

Taboo listening

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Summary

The status of background listening in music studies is low. Following the hierarchy in Adorno's *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (Adorno 1962/1971),¹ any kind of listening below the level of 'structural listening' is considered to be a symptom of an incorrect attitude towards music. Moreover, as gifted listeners – who can instantly decrypt all underlying structures in the perceived sounds – are *obviously* able to distinguish 'bad music' from 'good music', 'low level' listening becomes synonymous with 'low level' music. Music which is received inattentively, not just unwillingly, is considered to be 'music pollution'. Some say this is 'passive music', heard by inattentive listeners just like non-smokers inhale passive smoke. So many discourses about background listening are full with contempt against 'bad music you can listen to everywhere' (in bars, shops, public transport; or just the music teenagers listen to while studying: how can they do this?), that the suspect arises about the whole syllogistic machi-

¹ All references in this article are to the Italian edition (1971)

nery being set up to demonstrate – at last! – that Art Music is good and all other musics are bad. Serious professors, asked to comment the matter, were heard saying: ‘Once music was art, one would go to a concert and listen. Now we have all this bad music coming out of loudspeakers. See all those young people with their Walkman.’ It usually takes some time in the discussion to remind them about other functions of music in mankind’s history; some appear to be amazed when facing the evidence that listening via earphones can be a way to focus all possible attention to music, while some concert-goers often fall asleep. In other terms, some academic musicologists need to be reminded that the interaction of technology, music’s social and linguistic functions, genres, semiotics and psychology of music perception, is just a bit more complex than dividing the world of sounds in two: good on one side (generally a Brahms or Mozart concerto listened to attentively in a concert hall), bad on the other (pop music broadcast loud from you neighbour’s radio on the beach, that you hear with disgust).

The challenge to people who want to understand how music ‘works’ in today’s world – including musicologists, of course – implies that we should be attentive to all the ways music is listened to, or used. We shouldn’t have ‘a priori’ hierarchies or taboos. Unfortunately, such taboos exist, in music studies. What about listening to music while you’re driving? Is it attentive? Is it background? How can people work, listening to music? What about claims that some jobs can be done while listening, and others not? What about a practice so many people will comment privately, but no musicologist seems to be willing to address: listening to music while making love? What does that ‘say’ about how music is perceived? Is there a (popular) aesthetics of such music? Aren’t we hiding from ourselves a real *Dark Side Of The Moon* (proper reference, maybe) of music psychology, semiotics, aesthetics, sociology, practice?

To listen, to hear

Many widely used Western languages have at least two (or more)

distinct verbs to indicate the action of receiving sounds passively or actively or, philosophically more correct, sensing or perceiving sounds. *To hear* or *to listen to*, *udire*, *sentire* or *ascoltare* (Italian), *sentir* or *escoltar* (Catalan) *oír* or *escuchar* (Spanish), *ouvir* or *escutar* (Portuguese), *ouïr*, *entendre*, or *écouter* (French), *hören*, *anhören*, *hören*, *hören* (German). Actually, we can listen (or *ascoltare*, *escoltar*, *escuchar*, and so on) even if we aren't sensing (or hearing) any sound: we are just concentrating our attention on our sense of hearing. And we can of course sense (hear) a sound without listening to it. I remember the manager of a Silicon Valley computer company, trying once to persuade attendants at a commercial meeting about the advantages of a diskless and fanless workstation: she just switched off the fan of the overhead projector, which had been on for the whole meeting, and everyone said: 'Oh!', *listening* at last to the absence of a sound that hadn't been *heard* for hours. So one can switch from hearing to listening not only because a new sound captures his/her attention, but also because a sound disappears. The languages I mentioned (and probably others I don't know of) prove that in the relevant cultures semantic 'spaces' exist that relate to at least two different attitudes to sound reception: one involving our deliberate act to pay attention to that sensorial channel, another involving its actual functioning. One can notice that similar semantic 'spaces' exist for the sense of sight, represented in languages by verbs like *to look at* or *to see*, *guardare* or *vedere*, *mirar* or *ver*, and so on. This distinction between paying attention to senses and 'pure' sensation seems to be a common trait in many cultures, obviously in so-called Western culture (where it was investigated by philosophers for nearly thirty centuries, articulating the perception/sensation dichotomy) and by experimental psychologists, semioticians and cognitive scientists for decades), though I wouldn't dare to extend it to other cultures and call it 'human', at least in the form of a given culture's commonsense knowledge. If we go back to our linguistic examples, anomalies and asymmetries appear even within European languages. For example (an interesting example, I think), the German verb for 'to listen' (*hören*) is an intransitive one, and all nouns referring to active perception of sounds and music (listening, listener) are derived from *hören*

