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Listening to Different Texts: Between Reich and Eco with Nycz¹

Abstract:

In this essay, the author considers intertextuality in contemporary musical work, conceptualizing it not only as a critical category and as an artistic convention, but also as an aesthetic strategy. Listening for texts, as it were, opens the work for influences and gives it new purposes. The multiple texts, which are mutually interdependent, alter each other's meaning and are "read" and "re-read" during aesthetic experience. Depending on the listener, these meanings are more or less pronounced; some are seen as primary, while others are seen as secondary. Sometimes they are co-dependent and meaningful together, but sometimes they shy each other out. The multilayered quality of the work is acknowledged and seen as important even before individual meanings can be discovered. The author proposes a look at intertextuality in reference to musical works by Steve Reich, (e.g. *Different trains*, 1988). The author uses Ryszard Nycz's definition of intertextuality and confronts it with Umberto Eco's idea of interpretation and the structural openness of art. Putting forward a concept of listening-in as a necessary element of receiving and understanding certain musical works, she suggests accepting an intertextual aesthetic strategy for a satisfactory aesthetic experience. Assuming the presence of multiple texts, which are different in character and meaning, and accepting their interdependence, changes the reception of the work and colors its qualities. The challenge is not only to seek out different texts hidden behind the purely musical face of the work but to find out the way they influence each other, knowing full well that the major or minor role those texts play depend on the listener as much as on the author.

Keywords:

intertextuality, multilayeredness, hermeneutics, minimal music, listening-in

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In his text on intertextuality, Ryszard Nycz offers a wide understanding of the term,² which I would like to use as a starting point here. Following this definition, intertextuality is seen as including all of the relations and qualities pertaining to a work's "creation and reception as relying on knowing other texts and arch-texts (genre rules and stylistic and performative norms) among the participants of the communication process."³ In the author's suggested understanding of intertextuality, the concept refers to all of the interrelations and influences and all of the texts or arch-texts featured in processes of creation and reception of the work, with stress on the relations and in-between area of influences.⁴ Such a wide approach to intertextuality no doubt has its limitations and seems to demand some sort of narrowing down, however such a use of the concept could still be helpful when it comes to analyzing music rather than literary texts. For as much as the focus on the text behind the music is enriching and disturbing at the same time, it is also unavoidable. As Nycz suggests, there are arch-texts such as rules of the genre or thematic and formal expectations that could be read from the work indirectly through many different musical and extra musical (or sound and non-sounding) elements. There are also texts, which are pointed to from the level of hermeneutic and narrative reading, and there are structural texts, which could be pointed to when listening to the music's basic sound structure if only a certain kind of reading is employed.

In regard to music, intertextuality allows for seeing a musical work as more complex than before. It helps acknowledge texts and voices which influenced the work, gave it subtext and provided it with a wider extra musical context. Musical works are often filled with voices and musical subtexts, which are musical and yet which function as texts in that they require reading and making sense of in order for the whole work to be well understood and appreciated. The concept of intertextuality stresses the need to discover and be aware of at least some of those texts during the aesthetic experience of a particular musical work. Discovering all of the various texts that influenced a given work might be a daunting task; nevertheless, there are musical works which would be almost silent if the voices they give way to were not discovered, and there are those which would be utterly misunderstood in such a case. The examples I would like to present are just such works.

As much as it is important to listen to music *qua* music, there is a lot about music that needs to be listened for besides purely musical sounds.⁵ Still, it is the listeners who have to decide what is it they need to be listening for. This is precisely why I would like to suggest that in the context of the vast area of influences and textual interdependencies, there is also a question of where one should spend one's listening efforts. As much as the texts in music are something that needs to be taken into account during a musical experience, it also takes a certain type of listening to achieve that. The listeners need to be focused but also open; their listening practice should be flexible and changeable. Following this belief as important to engaged and to widely attentive listening to music constitutes my first assumption in this paper. My second assumption is this: musical works appear to their audiences and are judged in the web of interdependent influences both for the work and for the recipient, and subsequently everyone judges according to her/his preferences and experiential possibilities as shaped by their environment. Many things influence judgment and, therefore, to claim that a work of art is such and such, should always be taken as a stipulation. The work appears as such and such to a particular listener and any judgment should be understood in the spirit of qualified relativism. To someone who is used to modern orchestral works, a given musical work will sound and appear differently than to someone who listens

2) Ryszard Nycz, "Intertekstualność i jej zakresy: teksty, gatunki, światy," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 81, no. 2 (1990): 95–116.

