FLANDERS LITERATURE

Sound

A Philosophy of Musical Experience

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It Starts Hear

Peter Broderick, 2012

You should start here, with a reading and listening guide to understand this book. Music and philosophy are not an obvious match: philosophical work requires active thought and writing, whereas music can simply be listened to. However, this listening experience is so fascinating that it is well worth writing down your thoughts about it. The aim of this book is to offer a method to think and talk about musical sounds. So let us embark on our journey with words, but also with sounds, interactively and using different mediums.

I will use a lot of music to clarify my words. Each chapter starts with a list of the pieces of music used, their composers and dates of composition. I chose these pieces because they strongly appeal to me and illustrate my story. Forgive me for not feeding the reader and listener a kaleidoscope of genres, though. The fact that I am predominantly referring to contemporary western music does not detract from the message that I want to convey. The title of each chapter also refers to a particular piece of music. The chapters do not specifically discuss these songs, but the titles do allude to their content. It Starts Hear, for example, is a somewhat simplistic reference to the beginning of this book.

Although it may take some time, I recommend that you listen to the cited music while you are reading this book, if only for a while. This will allow you to better understand the words that I use to talk about sounds, it will enrich your reading experience and – who knows – you may discover some new music. To help you, I created playlists for this book on my website. If you scan the QR code on the cover or visit www.tomasserrien.com/klank, you will get access to the tracks. The website also contains more information about this book, myself and my philosophical activities.

It starts here and it continues. This book is best read linearly, in the order of the chapters. I am taking you on a journey to the essence of musical experiences, so this essence is not revealed until the final chord, after a few intermediate stops. End notes and references can be found all the way at the back. I will refer to various scientific studies, but the examples I discuss are mostly described from a first-person perspective, which means that I will only paraphrase other authors to a limited extent. As music philosophy is a relatively unexplored research area, I have also looked into my own musical experiences. After all, each study starts with the realization that we can learn by discussing our own and each other's experiences with the world around us.

Thanks for grabbing this book from the shelf. Enjoy the read, and enjoy the music.

Scan the QR-code on the cover to access the accompanying playlists or visit www.tomasserrien.com/klank to discover how you can make this book even more interactive

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Prelude

I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

U2, 1987

PLAYLIST

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, op. 125, Ludwig van Beethoven, 1823-24

Das wohltemperierte Klavier, Johann Sebastian Bach, 1722

Psycho Killer, Talking Heads, 1977

'We hear everything, but we rarely get the chance to focus and listen.'

- Chris Watson –

WHY PHILOSOPHIZE ABOUT MUSIC?

Natural sounds are heard every day: in birdsong, the flow of water, wind blowing, leaves rustling, the splash of raindrops. Villages and cities produce a multitude of sounds: footsteps, crying children, laughing youngsters, passing cars and trains, wailing sirens. Each house, each block has its own sounds: the buzz of the refrigerator, the beeps of the radio or television set, meowing cats, barking dogs, creaking stairs. People's chatter can be heard almost everywhere, in public spaces as well as at home or at work, containing both understandable and unintelligible words.

All across the globe, people want to connect with a variety of musical sounds, from pop music to African gospel, folk music to jazz, classical music to obscure metal and noise. Music is endlessly multiplied on vinyl records, magnetic tapes, cassettes, CDs, computers, MP3 players, iPods and, in the internet era, on platforms such as YouTube, MySpace or Spotify.

There is an abundance of sounds and music, for everyone and at any time. Yet, really listening has become more difficult. It is safe to say that we are currently facing an auditory crisis.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE IMAGE

The auditory crisis is taking place in a world that is confronted with a plethora of visual stimuli. Through the mass consumption of visual media, we are constantly seduced by images. We are diverted from attentively speaking and listening to endlessly looking at things that entertain us. Never before have people been so glued to screens. The vast majority of the western population owns a smartphone that they frequently use. Television programs have large audiences, series producers such as HBO and Netflix have millions of regular viewers, and YouTube is watched for a billion hours every single day. Celebrities such as PewDiePie have more than fifty million followers and the gaming industry today is more lucrative than the film and music industry combined. There are a lot of people who look at the world through multiple screens and therefore start to become spectators rather than active participants. This is not an inherently negative evolution, but it does cause the auditory to be undervalued. After all, images are increasingly dominating sounds, audio and the focused attention to music.

The Ancient Greeks were already focusing on the visual when they reflected on reality. Greek scientific thinking was most strongly influenced by their faith in Apollo, the god who brought order and structure

into the world. In the apollonian worldview, it was impossible for people to acquire knowledge of the world without light. Light reveals the true nature of things. What is visually bright is more easily understood.

