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DOI: 10.17399/HW.2017.1640010

The Deaf Humanist. Can Music Philosophy Educate Listeners Today?

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This article is intended as a contribution to discussion on the role of music philosophy in educating contemporary participants in the world of culture. From a broader perspective, it fosters reflection on the condition of the humanities today.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The author makes use of traditional literary studies, employing, as a music philosopher, a speculative method and availing herself of the tools of analytical philosophy; she also refers to the empirical experiences of musicians and listeners.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The argumentation is based on metacritical analysis of the subject literature within the scope of trends and challenges in music philosophy. The author considers the possibility of educating sensitive and active receivers of classical music. She invokes the reflection of the philosopher Peter Kivy in light of the discussion carried on with him by James O. Young and Jerrold Levinson. Irrespective of their differences of opinion, these philosophers all emphasised the role of the aesthetic education of the listener. The author highlights points on which the philosophers' dispute is merely superficial.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The subject literature is dominated by the analytical model. This results partly from the obligation to imitate the sciences that weighs upon the humanities and also from subjecting the results of humanistic reflection to processes of parametrisation. Music philosophy and musicology are increasingly divorced from live experience and are turning into elite disciplines, reserved solely for a narrow group of specialists. Therefore, we should aspire to specifying how the academic goals of music-related study can be reconciled with the mission of disseminating the culture of listening to music and understanding it.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The idea of interdisciplinary reflection on the experiencing of music should be promoted among scholars (musicologists and music philosophers).

→ **KEYWORDS:** **MUSIC, LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING, HUMANISTIC EDUCATION**

Suggested citation: Chęcka, A. (2017). The Deaf Humanist. Can Music Philosophy Educate Listeners Today? *Horizons of Education*, 16 (40), 161-171. DOI: 10.17399/HW.2017.164010.

Peter Kivy in memoriam

Let us begin with a couple of questions. How to raise the appeal of classical music among educated consumers of culture who are familiar with literature and the fine arts? How to convince them that the term “serious music” does not at all mean “too difficult, incomprehensible and reserved for musicologists?” These are pertinent questions in a Poland where humanities graduates are increasingly incapable of expressing an opinion about classical music, although they can skilfully formulate views on literature and the visual arts. Perhaps music theorists, music philosophers and musicologists themselves are partly responsible for music increasingly slipping out of the repertoire of modern man’s aesthetic experiences?

An affirmative answer to that question is being put forward today by several eminent representatives of theoretical disciplines dealing with music from a humanistic perspective. And that answer may be applied to wider reflection on the condition of the humanities, which – as the literary philosopher George Steiner has provocatively asserted – no longer humanises anybody (Steiner, 1989). It is pertinent to ask whether this problem is noticed by music philosophers and musicologists. Passing from the theoretical to the empirical domain, it would be worth analysing the presence of classical music in the media, which is linked to the question of music criticism and journalism and the role they play in cultural education, since the world of academic discourse and the world of journalism seem particularly responsible for the insufficient presence of the art of music in modern man’s aesthetic experience.

An attack on formalism

In May 2017, one of the pre-eminent contemporary philosophers of music, Peter Kivy, a lecturer at leading American universities, died. His works have been, and undoubtedly will remain, readily cited not just by music philosophers and musicologists, but also by music psychologists and sociologists. In his reflection, he addressed issues relating to the perception of music and its emotiveness, studying purely instrumental music, opera and the links between music and literature, and speculating on the way in which the musical work exists, coming down on the side of Platonism. He also helped to spread musical formalism among scholars and was himself regarded as a prominent representative of that current. Interestingly, it is precisely in the intellectual fashion for formalism that

many music aestheticians and philosophers discern one of the reasons for the “deafness of humanists” and their dwindling need to listen to classical music and discuss it – in a word, to make it part of the repertoire of the aesthetic experiences of the contemporary consumer of culture. That opinion is shared by two philosophers who often took issue with Peter Kivy: James O. Young and Jerrold Levinson. In their view, formalist scholars construct a succession of scientific “-isms” that inflate their academic jargon. Instead of listening to music and experiencing it, they adopt the cold academic method of “lenses and learning.” They treat the musical work as an immanence that can be decoded and fully cognised. The results of their analyses are often entirely incomprehensible to listeners, erecting a further barrier to the music. Contemporary participants in the world of culture find it easier to speak about literature, theatre, film and the plastic arts, which are merged in man’s everyday experience. The language for describing music, meanwhile, seems far removed from that experience, which discourages many receivers from making the effort to familiarise themselves with the musicological jargon.