3) *Ibid.*, 97.

4) *Ibid.*, 96.

5) Roman Ingarden, *The Work of Music and the Problem of Its Identity*, trans. Adam Czerniawski, ed. Jean G. Harrell (London: Macmillan Press, 1986), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-09254-3>.

to medieval music most of the time. As much as there are certain objective grounds for judgments (features of the work as measured by electronic equipment), the judgments themselves are and will remain relative. It is the duty of the judge, however – or of anyone passing judgment – to maintain a good standard in judging. It is in the spirit of a good standard for judging, as put forward by Hume, that I would like to suggest certain aspects of understanding musical works. Let us recall that, according to Hume, a good judge should most of all be attentive, have a well-trained ear (eye), rely on a stock of past experiences, and exercise an ability to compare and practice flexibility in her judgment.

More importantly, however, the question that drives this paper is axiological as much as it is aesthetic. It seems that to understand a piece of music, the audience of the musical work needs to acknowledge the referential texts that influence it – or, in other words, it may seem that the texts hidden behind the purely musical play an important part in the aesthetic experience of the work, pointing not just to the qualities of the music but to values other than the aesthetic most of the time. I would like to ask whether such a claim could be seen as plausible. To wit, what are listeners required to listen for during the experience of the musical work?

I. Listening to Steve Reich's *Different Trains*

My first example is Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988),⁶ a very complex piece of (post)minimal music. The piece, commissioned by the Kronos Quartet and written for strings and pre-recorded tape, is divided into three parts, entitled: (1) before the war, (2) during the war and (3) after the war. The titles themselves are expressive, suggesting a serious and historical approach – more so than perhaps the music alone would.⁷ The musical sounds invite listeners to a rather direct and simple reading. The sounds of violins and cello, simple musical gestures, sounds that represent travelling by train – like bells and whistles, engine puffs and cries of the locomotive managers – draw listeners into imitative musical space. The recorded sounds of actual trains, shouts and other recorded sounds are woven into the music of the strings. The pre-recorded voices and words are doubled by the music of the instruments. Everything about this piece – its pace, the mixed media, the atmosphere of the train station – seems to be representative of an actual journey by train. All of the sounds and their references remind the listener about train travel and, through that, about different travels people take in life. In accordance with other works by Reich, the repetitive, simple musical lines are evocative of a certain soundscape, but most of all they suggest a reading of electronic music produced as an example of a purely musical process.

However, when listening to the music further, especially in the second part of the work, the voices and texts become the traces of other readings. The significance of the music may only be discovered after listening with attentiveness and patience to voices in conversation during the second part of the musical work. These voices, which are hard to make out, gain still more significance if they are taken as historical evidence. Once recognized as such they constitute a completely different text of the musical work, similar in form but completely different in significance, a tragic and solemn treatise that should never be ignored. These pieces of conversations refer to the beginning of the war, being stigmatized, having to leave home and losing loved ones. The shattered parts of dialogues are even more suggestive as they are free from any graphic content and the listener must know enough to understand the meaning of the individual tales from historical context. Understanding these texts, then, requires quite an effort. Listeners of Steve Reich's music might take the fact of including recordings of

6) For a String Quartet and pre-recorded performance tape, see "Different Trains [1988]," *Bossey and Hawkes*, accessed September 15, 2019, <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Steve-Reich-Different-Trains/2699>.