(*Hörung, Hörer*). Apparently, in German there is a variety of compound verbs and phrasal expressions that can be used to describe different attitudes to sounds, but the basic terms that refer to the act of listening or to the person who listens are the same which refer to the act of hearing or to the person who hears. At the noun level there is no distinction. This happens in other languages too: certainly in English and Italian *bearer* and *uditore* are much more specific terms than *listener* and *ascoltatore*, so the situation is reversed, compared to German. It seems that cultures and languages are more sophisticated about actions, in this case (the semantic ‘space’ for nouns being less fragmented, or unevenly distributed). But German is particularly interesting because Germany is the *Vaterland* of *Musikwissenschaften*. It’s a language, a country in which many important *Hörertypologien* (and *Hörtylogien*) were born, despite (or just because of) the fact that a basic-level distinction between those two attitudes to sounds seems to be fuzzier, or almost non-existent, compared to other languages. Does this mean that German musicology be less refined, less detailed about listening and listeners, just like all of us have a very rough and unsophisticated perception of snow compared to the Inuits (the good old example from all semantics textbooks)? Not really. But the suspect arises that some misunderstandings or commonplaces of German-influenced musicology (that is, all musicology) might be originated at the level of the assumption that all hearing be listening or viceversa; that is, by a removal of inattentive listening or hearing – confined to the obscure universe of sensation – also implying the removal of any constructive interplay between different modes of reception.

Those who like metaphors and conceptual mappings as tools to shift meanings and construct theories, like the claimants of ‘passive listening’ as a way to absorb ‘music pollution’, do not seem to be disturbed by Heinrich Bessler’s definition of *passives Hören* as the typical *Hörstile* of Romantic music, as opposed to *aktives Hören* for music of the Classical period, *verknüpfendes* (linking, tying) for Baroque, *vernehmendes* (sensitive) for Renaissance (Bessler 1926). Passive listening, as Bessler implies, is typical for music like Schumann’s *E flat piano quintet*, not just for loud Italian dance music in a Foot Locker shop. But we aren’t al-

lowed to extrapolate: Bessler's typology, of course, is rooted in the canon of Western art music, though the way listening types are related to general structural characteristics of the relevant music styles is possibly a foundation for Adorno's better known typology, where 'structural listening' is idealized. And definitely, Bessler's *Hören* is attentive listening: if I understand what he meant, one has to put himself/herself in a condition of deliberate *passives Hören*, if he /she wants to listen correctly to Schumann's quintet, as opposed, for example, to one of Mozart's quartets.

Adorno's hierarchy

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's well known typology of listeners (and/or of listening behaviours) is by no means the first hierarchical one. Judgement is implied in older *Hörtypologien*, like Friedrich Rochlitz's (from 1799), where people *die mit ganzer Seele hören*, 'who listen with their whole soul', are of course the best listeners (compared to those who just 'hear with their ears'), or the audience classification in an issue of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* of October 28th, 1824, where a character is described, the *Seelenverkäuferin* ('slave dealer'), the 'mother who takes her daughter to concerts to look for a husband' (Bruhn, Oerter and Rösing, 1993, p. 130-135). And the history of musicology doesn't even lack a racially oriented *Hörertypologie*, based on 'experimental' data collected by Albert Wellek in 1938-39, under the Third Reich (*ibid.*).

