique person who has to be underheard to be understood.

Thus music, in Bernd's theology, is not Orphic (as it is with opera), in that it does not attempt to re-enchant the world with the rhetorical power of its voice. Neither is it Promethean (as it is with the image of Beethoven), in that it does not rebel against the Other in an act of counter-creation. But it is a submission to alterity that is a relation to an-Other that the self cannot master.

Bernd's model of listening stems from a particular practice with a narrow repertory, but he suggests at the end of his paper that this might also be inherent in the way we listen to music in general. How does music model this? How might it provide a mode of submission in which the Other emerges?

Bernd's paper suggests a possible explanation when he contrasts seeing with hearing. And I want to pursue this line of thought through the work of several contemporary philosophers who have theorized music in this way, replacing sight not so much with sound as with the paradox of a musical vision or an aural optics, that is, a seeing that is also a hearing.

It is commonplace to claim that Western thought is scopophilic: knowledge for Aristotle was already described as a way of seeing, but it is particularly with the Enlightenment's emphasis on scientific observation that the eye has been vilified as the organ of instrumental and totalitarian control. Lévinas, for example, calls the seeing that accompanies the '*I think*' of the modern self as an 'egology of synthesis' that gathers all alterity into a 'synchrony of re*present*ation'.[6] In other words, this monadic moment of self-presence is one of total vision, in which there is no time

[5] *Ephesians* v. 21; *Romans* xii. 10. See also *Philippians* ii. 1–11.

[6] Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Diachrony and Representation', *Entre-Nous: On Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York, 1993), 159–60. The italics in 're*present*ation' are added.

(and therefore no music) for the other to emerge as Other. Thus Lévinas insists that his famous image for alterity, 'the face', is not an image at all; the face of the Other is not a literal face that can be perceived, for that would merely capture the Other through the appropriation of the subject's vision. Rather he speaks of the '*sonority*' of the face, which is also a sounding of theology in that the face of the Other, for Lévinas, is the 'Word of God': it says, 'Thou shalt not kill.'[7] The 'face' as sound, as word, is not seen but heard. The 'face' becomes a kind of psalter bearing the word of God, and so requires a doxological response.

Adorno also speaks of musical eyes: in his unfinished monograph on Beethoven, he writes: 'In what does the expression of the human manifest itself in Beethoven? I would say, in the fact that his music has the *gift of sight*. The human is its gaze.'[8] These sonic 'eyes', like Lévinas's 'face', refer to moments that cannot be assimilated, where music appears to disclose the human, as if these eyes were portals into the depth of a human being whose inviolable and irreducible existence has long been discarded by the monadic subject.

So what is there to see through the vision of a *listening* eye? What is there in the 'sonority' of the face? Precisely *nothing*. To return the musical glance is to see what the modern world has made invisible. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, such vision is a 'voyance' that 'renders present to us what is absent'.[9] Or, as Lévinas writes: 'Ethics is an optics', but, unlike the clarity of Newtonian optics, it is a 'spiritual optics'; 'a vision without image,' he writes, 'bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision'.[10] This vision, which *seizes* time as a synchronic instant, must be contradicted by music's 'gift of sight', as Adorno calls it; and a gift, by definition, has to be something given, not something seized. The music must *give* time for the invisible to present itself rather than *seize* time to re-present the Other in the subject's retinal grasp. So instead of a *Vor-stellen* that positions an object in front of the subject's gaze, seeing what is heard (the unseen) allows an Other to 'show itself in giving itself', as Jean-Luc Marion puts it.[11]

Three qualities of music are outlined here that permit it to be heard as a vision of alterity. First, music's temporality, in delaying knowledge, suspends the judgment of vision, *giving* time for the emergence of the Other. Second, music's non-representational nature – its invisibility, as it were – prevents any conceptual

[7] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London, 1999), 104.

[8] Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, 1998), 164.

[9] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, IL, 1993), 121–49 (p. 132).

[10] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA, 1969), 23, 78, 23. Also see Lévinas's critique of 'seeing' in 'Diachrony and Representation'.

[11] Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA, 2002). This phrase is repeated several times on pp. 323–4 with minor changes; the quotation here is a composite one.

appropriation of the Other by the ego; in theological terms, the knowledge of the Other remains apophantic. And finally, music's physicality makes what is absent palpable, as if the Other were somehow indwelling the body, requiring an attitude of hospitality towards a stranger. Music, in this way, is a receptive mode of thought, an ek-static medium that opens itself to the world.

In fact, Bernd's description of transformative listening bears a close affinity with Merleau-Ponty's conception of the relation between the self and the Other. The subject is a hollow ('creux'), he states, that 'expresses the encounter of subjectivity with the world',[12] an encounter in which the subject is simultaneously active and passive, no longer the author of its thoughts but a chamber in which the other resonates, like a 'melody [that] sings itself within us much more than we sing it'; 'the body', he continues, 'is suspended in what it sings'.[13] What Merleau-Ponty describes here is akin to the resonance of a doxological theology in which singing suspends the self and opens the ears of the heart to the truth of an-Other voice which the body hosts.

So the transformative morality that Bernd describes in the act of worship applies to our relations with the world. Ek-static listening is a critique of the iPodic self, providing an alterior practice. Of course, this should not be applied indiscriminately to all music, and should not be abused as an inversion of the monad's power relations that merely reinstates domination from an-Other's point of view. Underhearing, as mutual submission, is a fragile and rare form of listening that actual pieces of music do not necessarily model. Hypothetically, there might be a structural similarity, as Bernd suggests, between doxological listening and the way in which we listen to music, as my discussion of Lévinas, Adorno and Merleau-Ponty suggests. But music has various functions and some music may not want to bear the moral burden of transcendental listening; it is quite legitimate for music simply to entertain. But even in cases where music has theological pretensions towards transcendence and transformation, we may not want to submit to it. Nietzsche's rebellion against Wagner in Bayreuth stems from his refusal to submit to the narcotic sounds of the Schopenhauerian Will. And Beethoven's heroic style, as the expression of an autonomous subject, may simply reinforce the isolation of the iPodic self. If, as Scott Burnham claims, this music absorbs us into its 'presence',[14] submitting to it may simply pander to the ego's monadic identity. In other words, music does not guarantee truth, however much it resonates within us, because it is itself ideologically loaded. In Bernd's terms, it is not always directed towards truth. Truth will always be

[12] Cited from Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy* (Evanston, IL, 2004), xvi.

[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL, 2003), 173–4; quoted *ibid*., xv.

[14] Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 162–8.

contested, but as long as it is necessary, theology and music will need to work in mutual submission.

ABSTRACT

This response aims to widen the implications suggested by Bernd Wannenwetsch by exploring how music may promote a listening that breaks out of a monad-like subject.