7) Joanna Miklaszewska, "Contemporary Music Documenting the Nazi Terror: Steve Reich's *Different Trains*," *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 8, no. 5 (2013): 125.

survivors of the war into the work as just that. But even acknowledging this fact changes the listening perspective. No longer is this a repetitive, maybe even boring piece of concrete music – a patchwork of city sounds, sirens, speech and melodic lines. Listening to the work while knowing that the conversations are historical and that they pertain to the situation of Jews in the beginning of twentieth century Europe gives it enough subtext to convert the repetitions into complex, dark ostinatos filled with tension and roughness, drawing on guilt, solidarity, freedom and more importantly recognition of the irreversible change in an individual life brought by the outburst of the war. As it happens during the train ride, the course of the journey may only be changed through violent, difficult and dangerous acts.

II. Intertextuality as a Quality

As the definition proposed by Nycz suggests, intertextuality in art means not only relying on certain less apparent elements in the work or acknowledging all the influences in them, but rather on mixing different texts and strata into an artwork so that the more apparent texts are read and understood through the references to less obvious ones, and where the influences of each and the presence of a text's impact creates a complex, multilayered and interdependent whole. Intertextuality is an interpretative strategy, but it is also a quality. It is a quality of a certain complexity through interdependent relations, of plurality and an amassing of levels building upon themselves, of gaining meaning through various relationships and references.

In this particular case, and perhaps more universally, the intertextuality of a piece of music demands a special, careful listening strategy. Knowing that the composer journeyed on a transcontinental train as a young boy in the mid-twentieth century adds to the reading of the music by setting the biographical tone. Realizing that the recording of conversations features survivors of the Second World War changes the perspective completely. The music and the sounds are no longer innocent and simple. They become a vehicle for personal realization, pointing to life struggle, survival and travel as a metaphor for life and death. The purely formal (often structural) qualities of the music are coupled with extra-musical and narrative qualities, which are less evident but which affect the listener on a more profound level. This assumes of course that the values brought by the music are recognized and considered important.

The relationships in Steve Reich's *Different Trains* are more interesting, less obvious and at the same time simpler than in many other works. The rhythmic and melodic elements are simple and predictable. The basic pattern of repetition is present throughout the piece. The work remains in perfect harmony. Perhaps, it is all the more affective because of it, and when the words in part two are finally understood the listener is struck with the sense of importance and gravitas of the piece. Every sound, tune and speech element are doubled and underlined; the text, even though barely comprehensible, speaks to those who have enough historical knowledge to grasp the situation.

Different Trains has a special value for me, as I have for a long time been oblivious to what it was about. I did not realize that there is another strata of the work consisting of recorded conversations, as the recording I had only featured the first part of the piece. Somehow I had managed to ignore this composition's serious message, and I did not comprehend its autobiographical content or its historical potential. This negligence or blindness to music's inner texts has made me rethink my aesthetic priorities. I have been challenged to be more open to the work's other values and their possible influence for the reading of the work. Finally, I think I have realized the subtle but irreversible influences the values, which are present only if one is to look for them, have on the significance of the musical work.

III. Musical Subjects and Musical Subtexts

As a rule, one might say, each listener brings to the situation her own way of listening, complete with expectations, assumptions and stylistic preferences. As much as when Hume talks about the palate being affected by the dietary choices and the immediate influences of taste, listeners are equally impacted by their musical preferences and expectations. The listening process is shaped by past musical choices as well as the willingness to explore the music in search for qualities. In this, individual choices are as important as social conventions and historical context. David Schwarz tries to distinguish a sphere of psychological interactions between the texts that are found in the music, and the way in which they are heard through an individual set of rules and preferences. He defines this sphere as that of *listening subjectivity*.⁸ The sphere, as defined by Schwarz, is set as the crossing between the imaginary and real, between what was once the common sphere of listening as “bathing in the mother’s voice” and producing one’s own voice as mirroring what was heard. The first stage of a child’s development – the time of listening to the mother’s voice – Schwarz calls the “sonorous envelope.” This may be recreated through music and, according to Schwarz, this is what happens in Steve Reich’s *Different Trains*:

Reich establishes the illusion of the sonorous envelope through a texture that suggests both an internal, oceanic immersion in repetitive fragments of sound, and an obsessive, external, and iconic representation of trains.⁹

The illusion Schwarz talks about comes through a technique of using speech to suggest musical lines and through constant repetitions creating comforting familiarity. However, in opposition to Schwarz, or perhaps along the lines of his thinking, I would maintain that those repetitive sounds are mostly irritating and annoying rather than soothing. Nevertheless, the fluctuating musical space created by the piece seems evocative of time and being surrounded by a certain continuum, thus creating “an image” of memory, subconsciousness and traveling back in time. With the sounds of trains the piece oscillates between familiarity and unfamiliarity.