The sight and light of Greek thinking has fundamentally affected the course of western science. How things actually appear before one's eyes or mind became the most important way to understand the nature of things. Being is determined by seeing. In his work on metaphysics, Aristotle stated that the eyes are the most important sensory organ to obtain knowledge, because they best reveal the differences between objects in the world. This statement profoundly affected the way in which knowledge was acquired in antiquity. Plato too, with the allegory of the cave in his philosophy of knowledge, referred to the importance of sight: seeing the illusory world as a shadow and discovering the real world through sunlight.

From then on, the faculty of sight became embedded in western thought and language use, in words such as 'insight' and 'enlightenment'. The philosophy of Aristotle and Plato permeated the premodern western world. Similarly, Christianity was visually represented in premodern painting. Jeroen Bosch, Pieter Bruegel and Sandro Botticelli worked the fate of mankind into impressive and frightening visualizations of hell. Making evil visible was an effective strategy for the Catholic Church to convert people.

Later, the Enlightenment left its mark on the modern world and laid the foundations for our current definition of good science. Building on Descartes, philosophers like Locke, Rousseau, Leibniz and Spinoza each in their own way reflected on how we can acquire knowledge of the world. This led to a battle between two ways of dealing with reality: rationalism and empiricism. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant attempted to reconcile both. The use of reason or ratio took center stage. The source of all knowledge would no longer be the God of the Bible but rational thought and people's sensory perceptions.

Subsequent philosophical movements, such as idealism and materialism, did not detract from the dominance of the visual. Wisdom and insight could be obtained by letting the light shine on one's inner spirit, like a lamp in the head, or by researching the structure of the outside world with one's eyes. Today, this ideal of visualization still prevails. Neurologists are even attempting to visualize human experiences in the brain, while biologists are investigating the essence of life by depicting DNA structures as strands. Since the discovery of the electron microscope in 1933 by Ernst Ruska, our belief in the visual observation of atoms has also gained popularity. Through this discovery, the deepest structures of matter, invisible until then, could now be visualized. A whole new visible world of electrons, neutrinos and quarks opened up.

THE VISUALIZATION OF MUSIC

The reduction to abstract visualization has also influenced the study of sounds and music. As musicology is narrowed in scope by visual metaphors and abstract descriptions, the auditory aspects of our world have become undervalued.

Musicology and acoustics, two essential sciences of sound, are imbued with visual analyses. Books on classical music theory transform sounds into scores with dots and dashes. Of course, scores come in handy and are without a doubt necessary, but they cannot capture the essence of music. Acoustics, in turn, measures sound as a wave or a vibration to visualize it in frequencies. Convenient, but it does not tell us anything about our experiences with sound itself.

In musicology, music history and music theory are the two main disciplines. They offer an interesting view of music, but always from a historical perspective or at an abstract level. For example, the well-known *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* offers a very comprehensive overview of western classical music. It is a highly documented reference work on music history, but it does not teach the reader the essence of music. Some musicologists look for this essence in the detailed studies of harmony, counterpoint, rhythm and melody. These musicologists are experts in their field, but the analysis of musical systems, notations and compositional techniques does not lead to a complete understanding of music. Music is not easy to measure. A music theory that seeks to grasp this mysterious phenomenon by means of endless analyses is often bogged down in abstractions that the average listener does not understand. The analyses of musical notations turn sounds into visual entities. They are certainly a tool to understand how complex compositions are created, but perfectly explaining or reproducing Beethoven's music will not make you

understand its essence. You can try to understand Bach's masterful fugues by studying contrapuntal techniques such as augmentation, stretto or retrograde, but that analysis teaches us little about what it is like to listen to Bach. No matter how well trained you are in music analysis, music will always have an immeasurable aspect that cannot be fully understood.

A profound way of objectifying and visualizing music can be found in studies with a neuroscientific approach. Here, sounds are turned into brain areas that light up on MRI scans. Known authors such as Oliver Sacks (*Musicophilia*), Erik Scherder (*Singing in the Brain*) and Daniel Levitin (*This Is Your Brain on Music*) wrote interesting and accessible studies, but always from the perspective that the truth behind music can be found in our brain. This ties in with our present-day tendency toward abstraction and visualization. Brain processes may be able to explain why we experience emotions when we listen to music, but abstract reasoning itself does not actually reveal what it is like to experience those emotions. Similarly, chemical processes in our brain may explain why we like to eat chocolate, but they cannot describe what it is like to eat chocolate. It is interesting to use brain scans to study listening to music, but the brain processes that are rendered visible mainly tell us something about our brain. The neuroscientific perspective may visually clarify the influence that music has on people, but it cannot really describe how music is experienced.