The path of bringing music closer to everyday experience is taken by James O. Young. Hence his *Critique of Pure Music* (Young, 2014) is dominated by the proposition of perceiving in sounds the representation of emotions. If most people feel competent when looking at representational painting, that is all the more reason for them to be convinced by a conception according to which pure instrumental music (e.g. Brahms’s symphonies or Chopin’s nocturnes) portrays emotions experienced by everyone. Regardless of one’s antipathy or sympathy for emotionalistic theories, it is hard to deny that both music critics and theorists use emotional terms when describing music. They were used even by the father of musical formalism, Eduard Hanslick, when, as a music critic, he commented on artistic events. Perhaps most important of all, however, is that listeners and performers, relating their musical experiences, provide empirical data that is often ignored by the theorists. Even children learning to play an instrument are commonly termed “musical” when they succeed in sensing the expressive qualities of music. Nearly all of us, in our familiar utterances, link music with emotions. This is reiterated by the music psychologist John Sloboda when he invokes the testimony of performers (Sloboda, 1999; 2002). Peter Kivy, however, regarded such a common sense conclusion, based on observations, as unjustified. Formalism, which Kivy consistently defended, supposes that – as Young relates –

anyone who speaks of music as having psychological depth or as providing psychological insight is confused. From the formalists' perspective, music is not the sort of thing that could provide psychological insight: patterns of sound can no more provide insight than the pattern of colour in a kaleidoscope can. Kivy calls the psychological depth of music an illusion (Young, 2014, p. viii).

So anyone stating otherwise is declaring open war on Kivy, whom Young calls "the most influential contemporary philosopher of music." Young's project represents an attempt at restoring credibility to the belief that music expresses emotions and that it can arouse emotions in the listener. For the contemporary humanist, that theory provides hope of grasping the connection between sounds and one's own emotional life, particularly since it presupposes the verbalisation of experiences of music.

A central hypothesis of this essay is that music has features that make its description in emotional terms non-arbitrary. When we apply emotion terms to music, we are doing so in a way that is related to the prior application of such terms to people and their mental states (Young, 2014, p. 5).

James O. Young's reflection leads to a clash between two perspectives: speculative and empirical. Young, like Kivy, brandishes the weapon of analytical philosophy, but backed by contemporary neuroaesthetics and cognitive psychology.

Empirical evidence, including evidence from psychology (...) strongly supports the hypothesis that the experience of music has much in common with the experience of ordinary emotions (Young, 2014, p. 5).

It should be noted that Kivy consistently avoided references to empirical evidence, as he was fully entitled to do as a philosopher faithful to his methodology. At the same stroke, however, he also ignored "hard evidence" from the neurosciences, which today can substantiate philosophical speculation, as they do in the case of Young's book. In *Critique of Pure Music*, Young not only makes a successful attempt at highlighting the weaknesses of musical formalism, but also defends live, committed aesthetic experience. A key element of that experience is pleasure, which goes beyond intellectual benefit. Pleasure can be analysed by means of modern neuroimaging techniques and then described, with the aim of capturing its exceptional quality. Musical pleasure also goes beyond the limits set for it by traditional aesthetics, since, instead of contemplation, distance and isolation, it proposes the full affective-cognitive engagement of the subject experiencing music. For listeners, sounds become

a reflection of their own affective states, and so a mirror in which they look at and recognise themselves. Here is one of the reasons why we want to listen to music: thanks to music, we attempt to come to terms with our fears and to set our inner world in order. The work of art music thus perceived engages not just listeners' intellect, but their whole corporeal-sensory person. Listeners are not even required to verbalise their experiences. Pleasure renders us all equal in the face of music and tears down the division into experts and laymen – suggests Young. So his prescription appears to run along the following lines: for humanists not to become indifferent to music, they should learn to discover in it a reflection of their own feelings, yearnings and desires. Humanists should be capable of listening intently, of dwelling on the sounds, even if they do not entirely understand the structure of the work they are listening to. Musicological knowledge, and especially detailed analysis of the musical work, is not needed for this. So what should be inculcated in people from childhood is a “culture of listening,” thanks to which music can be treated as a wordless, moving emotional message, which enables us to be more self-aware and sensitive people.