Nycz claims that in a given communicative situation there is a difference between the intertextuality proper and facultative intertextuality. The first refers to all of the relations and influenced elements that are needed for a recipient to grasp the meaning of the text, while the latter refers to all other relationships which exist but which are not necessary to experience or understand the work. Of course the question remains, how does one distinguish between the two? Nycz maintains that the work contains signals, which point to the context, which in turn help one realize and understand it.¹⁰ Knowing these signals or intertextual referents (*intertekstualne wykładniki*) are an important part of the reading (or listening), according to Nycz, as only knowing the work’s context allows for a full understanding of it.¹¹ When it comes to music, however, there are no interferences or signals in the way that those elements function in literary texts. The difference between what is needed and what, even if interesting and enriching, is in fact superfluous — the facultative is very difficult to identify, perhaps even impossible to establish. How, then, does the intertextuality of musical work function?

The author of the work intends something in the work, which may only be discovered through attentive listening. Let us remember Hume’s suggestions about the attentive and experienced eye, as well as the delicacy of

8) David Schwarz, “Listening Subjects: Semitics, Psychoanalysis, and the Music of John Adams and Steve Reich,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (1993): 24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/833367>.

9) *Ibid.*, 40.

10) Nycz, “Intertekstualność i jej zakresy,” 99.

11) *Ibid.*

the imagination and comparative skill, as all required for maintaining a good standard of aesthetic reception. In the case of music, attentive and experienced listening, in addition to the already mentioned qualities, would be needed. How one listens plays the most important part. As much as in Hume's essay – the author stresses the sound or defective organs as sources of the experience – one needs also to include the cultural and theoretical preferences that are shaping the experience. It is safe to say that everyone listens through their expectations, waiting for sounds and their relations; we are, then, greatly surprised when they are far removed from those assumptions. Yet, even if pure and unaffected experience is rarely achieved, repetitive listening might be the key to “good listening.”

IV. The Listening Experience?

During a music experience, be it a live concert or listening to the recording of it, the recipient is struggling to hear the work as a meaningful whole and at the same time to hear all of the intricacies and technically outstanding moments in the performance. The question arises of not only what the listener is supposed to listen for in the music, but also of how one is supposed to do that. The texts and worlds lurking behind the music are extremely vast. Still, they are limited by the preferences and limitations of those who listen. As Jerrold Levinson suggests, one listens to music repeatedly in order to understand it and, moreover, the experience of listening itself is the key to understanding.¹² The listening reaches out of and beyond the surface of the sounding experience. Having said that, two things strike me as important. One is that in the repetitive listening experience the premise of repetition is wanting to hear and thus to understand more but, equally, that just one listening is never enough – and that in itself may be difficult for many listeners to accept. The second thing is that the delicate line between the texts and the information necessary for listening to musical works, and those texts and worlds that enrich and widen the scope of understanding (still well before, I think, the facultative texts mentioned by Nycz), are always worth exploring. The ideas we are so familiar with, like the one proposed by Ingarden, of being faithful to the work or doing it justice, need, therefore, to be put in context of the phenomenological horizon. Where the line of interpretation changes swiftly, as does the position of the listener, both the work and the texts it evokes sound different.

As Umberto Eco stresses in his *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, there is a certain dialectic between the rights of the text and the rights of the readers, and so there is an equally important dialectical tension between the work, which is to be respected, the texts that are exposed by it, and the texts the listeners are searching and listening for.¹³ As much as the *intentio operis* must be the ultimate goal of the listening, all of the changes within the listening subjects affect what is being heard. In the end, in the listening experience the recipient listeners – if such be their goals – come to understand the possible sources of the music as well as their own preferences and ideals (and values).