Equally interesting is sociological research on music, although it is equally unable to grasp its essence. The book *Een eeuw popmuziek* (2015) by Belgian writer Gert Keunen gives an impressive overview of the musical genres anyone can listen to today and is a must for any music lover who wants to know more about the contemporary music scene. The book gives a good overview of the music industry and the different genres, but does not examine the essence of music. The well-known book *How Music Works* by David Byrne (Talking Heads) does deal with these fundamental questions. As such, Byrne has written a wonderful ode to music by taking the reader on a musical journey full of tips, fun facts and discoveries that illustrate the power of music. However, while his book is a masterpiece, it ultimately still answers mainly sociological questions.

The Rest is Noise (2007) by *The New Yorker's* music critic Alex Ross also takes the reader into the sound maze that is modern music. He eloquently describes how the different genres in twentieth-century music came into being, against the background of political and social developments that influenced the creation of musical sounds. It is an exceptional book, but Alex Ross mainly explores the context in which music is created, without offering any description of what music actually is.

While musicologists may be able to tell us interesting things about music, they do not reveal the gist of listening to music. They succeed in abstracting and visualizing sound and music, but due to their one-sided focus on the visual, they ignore the actual meaning of sounds in interaction with people. After all, this meaning goes beyond what is visible and what can be measured.

LET US LEARN TO LISTEN AND EXPERIENCE AGAIN

Everything starts with listening to sounds. Sounds capture fundamental relationships between people and the world. People are involved in the world because they can listen and speak. Speaking allows them to communicate auditively, and therefore also musically, with others about what concerns them. Listening is an activity in which people open themselves up to others as well as themselves. It is in this tension between speaking and listening that sounds take on meaning and communication emerges. If this meaningful speaking and listening were to disappear, mankind would, as the philosopher Michel Foucault once said, disappear like a face in the sand on a seashore. Listening is an existential form of communication that transcends the physical ability to hear. That is why I have also taken into account the listening experiences of deaf people. I will discuss this further in chapter three.

Sounds, and therefore also musical sounds, are forms of human speech. Can carefully listening to sounds bring us closer to the essence of music? Musical experience is rich and involves so much more than just hearing. In this book, I have tried to capture this experience with the help of thinkers who are inspired by phenomenology, a philosophical movement that assumes that experiences with a phenomenon, in this case

music, should always take up center stage in any study. By doing so, as a philosopher but also – and especially – as a music lover, I aim to demonstrate that music is absolutely phe-no-me-nal.

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What Sound

Lamb, 2001

PLAYLIST

Toccata en Fuga in D-moll, Johann Sebastian Bach, 1700-02

Love Her Madly, The Doors, 1971

Paint It Black, The Rolling Stones, 1966

Don't Let Me Down, The Beatles, 1969

Harder Better Faster Stronger, Daft Punk, 2001

Heartless, Kanye West, 2008

Adagio For Strings, DJ Tiësto, 2005

A Tout Le Monde, Megadeth, 1994

Winterreise, op. 89 D991, Franz Schubert, 1827

Day Is Done, Nick Drake, 1969

It Don't Mean a Thing, Duke Ellington, 1931

Praise of Genghis Khan, Batzorig Vaanchig (Mongolian throat singer), 2014

Toilet Piece/Unknown, Yoko ono, 1971

Row Out, Andreas O. Hirsch, 2017

Williams Mix, John Cage, 1951-53

Risveglio di una Città, Luigi Russolo, 1913

Cinq Études de Bruits, Pierre Schaeffer, 1948

Sunday Morning, The Velvet Underground, 1967

No Words No Thoughts, Swans, 2010

Dirty Boots, Sonic Youth, 1990

Straight Head Narrow Mind, Sore Throat, 1987

A Divine Proclamation of Finishing The Present Existence, Last Days of Humanity, 2006

Rise Above, Black Flag, 1981

Salad Days, Minor Threat, 1985

Waiting Room, Fugazi, 1988

El Divisadero, Chris Watson, 2011

I Lead You Towards Glorious Times, Merzbow, 1994

Projekt Misanthropia, Gulaggh/Stalaggh, 2007

Forever, Iceage, 2014

The Dancer, Cocaine Piss, 2016

4'33", John Cage, 1952

MUSIC VERSUS SOUND: A DIFFICULT DISTINCTION

I am still not satisfied. To understand how sound affects people, I have to delve deeper into the phenomenon of music. Intuitively I know that music consists of sounds. But at what point do sounds become musical? What is music and how can music be distinguished from other sounds? At what point do random words or sounds become music and how do they differ from what people normally experience as such?