Classical music for all?

The reader will find a similar thread in Jerrold Levinson's book *Music in the Moment*, which promotes listening that involves immersing oneself in the musical “here and now” (Levinson, 1997). Peter Kivy, attacking Levinson's book in his essay *Music in Memory and Music in the Moment*, pointed to the advantage of the silent study of a score over delighting in music performed “here and now” (Kivy, 2001). One crucial notion in Levinson's concept is that of *quasi-hearing*, which characterises a democratic model of contact with music, making all receivers equal. Levinson explains that the experience of quasi-hearing possesses three crucial components: “he first would be the actual hearing of an instant of music, the second would be the vivid remembering of a stretch of music just heard, and the third would be the vivid anticipation of a stretch to come” (Levinson, 1997, p. 16). One could hardly fail to notice the similarity between such quasi-hearing and Augustinian reflection on the elusive “now,” perfectly exemplified by music. Władysław Stróżewski expressed this aptly in his considerations of musical time, which appears, above all, as “a succession of moments that are actually experienced or that are memorised or anticipated – immeasurable points, each of which appears for a split second in one's awareness

and immediately falls into the past” (Stróżewski, 2002, p. 271). Within this context, Levinson also invokes Husserl’s analysis of time; more specifically, the phenomenon of keeping in one’s memory that part of a work which has just sounded (retention) and actively anticipating what is about to occur (protention).

The second key notion is *basic musical understanding*, which – as emerges from Levinson’s reasoning – constitutes a necessary and at the same time sufficient condition for following music. Thus delighting in the *music of the moment* presupposes the possession of certain listening habits and experiences, as well as expectations resulting from them. So we cannot say that the mind of Levinson’s receiver is entirely a “blank slate.” This is certainly not a naive and innocent listener, although we know little about the demands placed upon him or her. Besides a brief mention of the receiver’s “suitable preparation,” Levinson devotes little space to specifying what his or her competences and attributes ought to be. Although he does not state this explicitly, one of the attributes of Levinson’s listener would appear to be musicality. Such would be indicated by the ability to intuitively and without reflection employ “knowing-how,” thanks to which the listener described by Levinson reacts appropriately to a musical event, although is unable to conceptualise it through the use of notional knowledge, or “knowing-that” (Levinson, 1997, p. 29). Let us now return to the humanists hypothetically indifferent to music, who are deterred by musicological conceptual knowledge, or “knowing-that.” According to Levinson’s suggestion, such humanists are not in a hopeless position as long as they are willing to regularly and patiently listen to music and allow it to act on them.

Kivy disagrees. Although sharing Levinson’s view that it is worth aspiring to democratise access to cultural goods, he formulates reservations with regard to classical music:

All should have access to the means by which the glories of classical music can be made available to them. But that does not mean telling them the big lie that all they need to do is listen, over and over again, and that musical training is a kind of conspiracy, a “racket” to deprive them of their birth right. They should be told the awful truth that classical music is difficult to penetrate; that work is required; that it will only open up its glories to those who are willing to do the real work (Kivy, 2001, p. 214).

The next stage in Kivy’s argumentation merits particular attention, since it unexpectedly turns into an accurate diagnosis of the crisis in the culture of listening:

Levinson suggests that people turn away from classical music because they have been bamboozled by the purveyors of theory. There is a much simpler explanation. They turn away because they try to listen to it as they listen to popular music, which requires no explicit, consciously entertained musical knowledge at all, and, quite predictably, do not enjoy the experience. The reason popular music is popular is that it is 'easy listening'. The reason classical music is not is that it requires, at least for its full, rich effect, knowing stuff (Kivy, 2001, p. 215).