V. Listening for the Music

When listening to music such as this, one wonders what is beyond the music, what has influenced the composer or shaped the way the piece was composed. But in the listening experience, there is the freedom of pleasurable or satisfactory elements that make the experience what it is. The individual qualities of each and every moment of the work are coming together to make it a lasting and powerful experience.

Steve Reich's music affords another example of complex, if minimal, music that may be successfully read as intertextual. *Tehillim* (1981), to my mind an extraordinary composition, is certainly a very interesting vocal

12) Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

13) Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation: World, History and Texts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 143, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511627408>.

piece in Reich's career. The techniques employed by the composer (e.g., canon) sound completely different and fresh due to the choice of instruments and rhythmical pace of the piece. *Tehillim* is written for four female voices and a number of instruments (piccolo, flute, oboe, cor anglais, two clarinets, six percussion instruments, two electric organs, two violins, viola, cello and bass). It is a setting of the Hebrew text from the Book of Psalms to music. The apparent simplicity of the music is coupled with a unique treatment of music material similar to that of Eastern musical traditions or Early Western music. The major complication in the music is rhythmical, although this will hardly be recognized from listening to it. The complex rhythm and changing tempo make it difficult for the conductor but hardly noticeable for the listener. Should listeners be aware of the fact that the music is sung in Hebrew, and should they know anything about the tradition of setting the Book of Psalms to music? Such elements are considered texts in Nycz's treatment of intertextuality – the rules, the stylistic traditions and practices constitute the texts which influence and govern the work. The technique Reich uses is at the same time traditional and thus familiar and exotic. The Bach influences on the work are, perhaps, less apparent than the Middle Eastern ones, yet all of these are in the music. The question remains, then, is recognition of all of these worlds necessary for the listening experience?

VI. The Attentive Listener

In musical experience the listening constitutes the most important part – the listening and not the hearing, mind you. During the listening process what happens is only partly left to chance; most of the time the listener is directing her listening experience – searching for sound and examining the quality but also ignoring other sounds and relationships. Listening as following the footsteps of a friend involves attention, intention (a sense of direction) and commitment. It allows for choosing to let go of all the other traces and possible directions. In listening to the music, the listener is receiving as much as she is expecting. The music one hears only makes sense as it conforms to all that one is assuming about it. The room for mistakes and surprises is not that great. From time to time, however, the listener will encounter works and sounds that will be completely alien for her, and still she will manage to receive it as music despite her deepest fear that it has nothing to do with music. Most of the time music is music because the listener chooses to recognize it as such. And so the listening is the most important part.

VII. Conclusions: Between Qualified Relativism and Open Work

Intertextuality might be a strategy for reading and interpreting a work, but it seems also to provide a vision or an ideology of the kind that seems to favor the contextual reading of the work. This strategy does, however, put the work's intention in the center as *intentio operi*. The texts that are searched for and found are indispensable for an understanding of the work. What might worry some listeners, in this case, is obviously the effort and possibly the skill needed for discovering all of those texts. How is one able to hear all that in the music?

Perhaps the plea for hearing the work in its totality, for acknowledging all of the worlds that inspired it, is a little idealistic. And to hope for such competence among listeners – to assume their ability to identify voices and texts other than those perceptible immediately and up front, as it were – is a bit unrealistic. But, on the other hand, we are in most cases hearing the work through the voices and texts that we believe are there in the first place. The ear we lend to music is never an innocent ear and, therefore, to hear musical work requires concentrating on the music and following the traces – the artistic and aesthetic qualities – that lead to important texts and voices. It is the listening, nonetheless, that is most important in this situation. The work is open to interpretation, and yet there are limits to this openness brought by knowledge, the texts and the expectations, which allow for some and prevent other types of listening. We only hear what we are capable of given time and cultural limitations. Let us make the best of it.

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