For decades, philosophers and scientists have been discussing the foundations of music, and various attempts have been made to theoretically define the phenomenon. Initially, these attempts were undertaken in a traditional way, on the basis of the sufficient and necessary conditions that music should meet. A necessary condition is, for example, that music should consist of sounds. But does that mean that the sound of horses whinnying is also music? No, it is not, because these snorts have insufficient characteristics for the definition of music to apply. But what are these characteristics and what would be *sufficient* conditions? According to some researchers in this tradition, sounds mainly had to harmonize, while others emphasized the importance of sound duration and timbre. But all of them still just limited themselves to arbitrary guesswork. It turned out to be difficult to determine the distinction between music and sound, because music is a vague concept, and not universally recognizable. What is music for one person, is a cacophony for another.

The search for the difference between music and sound continued. To break the deadlock, researchers resorted to descriptive definitions of music, without attaching any conditions to them. Although everyday sounds may seem like music, that does not mean that they really are. But how can we then distinguish between musical and non-musical sounds? Musical sounds were described as sounds with certain characteristic properties: they can easily be placed on scales and have a specific frequency that other sounds lack. In combination with each other, they form a harmonious whole that can be found in almost every piece of music. Still, these attempts at definition turned out to be unsatisfactory too, as frequencies are not necessary for musicality. Moreover, the definitions ignored non-Western scales, causing other musical cultures to soon be considered inferior.

To avoid accusations of ethnocentrism, the idea of defining music on the basis of intentionality was born. In this definition, music includes all sounds produced by people who have the intention of making music. Music is any set of sounds that is intended to be heard as music. *Toccata and Fugue in D-minor* by Bach is music because Bach had the intention to make sounds that sound like music. This perspective was successful and stimulated further reflection on the best possible intentional definition. One of the most recent and successful definitions reads as follows:

> Music is any event intentionally produced or organized to be heard, and either to have some basic musical feature, such as pitch or rhythm, or to be listened to for such features.

This definition deliberately uses the term 'event'. Music is something that happens at a certain time (for example, during a recording), in a certain location (for example, at a concert) with the aim of people listening to it live or afterwards. Music thus becomes a fact, a circumstance that is fixed and has been created to induce listening behavior in either oneself or other people, because the event is

accompanied by musical characteristics, such as rhythm or pitch. Take the oeuvre of the American band The Doors. Why do we automatically assume that The Doors did not make sounds but music? According to the above definition, the answer is clear: The Doors made music because their musical events included musical characteristics that were made to listen to. If they had created events that were not meant to be listened to for musical reasons, then they simply would have made sounds, not music.

But is such a complex definition really necessary? After all, most people do not have to think long about whether the oeuvre of The Doors contains music. Jim Morrison wrote poetic lyrics, made sounds that sounded beautifully together and is considered a genius by most connoisseurs. So we do not really need an ingenious definition to understand what music is. We can debate endlessly whether The Beatles are better than The Rolling Stones, but there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the albums of both bands contain music, not just sounds. The same can be said of almost any kind of music that most people listen to. Whether people listen to Daft Punk, Kanye West, DJ Tiësto, Megadeth, Schubert, Nick Drake, Duke Ellington or a Mongolian throat singer, they will all agree that it is music that they are hearing. Whether they consider it good or bad depends on their personal taste and not on any definition of music.

Nevertheless, even with the best possible definition of music, the distinction between ordinary sounds and music is not really clear yet. In practice, there are many borderline cases that require a more ingenious definition. I will illustrate this with a few special 'musical pieces'.

Toilet Piece/Unknown (1971) by Yoko Ono, a well-known Fluxus artist and John Lennon's widow, features the sound of a toilet flushing for 31 seconds. The piece starts with the flushing itself, causing the sound of flowing water. Next, you hear the transition to the end of the toilet visit, after which the sink gradually fills up again. A remarkable piece of work, that much is certain. The Fluxus movement was established in New York in the sixties. Its members aimed to bring art and daily life closer together by purifying the practice of art from all forms of commerce. Yoko Ono's work illustrates this perfectly, because going to the toilet is perhaps one of the most banal activities in our lives. The fact that you can record toilet sounds and present them as a piece of music is somewhat strange. Within the Fluxus movement, the piece may be regarded as art, but it is still difficult to describe it as music. After all, what is the difference between the daily sound of a toilet flushing and Yoko Ono's toilet piece?