So what practical conclusions ensue from the dispute between Kivy and Levinson? Well, Levinson goes perhaps too far when he compares the competences of all receivers of music. It seems impossible to maintain a conviction of the completely democratic character of listening to music, which would mean at the same time that specialist musical knowledge was of no significance for the perception of sounds. Levinson is right about certain features of perception common to all people (we find it easier to focus on an attractive passage than on a whole complicated structure), but his aspirations to levelling out the competences of all listeners are unconvincing.

Manifest in Kivy's stern approach to the difficult matter of music are many issues crucial to a hypothetical candidate for a music lover. Kivy is undoubtedly right: when first coming into contact with classical music, inexperienced listeners may remain indifferent to it, but the more they know about it, the more they will be able to hear in it. Without making a conscious effort to get to know music, there can be no question of becoming musical and of making music part of one's repertoire of important aesthetic experiences. However, such an effort seems like an absurd waste of time to a contemporary youngster and to many parents, who regard the development of musicality to be a non-essential addition to the pragmatic raising of their children. Of course, we can deem Kivy's views to be unfashionable and reconcile ourselves to the gradual disappearance in people of a yearning for musical catharsis. Yet that would mean agreeing to the slow death of the humanities. Kivy is also right to note a tendency for art music to be set on a par with popular music. On this point, he dons his aesthetician's hat, demanding the assessment and grading of the values manifested by different forms of music. The aspiration to democratising cultural goods kills high culture, since it forgets about value judgments. Journalism contributes to this when, instead of a responsible evaluation of artistic phenomena, it launches them as "news," equating a performance of a Mahler symphony with a Miss World competition, a long jump record or a political scandal.

The role of the media

In Poland, the media are interested in classical music more or less every five years, when the Chopin Piano Competition and the Wieniawski Violin Competition are held. Both competitions are spectacular media events and show just how many music lovers long for music, which for the few weeks of the competition brings colour to their life. They follow the auditions not just on radio and television, but also online. Unfortunately, on such occasions, the media quite often look for sensations, as is manifest in the aggressive tone of their reviews of the competition auditions. Music critics no doubt wish to appeal to average receivers and encourage them to word their own aesthetic judgments in a bold way. Indeed, the public reacts quite keenly and pursues fiery disputes over the quality of performances on Internet fora, sometimes issuing harsh assessments even before the competitors have been appraised by the professional jury. Journalists themselves also often seem to confuse journalism with art criticism. There is an error here in the very premise of portraying classical music as equally as “attractive” as pop music – a procedure that is doomed to failure. Within this context, one is reminded of the warning issued by Kivy, who was worried by listeners placing the same expectations on classical music as they do on pop music. For journalists, as for the masses, music is supposed to be a source of easy pleasure and perhaps also cheap sensation. The difference then becomes blurred between informing the public of artistic facts and responsibly commenting on those facts. Classical music becomes a tasty titbit, an item of news, which must be sold at once. In today’s world, the performer of such music must also become “media fit,” and that is certainly happening increasingly often. A female violinist recording Bach solo partitas ought to pose on the cover barefoot, ideally in a muslin dress. A female pianist ought to sign a contract with a fashion designer and appear as a model – an icon of refined beauty. Yet it is difficult to expect the same attractiveness from a musicologist or a philosopher living far from the limelight, or from an art critic. One should expect them to provide vivid accounts of their own musical experiences. It would seem that this is precisely what Levinson and Young are attempting to practise in their theories. Paradoxically, Kivy, totally devoted to formalism and analytical philosophy as he was, also helped reinvigorate the culture of listening. Kivy demanded committed, intellectual experience. His abstract, sophisticated thinking about music occasionally makes him appear like a mathematician, contemplating a perfect, logical equation. Such an elevation of music has its value, whilst the links between music, mathematics and spiritual life are

sufficiently strong that we can begin to perceive on a slightly higher level the influence of music on abstract thinking and cognitive faculties. Such an approach to the problem may be attractive to contemporary intellectuals who have not given themselves over to clicking on mobile devices and obtaining facile, immediate answers to their questions.