What is new, and one may add, what's *typical* in Adorno's typology, is the link between various listeners and listening attitudes on one side and musical genres on the other. Quite rightly: Adorno is always right, even when he's wrong, and he's always wrong, even when he's right (this is the privilege of dialectics). Different genres – I would say – imply different listening attitudes; to some degree, they are *defined* by different listenings (and listeners). Moreover, different media imply different listening: Adorno is well aware of this, and his discussion of the musical use of the radio (with symphonies losing in the little box their *gemeinschaftbildende Kraft*: Adorno 1963/1969) is more

stimulating than his only moderately dialectic *Hörertypologie* (at least in the form that was inherited by musicology). I'm not an expert (nor a fan) of deconstructionist methods, but the first chapter of the *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, where 'types of musical behaviour' are introduced, would offer good examples of narrative rhetoric to such an analysis. The 'expert listener', the first one, is defined as someone who 'normally never misses anything, and at the same time is fully conscious, in every moment, of what he heard' (Adorno 1962/1971, p. 7). First kind, and best ('perfectly adequate'). Adorno is not bothered to explain here the values according to which this kind of listening is best, and why it is a 'privilege' to belong to this type of listener: he did it elsewhere. But one might argue that in the first chapter of an *Introduction* to music sociology, enouncing some basic categories, he could have *not* given the reading of his *Philosophy of Modern Music* for granted. In fact, he helps the reader with an example of this 'perfectly adequate behaviour, that should be defined as *structural listening*': 'someone who, facing for the first time a free piece, void of clear architectural signposts like the second movement of Webern's *String Trio*, would be able to indicate its formal structure' (*ibid.*). Of course, Adorno could have given many examples of 'difficult' music that might put an expert listener to test. For example (the *Introduction* was first issued in 1962) Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (released in 1960). Or a song by Umm Kulthum, or a piece of Indian *raga*. All good tests, all void (for a European 'expert listener') of clear architectural signposts. Though it isn't a great finding to notice that Adorno wasn't a cultural relativist, it may be useful to point out that his typology of musical behaviours, with all the underlying rhetoric and all its hierarchical assumptions, was adopted as a kind of Bible by 'official musicology' (a term which is quoted with contempt in the *Introduzione* of the Italian edition, by Luigi Rognoni). *Expert* (number one), *good listener* (number two), *cultural consumer* (number three), *emotional listener* (number four), *resentful listener* (be it a fan of preromantic music or a jazz fan, numbers five and six), *pastime listener* (number seven, the one who listens to *Unterhaltung Musik*, that is, popular music), and finally the non-listener, the *anti-musical listener* (number eight), were incorpo-

rated in most musicologists' common sense, despite many caveats and warnings by Adorno himself. He talked about contradictions between types, about the non-linearity of his classification, explicitly described as *non* monodimensional: he even stated that the association between listening behaviours and music types wasn't meant to be biunivocal ('according to different viewpoints this or that type of listener will appear to be closer to the object', Adorno 1962/1971, p. 6), dialectically criticising his own basic assumption, that the criteria driving the typology's construction be 'the adequacy of the listening to the music being listened to' (*ibid.*). Useless warnings: with very little changes (mainly about jazz, promoted recently from resentful to good or structural listening), Adorno's typology – in a crystalized, undialectic form – is still amongst the founding categories of 'official musicology', with all corollaries (that Adorno might have proven false), like 'popular music does not demand (or deserve) structural listening', or 'the least competent (or attentive) the listening, the worst the music', or (a slightly different form) 'music that people listen while not paying attention to it, is bad music'.

To some degree, the whole musicological discourse about music not meant to be in the foreground has been an articulation (with very little use of Adornian dialectics) of that typology, a self-indulgent sillogistic machinery (see how some musicologists smile, when they speak of 'consumption music'), a set of theorems derived from Euclidean postulates that never encountered any Riemann (the mathematician, of course).

A phenomenology of background listening: 'Baby you can drive my car'

Music not meant to be listened to attentively, as a massive undifferentiated set, includes music performed live as well as loud-speaker-diffused music. As all students of Western music's history know, but many (even historical) musicologists too often forget, many pieces that were created as a sonic backdrop were later incorporated in the canon of concert music. Legends could

add to this list even pieces like the *Goldberg Variations*, but to remain on more solid ground one could say that genres like *Tafelmusik*, *serenata*, *cassazione*, *overture* (even Rossini's) were defined by their function to accompany banquets, masquerades or other social gatherings, or to take gently the audience's attention to music, from almost null, to a degree more suitable for subsequent musical attractions. In most Italian opera theatres, for long, *food* (or *sex*) used to be the foreground. As we have seen, such behaviours were criticised in the name of Art then already: this doesn't mean that nothing has changed, but it's a warning against a possible loss of sense and value, if we just dismiss background music as such.