According to the first part of the definition quoted above, *Toilet Piece/Unknown* may be music, because Yoko Ono had the intention to create an event that was meant to be heard. But what about its musical characteristics? I think few people listen to *Toilet Piece/Unknown* to hear the timbre or other characteristics of this work. Probably, Yoko Ono did not intend to give this piece any musical characteristics either. On the contrary, she wanted to react against an elitist vision of art, alienated from everyday life. The difference between this and the ordinary sound of a toilet is that flushing in daily life is clearly not an event that we consciously produce or arrange to be heard. It does not matter to us whether flushing produces a sound or not. What matters is that the faeces and preferably the accompanying odors quickly disappear. This strange piece of music therefore only matches our definition in part. But imagine that, when Yoko Ono recorded *Toilet Piece/Unknown*, she flushed a deliberately chosen toilet at a deliberately chosen moment and location. Was she already making music at that point, or did the toilet visit only become musical when she decided to play the recording to others?

Our definition is not particularly easy to apply to other borderline cases either. Andreas O. Hirsch's vinyl record *ROW* features a track of 19 minutes and 23 seconds called *Row Out*. It was recorded for

a theater festival in 2011, aboard a boat during a training session of a Dutch rowing team from Terschelling. All you hear are typical sounds that go with rowing. A steersman's voice encourages the rowers, who are pulling the oars with their powerful arms to propel the boat through the water. You can hear the water lapping against the boat and occasionally a few Dutch words. Halfway through the song, the rowing speeds up for a little while, only to stop entirely toward the end and change into metallic, quiet sounds with voices in the background. Is this music or not? Is this an event that was intentionally produced or arranged to be heard? Probably not, because the rowers, who are the musicians of this piece, did not deliberately produce any sounds for the recording. The sounds were merely a side effect of their intention to row. But Hirsch clearly did record these sounds with a specific intention. That is why it is difficult to tell the difference between real rowing noises and those in his song. Both contain a certain kind of rhythm, but it remains to be seen whether someone will listen to *Row Out* because of that musical characteristic.

One of the most extreme borderline cases is *Williams Mix*, a piece by John Cage from 1951-53. It is an electronic composition in which eight magnetic tapes simultaneously produce various sounds. The song contains a mixture of all kinds of sounds: city sounds (traffic noise, people talking), natural sounds (frogs croaking, the wind), squealing, annoying sounds and electronic sounds that are difficult to identify. When you listen to the song, all these sounds hit you simultaneously, without a clear structure. Sometimes you hear something you recognize, but after every second a new sound is added, putting you in a state of confusion. It sounds as if everything is fast-forwarded, like the sound of a movie you are playing. *Williams Mix* is a Dadaist sound production, in which it is difficult to distinguish any musical characteristics. The song has no clear rhythm or tempo at all and lacks any harmony. We hear a mix of sounds without any recognizable musical form or content. In a sense, *Williams Mix* could be called music, because John Cage had the intention to create something to be heard, but if that is the case, it is difficult to pinpoint what musical characteristics would make you listen to it. After all, a random mixture of sounds that you just hear on the street has more musical characteristics than *Williams Mix*.

IS NOISE MUSIC?

It can get even more complicated. Even if the distinction between sound and music is defined intentionally, other questions remain unanswered. Noise music, for example, raises the question what the difference is between noise and music. One of the founders of this genre was Italian composer Luigi Russolo (1885-1947). In the twenties of the last century he was a representative of futurism, a forward-looking musical movement with compositions based on noise. Russolo made instruments himself that he used to create industrial sounds. He called them noise machines, because they mainly produced rumbling, humming, beeping, crackling, buzzing and other noises. His Russolophone is renowned, an instrument that simultaneously produces seven sounds, each in 12 possible volumes. Listening to compositions by Russolo is a strange experience. Take, for example, *Risveglio di una Città* from 1913. This piece is a mishmash of extraordinary and noisy sounds that follow each other without any logic. Harmony, melody or rhythm were not important to Russolo. He wanted to create atonal sounds. He explained his views on music, noise and sound in his manifesto *L'arte dei rumori* or *The Art of Noise.* The piece raises an interesting issue: why could noise not be part of the music creation process?