Here, neuroaesthetics comes to our aid. It too may convince more than one stern rationalist to approach music as intellectual gymnastics, which, in the case of early musical education in schools, stimulates the creation of new neuronal pathways in the brain (Koelsch, 2012; Boden 2004). Musical beauty shown in such a light is no longer an entirely disinterested abstraction, but reveals its pragmatic dimension.

University mistakes?

One might hazard the assertion that a love for classical music is also not served by the forced “scientification” of musicology, which today concerns every scholar. This is much bemoaned by that great music lover George Steiner, who in his book *Real Presences* accuses the humanities of slavishly imitating the exact and natural sciences, for instance by chasing the points that are awarded today for academic publications (Steiner, 1989, p. 35-37). Steiner’s radical diagnosis is based on the conviction that humanistic reflection is not analysis, but a continual search, the continual posing of questions. It does not lead to the discovery of unequivocal answers or the introduction of patents; it does not save anyone’s life. It is not pragmatic, and under no circumstances is it “applied.” That does not mean, however, that it is not necessary to the contemporary world. Into his considerations of the condition of the humanities, Steiner repeatedly, on various occasions, weaves reflection on the insufficient presence of music in man’s experience. He urges people to make vivid, personal interpretations of their musical experiences. Such experiences bring the listener close to the performer. In Steiner’s model, the ideal listener would be a highly sensitive person capable of combining reflection on their own life and on music, aware of the context within which a work was composed, capable of independent, responsible criticism. Steiner demands of the humanist personal experience of works of art. He accuses universities of erecting a barrier between the public and artworks by means of metatexts and commentaries that exempt the receiver from the independent interpretation and experiencing of art.

Steiner’s book essentially represents an appeal for the need for personal experiencing of literature, music and art to be aroused in children,

youngsters and adults. This can be done, partly by teaching them to play an instrument, even if that involves, at some stage, forcing children into regular practice. What we gain through our labours, suggests Steiner, not only makes us humble and patient, but also arouses our enduring respect. As for academies and universities, he considers that we should expect a commitment to teaching the living reception of works of art, and not just creating a succession of erudite dissertations about them.

Conclusions

There is no simple recipe for overcoming the crisis in the culture of listening. The suggestion that music philosophers and musicologists hinder listeners' access to music by promoting intellectualism and formalism is a considerable simplification of the problem. Making classical music easily digestible and pleasant, like popular music, will not make anyone love it, but will cause huge disenchantment instead. It would seem, however, that the heated debate among such scholars as Kivy, Levinson, Young and Steiner may give rise to several constructive conclusions.

First, the proposals of Young (music as the art of representing emotions) and Levinson (delighting in the musical moment without analysing a work) will not harm classical music, will not lead to simplifications and will not popularise "partial education." Thanks to a critical dialogue with the intellectualism and formalism of Kivy, they represent a valuable proposition for listeners seeking a theoretical grounding to their passion. Those theories link music to existential experience and can stir within the listener a longing to encounter elevated values.

Secondly, the theories of music philosophers anxious to help make the public more musical constitute an intellectual challenge and encourage listeners to pursue their own searches, to link their experiences of music with experiences of other arts. Many of these theories (Young, Levinson) draw on research conducted in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroaesthetics (Young), which not only links them to empirical study, but also lends them an interdisciplinary dimension. Consequently, listeners learn how their minds function and link their experiencing of art with other cognitive processes.

Thirdly, the challenges of music philosophy often turn out to coincide with the challenges of philosophy per se, which teaches critical thinking and active enquiry, forces people to reflect on their own experience and, although not generating such unequivocal answers as the natural sciences and exact applied sciences, represents an intellectual resource for

them. Music philosophy inclines us to reflect on the analytical tools of art criticism, teaches discernment and encourages us to make judgments. The degeneration of the culture of listening is without doubt one of the side effects of living in a world in which people increasingly rarely conduct engaged, personal acts of assessing art, because there is a lack of time for experiencing it. The “increasing deafness of the humanist,” meanwhile, is one of the symptoms of a lack of reflection, the social harmfulness of which is surely self-evident to all.

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