However, current discourses about background listening are mostly about music diffused by loudspeakers in private or public spaces, *not* in a concert setting. Most of this music is recorded. Though every step in the chain that leads from the source of this music to the listener's ear and mind may be meaningful, discussion is usually focussed on the listener's end: that is, from the loudspeaker to the mind. In describing some situations that I do not dare to define typical, but that I experienced personally, I will also start from there. A brief methodological warning, however, is necessary. I'm going to put together some empirical data with personal observations about my own experience; the latter, because of their hermeneutic nature, have no *proof*. I hope they can be of any use, at least for those who will try to prove they are not true.

According to a 1983 survey (Ala, Fabbri, Fiori, Ghezzi, 1985, p. 77), about 24% of interviewees in two Italian cities declared they would listen to music in their car, every day. Those who did, would listen for a daily average of a little less than an hour. Averages over the total of interviewees, from different media, sum up to those two hours and about fifty minutes (four hours and ten minutes for teenagers) of daily listening to so-called 'reproduced music', that emerged at that time from independent surveys carried out in various countries. It must be pointed out that the questionnaire referred in general to 'music' and specifically to 'listening to tapes in a car', so – in principle – answers to that question would not cover listening to radio programmes in a car,

not even those including music. These should be included in the answers about 'radio' (about 70% of interviewees, for about 70' a day). A general caveat about this kind of research is of course that answers are about the subjective memory of having listened to music, and can easily exceed reality; however, for that 24% of interviewees, a little less than an hour a day is a fair estimate for the time spent in cars by people going to their workplace and back home, if we average people living in the two cities and commuters. Twenty years ago, cars in Italy were sold usually without a car stereo (one should buy it and have it installed), and obviously there were no car cd players around: one can imagine that today's figures would be much higher, not only in percentages (more people owning cars, and car stereo equipment), but also in timings (traffic has increased a lot).

Working at Radio Tre (Italy's 'cultural' radio station, part of the State-owned Rai), I was informed about a year ago that many of the listeners actually listen to that channel in their cars. This was no surprise for me, as a long time car listener, but also because many people I know, when they told me they listened to my programme, would tell me they did it while driving. It was a surprise, however, for the radio's director, who until then – when I suggested to address the 'car audience' specifically – used to answer: 'You know, so few people listen to Radio Tre in their cars.' This isn't lack of experience or imagination on the director's side, however. It's a problem with radio audience surveys. When the research team at last decided to address the question properly, the car audience was discovered, even for Radio Tre. Quite recently, in some countries, new research methods were introduced, that bypass interviews and related systematic errors. The Swiss Radiocontrol (www.radiocontrol.ch) system is based on a small digital recorder, the size of a wrist-watch, that records short samples of the sonic environment at regular intervals. The 'watch' is distributed to a sample of the population, and collected after one week; recorded data are compared to an audio database including all radio programmes in the week, and the software is able (apparently!) to detect if recorded samples are equal to what was broadcast by some station at exactly that time of the day. So, Ra-

Radiocontrol offers audience data that cover all possible radio sources (at home, in the car, in public spaces), provided they were audible, and eliminates some of the most common error sources (like a radio switched on in another room, that would be included in the listening time during an interview, but that the 'watch' doesn't 'hear').