Russolo's ideas were very original for his time and were followed by many others. For example, he clearly influenced the French music movement *Musique Concrète* (including composer Pierre Schaeffer, to name but one), which tried to electronically transform everyday sounds into compositions. Ambient noise was increasingly being incorporated into musical pieces, and in the second half of the twentieth century, the experimental music scene flourished. Several bands that

focused on noise were formed, such as The Velvet Underground, Swans or Sonic Youth pioneers in incorporating noisy sounds into pieces of music. These bands made full use of the new possibilities to not only create noise in a natural way, but also with different types of feedback and distortion. Prepared guitars with all kinds of objects between the strings produced even more and different forms of noise. These bands eagerly experimented and increasingly called into question existing definitions of music. In both rock and metal music, new genres integrating noisy elements proliferated, from extreme grindcore (like Sore Throat and Last Days of Humanity) to more famous hardcore punk (such as Black Flag, Minor Threat and Fugazi). The ability to record and process noisy ambient sounds also stimulated new musical experiments. For example, Chris Watson recorded the sound of a well-known train traveling from the east coast to the west coast of Mexico and used those sounds to create the album *El Tren Fantasma*. When you listen to the song *El Divisadero*, you realize just how strange a train can sound.

As these pieces of music may sound nice or pleasant, they are easier to distinguish from noise. After all, noise is usually associated with a feeling of irritation. As long as annoying sounds do not dominate, sound tends to be classified as music rather than noise. However, the complexity of contemporary music does not allow for such a straightforward distinction.

Take Merzbow, for example. Merzbow is a project of and pseudonym for Japanese artist Masami Akita, one of the most important figures in contemporary noise music. This music, also known as *harsh noise*, revolves around noise. With any means possible, Merzbow produces a mix of annoying sounds that is as noisy as can be. His songs are so deafening that they are difficult to listen to completely. The noise of a dozen jackhammers in the street is nothing compared to them. Merzbow has released more than fifty albums since 1980, and time and again, everything revolves around creating noise. When you listen to his work, you stumble upon numerous examples of how problematic the distinction between music and noise can be. For instance, I challenge you to listen to the last track on the 1994 album *Venereology*, *I Lead You Towards Glorious Times*, from start to finish. Careful: it is not an easy task! The beeping, extremely loud sounds make you feel uncomfortable, and it is hard to suppress the urge to turn the volume down more and more as you listen to it. Nevertheless, it is an interesting challenge to listen to this horror-like palette of sounds, from which any kind of musicality is removed. Listening to this is for many a prolonged kind of torture, an attack on their hearing that is accompanied by a strong emotion of aversion. Just like when you eat something you do not like, you want to temporarily switch off your senses when you are exposed to these sounds. The question whether this is still music is equally challenging: is Merzbow pure noise or does it have some kind of musicality? In an interview, Masami Akita answered this question as follows:

> If music was sex, Merzbow would be pornography (...) Noise is the unconsciousness of music. (...) Merzbow is not male or female. Merzbow is erotic like a car crash can be related to genital intercourse.

Although few pieces of music can match Merzbow's extreme noise experiments, the Dutch-Belgian band Gulaggh does come rather close. The band was founded in 2000 under the name Stalaggh, using neo-Nazi slogans and band names that refer to prison camps and genocide. What is the most offensive aspect – but also the most appealing to the imagination – is that their music mainly consists of the screams of psychiatric patients. It is a sinister thought, but Gulaggh aims to make music that is as unpleasant and frightening as possible. They justify using psychiatric patients by claiming that people of sound mind would not be able to express such pure fear, hatred and despair. Morality aside, it is interesting to listen to their work because it again questions the definition of music. Their 2007 album *Projekt Misanthropia* is not exactly an agreeable listening

experience. It combines several sounds without any form of rhythm or melody, with screams and yells in the foreground that die out painfully slowly. Even Merzbow sounds less unbearable at times. The connection you automatically make with the screams of real people makes you shudder. If you do find a reason to keep listening and you manage to somehow find it agreeable, it still remains to be seen whether this is music. What is the difference with hearing people scream in a real psychiatric context? Both sounds of desperation and anxiety send shivers down your spine and make you want to close your ears.

With these extreme pieces of music, the intentional definition of music does not really help us much. We may have specific reasons to listen to them, but it is more likely to be out of curiosity or interest than because we can distinguish musical characteristics such as rhythm or pitch. To state that there is no difference at all between sound, noise and music does not solve the problem either, because then everything is music and nothing is just sound, or vice versa. Then we are back to square one. Once again, it is hard to draw the line. If the sultry sound of contemporary punk bands like Iceage or Cocaine Piss is music, why should not Merzbow, Russolo or Gulaggh's work be considered music too?

NOW LISTEN UP!

Does it make sense to continue searching for a definition that unambiguously distinguishes music from ordinary sound or noise? Sooner or later, each new definition will give rise to another borderline case that makes us question the existence of such a definition. The real question, then, is perhaps whether trying to determine the foundations of music is not a senseless problem. In daily life, I hardly ever encounter situations where I have to rack my brain to decide if what I am listening to is music. If this does happen, definitions of music are irrelevant. As soon as I come across sound or music, I focus on the auditory, without having decided in advance if what I hear can be regarded as music by definition. Strict definitions are abstractions that distract us from the right approach to music. As Silvio Senn, a philosopher from Ghent, Belgium, wrote in 1986,

> For starters: music is not there to be talked about, it is there to be heard, just like a painting is there to be seen. However, what appears to be a triviality has non-trivial consequences: the purpose of the music is to be heard. And that means: music arises in the hearing of the listener, not in the play of the performer, the musician, as the circus of virtuosos is so fond of maintaining. The same applies to the origin of music in the composer's authorship: he is only a composer insofar as he himself is his first listener.

All attempts to offer an abstract definition of music are doomed to fail, because they regard music as an event or fact with specific characteristics. After all, music is not an event, fact, object or thing. Music is a meaning that a listener experiences in body and mind. Composers and performers are also primarily listeners of their own or a musician's creations. If you want to know the first thing about music, your focus should not be on the music itself or the way it is 'made', but on the meaning of the listening experience with this special world of sounds. It is only because listeners experience sounds in a certain way that music can come into being. What really matters is the musical experience and gaining a better understanding of it.

Whether or not a person experiences certain sounds as musical is a subjective matter. Yet, every musical experience has structures that determine how its meaning is formed. A sound experience becomes a musical experience when the listener attributes a musical meaning to it. But this meaning can only arise if the experience has certain structures. Without these structures, musical experiences could not be distinguished from other experiences, which would suggest the absurd

conclusion that every experience is a musical experience. So what structures are characteristic of a musical experience?

In any case, it is clear that musical experience involves experiencing invisible sounds. There is no music without sound, and the experience of silence in itself cannot be a musical experience. That is less obvious than it seems. To illustrate this, I would like to dwell for a moment on a piece by John Cage (1912-1992), whom I have already mentioned before.

Cage was one of the greatest innovators in music history. In his early years, he was fascinated by experimenting with sounds and became convinced that freedom in music is essential. He vehemently opposed the ordinary ways of composing music of his time. This resistance heralded his first creative period, during which he invented the prepared piano, among other instruments. In doing so, he laid the foundations for ideas that would later be responsible for *Williams Mix* and other obscure pieces of music. In his later work, Cage resolutely left room for the element of chance in his music. He recorded sounds that were created entirely arbitrarily in certain locations and used them as the basis for his music pieces. In 1952, these 'new sounds', as he himself called them, were featured in one of the most talked-about pieces of music of all time: his world-famous *4'33"*.

During the performance of this special piece of music, nothing was fixed in advance. After all, John Cage did absolutely nothing for exactly 4 minutes and 33 seconds. The piece of music was created by accidental ambient sounds, like the audience coughing or the sound of objects being knocked over, alternated with longer or shorter periods of relative silence. As a result, the piece sounded different every time, which was Cage's way of demonstrating that complete musical freedom was in fact possible. The music world reacted with surprise, approving and disapproving at the same time, but all agreed that it was a revolutionary musical move. Although it may appear absurd, by excluding the composer and leaving the responsibility for the music entirely up to coincidental sounds, Cage turned the audience into a group of musicians, as if by magic. Cage was inspired by Zen Buddhism, which states that, in the creation of sounds, the composer's intention is irrelevant. Every sound can therefore be given a musical interpretation.

What makes Cage a revolutionary is that he made people think about the fact that it is impossible to create absolute silence. Even though his intention seemed to be to produce a silence lasting 4 minutes and 33 seconds, with each performance a musical experience was created based on the sounds people heard at that specific time. Of course, there is such a thing as relative silence, a moment when little can be heard. But do not be fooled: even in a soundproof space, you cannot experience absolute silence. You will notice the sound of your blood flowing and will start to be annoyed by it. Not to mention the ringing in your ears. Relative silences are usually associated with moments of rest with few dominant sounds, often linked to the experience of natural sounds, such as water murmuring or birdsong. Cage showed that even in such a situation a musical experience can arise, even if there is a smaller chance of that happening. The context that Cage creates can suddenly attribute musical meaning to the relative silence that is heard in *4'33"*.