If I was a carrier of the Radiocontrol 'watch', research figures would show that I switch on my car stereo whenever I start my car, even for a very short ride, and usually switch it off just before parking. I listen to the radio, or to cd's. Quite often I listen to more music in my car – each day – than at home. Of course, what the Radiocontrol couldn't tell is what happens when I listen to music in my car. I wrote about the subject many years ago (Fabbri 1987, now in Fabbri 2002), and I'm still trying to understand. First, I drive. Quite trivial, but not exactly so. I discovered what many other people know, that the audio level which fits me when I drive is usually too high for my passengers. The same happens when someone else drives: he or she likes the volume to be louder than I like. Why? The only explanation that occurs to me is that my mind is partly absorbed by activities related to driving: maybe less the almost automatic gestures involved, than paying attention to the road. So the psycho-acoustic gate for listening could be at a higher level. But whenever I get to this point in my effort to explain this apparently simple and quite common situation, I have to face the vagueness of the very concept I'm trying to base on. What does 'paying attention' mean? What is 'attention'? Well, from my experience as a driver – which is almost as long and as varied as that as a listener – and from what people usually know, suggest and teach about driving, I know what 'paying attention to the road' does not mean: it does not mean that one should scrutinise at every moment all details in his own field of vision, watching for possible sources of danger. If one does this, he/she can't drive. To become a safe driver, one is taught: 1) to point at a certain point ahead of his/her car, not too close, not too far; 2) to be open to any kind of signal that might come from elsewhere; 3) to filter out all details related to common situations. A good driver is someone who has learnt how to balance these (and probably other) sensorial and mental

processes: we may call ‘attention’ each of the processes, or the resulting balance, but still know very little about all of them. Research was carried out about the use of mobile telephones while driving: it was proved that holding a mobile is dangerous (who could doubt it?) but also that talking over the phone using an earphone and mic (and even the car stereo’s audio) can prolong reaction times, in case of unforeseen events. How? At what level? Why shouldn’t a normal conversation (with other people in the car) produce the same effect? And music?

Conversely, I wonder if what we call attention to music works the same way, or differently. Is Adorno’s expert (or structural) listener a ‘good driver’? Or isn’t he/she, according to Adorno’s description as someone who ‘normally never misses anything, and at the same time is fully conscious, in every moment, of what he heard’, that kind of goofy learning driver overwhelmed by stimuli, incapable of filtering out unnecessary details, incapable to do two things at the same time: look at the road and drive? I bet it isn’t. But then there must be something wrong, maybe not in Adorno’s description, but in the related idea that attention to music (which qualifies listening from hearing) be something like exploring, probing constantly the acoustic field, like the eye does on the page when reading a score. It doesn’t work like that. But if it doesn’t, then attention is something else. And there are different listening modes, different attentions, that we learn to use and to balance in our ‘loudspeakerful’ environment. Going back to car listening, there are common experiences that are most probably related to multidimensional attentions and to our (learned) ability to combine mental activities. There are ‘road songs’, where the use of reverb, of chorusing, flanging, Leslie, and other effects, and where tempo and performing intentions suggest and relate to wide spaces, so that those songs – while often referring to ‘the road’ in their lyrical content – suggest the car and car listening (quite Adornian, in a way) as the most adequate place and attitude. I think of songs like Springsteen’s *Tougher than the Rest* (‘The road is dark, and it’s a thin, thin line...’ and exactly then the organ switches to Leslie, suggesting the distant shimmering of heated asphalt), or Joni Mitchell’s *Night Ride Home*, with a sampled cricket sound that passes by

like trees or wayside posts, or Ivano Fossati's *Una notte in Italia*, where the 'road song' sound cliché suggests a car as the place, though we learn from the lyrics that it is just parked 'on top of the world', and characters in the song are just making love in it. But I also think about music that sounds as a confirmation of the flowing intermittent continuum of white stripes on the road, trees, posts, buildings, like a Baroque *Allegro*, or music that contradicts that flow, like a huge late Romantic *Adagio*: they are both amongst my favourite car music. A matter of taste, of course. But there are reasons for it.

A phenomenology of background listening: taboo listenings

Another piece of evidence from my radio job is the amount of people listening to the radio (and to music) while working. I do that myself. Not while writing a paper, or an article. Maybe while writing a letter. Quite often while consulting a database or inputting data, preparing the layout of documents, doing any kind of work with numbers or formulae. I used to write computer programs while listening to music, but couldn't listen to spoken programmes on the radio. When I had a programme in the working hours at Radio Tre, I realised that whenever I spoke about matters that might interest architects, designers, scientists, painters or craftsmen I had many more calls or letters. Maybe I am too boring for writers, poets, teachers, philosophers, sales people. Maybe also people doing some jobs can't listen to the radio while doing them, others can. Not just manual labourers. So, there are in Italy intellectual labourers (hundreds of thousands of them) who listen to Radio Tre in the morning and afternoon, while working; they listen to news, comments and discussions, and to music: 'classical' music (from Gregorian to avantgarde and post-minimalism), jazz, 'world music', singer/songwriter genre ('canzone d'autore'), rock and pop. This is seen as normal practice by virtually anybody. However, any time I have the chance to discuss how music is used by young people, and specially at academic conferences, where the subject is popular music or soundscape (or 'music pollution'), the first arguments raised by other partic-