That is exactly what makes the piece so interesting, because it is the human quest for silence that determines the limits of musical experience. Every human being experiences silence differently, but it is precisely the confrontation with this personal silence that establishes both the limit and the possibility of an experience with musical sounds. It is because you can experience a form of silence that you know what sound is, and vice versa. On a quiet walk surrounded by nature, silence only takes on meaning when it is interrupted by the sound of the wind or birdsong. The reverse is also true. It is not until a series of sounds ends in silence that you can understand what you have

experienced. Composers eagerly use this reasoning to give sounds enough room, so that they may be heard in their full meaning. Silences in music give listeners the opportunity to understand what they have just experienced. The ultimate silence with which a piece ends is therefore necessary to assign meaning to the piece as a whole. If a song were to last forever, you would no longer know what you are experiencing after a while. It would become similar to a continuous ringing in your ears, anytime, anywhere. It is impossible to experience anything of musical significance in sounds that last forever. This explains why an abundance of sounds causes meaning to dwindle. Experiencing relative silences is important to understand the meaning of sound and music. The same applies to conversations: silences are necessary to assign meaning to words. This is exactly what our current visual culture is often lacking. Social media and the worldwide web expose us to a massive flow of visual stimuli, and the flow never stops. If we want to experience any form of meaning, we need to hit the pause button every now and then and experience the silence.

The importance of silence helps us better understand the difference between experiencing an ordinary auditory meaning and experiencing a musical meaning. Cage demonstrated that this involves attention. Because his experiment created a framework in which people could dwell on sounds, they were also able to experience those sounds musically. Suddenly, the sounds were no longer commonplace and could even take on a musical character within the specific context. Of course, it is quite possible that you find Cage's experiment pure nonsense and discover no musical meaning whatsoever when you listen to *4'33"*. But if you do, then that musical experience will have a structure of liveliness that an ordinary auditory experience is lacking.

The structure of liveliness in musical experiences is not abstract at all. When you hear ordinary sounds, you usually experience a certain meaning, but that meaning is characterized by a certain degree of superficiality. There are four options:

1. You do not notice a sound that is in fact there. The sound of your keyboard, for example. This creates a non-existent or meaningless experience.

2. You do notice a sound but do not give it much thought. You are deeply concentrated on writing and suddenly hear shouts in the garden. You stop paying attention to it and continue working. This creates an ordinary auditory experience.

3. You notice a sound, but it annoys you. A jackhammer in the street, a television set beeping, loud shouts. This creates a noisy experience that you would rather avoid.

4. You notice a sound and attribute positive qualities to it. These qualities are often functional: a cat meowing (cute!), your mobile vibrating (message!), a microwave oven beeping (food!), a car rushing by (watch out!). This creates a host of useful auditory experiences that help us through life.

A conversation would belong to the fourth option. While you are talking to someone, the sounds only acquire meaning if you are actually listening. Otherwise, they fall within one of the three other categories. Indifference can never be the basis of a good conversation. The better you listen, the better the conversation and the more meaning you can get out of it. This ability to communicate is a useful and necessary quality for humans. For most people, however, there is a fundamental difference between having a conversation and listening to music. After all, a conversation often remains mainly functional. You listen to someone because that is the polite thing to do and because it may be important for the rest of your day or even your life. Of course, not all conversations are relatively superficial, and a brilliant speech can even be thrilling. Nevertheless, for many people, listening to such a speech is still not the same as listening to music. When you experience sounds as

music, you do so with your whole body and mind. You are excited, uniquely involved in the sounds and you become livelier, as it were. This experience of liveliness is highly personal. For one thing, the degree of involvement in the sounds determines the emotional aspect of the experience. This role of emotions in musical experiences will be discussed in more detail later on.

All of this explains why some people discover some kind of musical meaning in the work of Merzbow or Gullaggh. They experience the noise in a different context than in a busy crowd on the street, where they find the sounds annoying or do not even notice them, leaving the noise meaningless. The same applies to the work of Yoko Ono, Russolo or Cage, where ordinary sounds can also acquire a lively kind of meaning.

As a consequence, any experience with sound can take on musical meaning. The likelihood of this happening varies from person to person and is certainly not universal. Many more people experience music in Beethoven's work than in Merzbow's. But in fact, there is no real difference: when you experience music, you are vividly involved in the sounds you hear. For many people, it is true that sounds can take on a lively meaning. It is within that liveliness that the various other structures of musical experience can be expressed, by asking yourself the same annoying, almost insulting, question over and over again: What do I hear and experience in music and what does that mean?

Remark: This sample translation is without notes.