ipants (that I could not distinguish from the crowd of ‘intellectual working radio listeners’ I mentioned above) are like the following: ‘They listen to music while they’re studying or doing their homework!’ ‘Have you ever been in those shops they use to go to? With that loud music?’ ‘They go out and put their earphones on, and they walk, and take the bus while listening to music!’ Oh shame! Poor wasted teenagers! What fascinates me most, however, is how ‘attention’ becomes the theoretical focus of such arguments, sooner or later. Maybe because attention is so difficult to get from teenagers, by many adults (or such adults). Then attention is the problem, also a musical one. Music is art (or used to be) inasmuch as you pay attention to it, and the canon of such adequate behaviour is a concert hall. Adorno is looming. So any kind of listening behaviour different from that isn’t even worth discussing, except for placing it in the dustbin of bad music and music pollution. It’s a taboo. In such occasions, many times I wished I could discuss another taboo, that never emerged or was even suspected (really?) by these musicological parents, so to speak: the fact that apparently so many people, during their life from teenage to late adult age (including those parents’ children, and – who knows? – parents themselves), listen to music while making love, and/or having sex. Not unlike those ‘listeners’ in Italian opera theatres, during the show. Well, here we are. I don’t know if there are any theories or pieces of research available (like the one that recently showed how people usually tilt their heads to the right, when kissing), but I’m sure there are ‘folk theories’. I heard a few times judgements about albums particularly adequate to the function (Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side Of The Moon* being apparently one of the favourites), and I wonder about the interrelated musicological and sexologic implications of lp duration: were psychedelic and progressive rock (with their side-long pieces or suites) favoured because of this? What does ‘long play’ actually mean? Were cassettes (and autoreverse) successful for the same reason? Is it true that Akio Morita (Sony’s founder and president) asked the total playing time of a cd to be enough to contain the whole Beethoven’s *Ninth* symphony, or did he have other requirements? Humour, as usual, helps hiding embarrassment. Hermeneutical efforts, to complement or surro-

gate invisible evidence, need to enter very private regions. Anyway, let's do it. Personally, I do not particularly like to have music on while I'm making love: that is, I would not suggest it unless my partner does. But it happened to me, quite a few times. If someone asked me, then, if I *listened* to the music, I would answer 'yes'. Some of those were quite thrilling listening experiences (I'm not kidding, now): memories I have of some music pieces listened to in those situations, are the only memories about that music, that I never listened to again. From what I heard, it is quite common that people remember and remain emotionally linked to music for the same reason, the 'our song' cliché being the romanticised version of this widespread phenomenon. Again, the question about attention emerges, from the background of our thoughts. What kind of attention is it, in this case? I heard of musicians (or, anyway, 'musical' people) who could 'do it' with many kinds of music, but definitely not with others: I found it fascinating that amongst the latter, along with examples I also could suspect (like Webern's *String Trio*, just to mention it again), someone included 'anything by Johann Sebastian Bach', commenting that his/her mind was captured by the logic of contrapuntal development in a way that he/she couldn't care for anything else. Seemingly, a piece of evidence that music demands adequate listening, confirming Adorno's theory and advising that you shouldn't have a structural listener either as a driver or as a sexual partner. Or, maybe, a confirmation of Bessler's typology, hinting that in such circumstances passive listening (for Romantic music) be more suitable than *verknüpfendes Hören*. Or (who knows?) a suggestion that for such background music the Western listener refers to a semantic encyclopaedia based on film music clichés; and one wonders if a love scene accompanied by Webern's *Trio* or by a canon from the *Goldberg Variations* in a successful movie might bring to a sudden change in preferences. One also wonders if any of the above considerations might apply to other cultures, and when will the time come that such questions can be asked everywhere. There are many taboos around: one can at least give an ear to them.

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