

The role of the body in the contemporary definition of an intersubjective approach to music

Isotta Trastevere

Researcher and sound artist
Attachée temporaire à l'enseignement et à la recherche à Aix-Université
Membre du laboratoire PRISM (Marseille)
Collaboratrice extérieure du groupe de recherche ACCRA
isottatrastevere@gmail.com
ORCID ID 0009-0004-3083-2067

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Abstract. Electroacoustic music and sound arts are practices defined by the fundamental dimension of their sensitive relationship with matter. In this sense, they could be defined as experimental practices that involve a singular experience of the body. Listening to sound material for its own sake leads us to consider its tactile nature, which calls up a little-explored dimension of our sensitive perception.

The musicologists Salomé Voegelin and Mariusz Kozak are respectively studying bodily involvement in listening to music and the involvement of the body in defining musical temporality. Their works reveal a change in trend that shifts the focus of analysis from the notion of object to that of space. Indeed, the notion of space includes the existence of the listening body as a “network of intentionalities” (Merleau-Ponty).

It would therefore be interesting to revisit Pierre Schaeffer's four listening functions, *ouïr*, *entendre*, *écouter* and *comprendre* (Schaeffer) from an ecological approach to perception. Andrea Valle identifies the pivotal role of the hearing function, outlining iconic listening (Valle), where the four listening functions are constantly interconnected. It is in this constant movement of tensions involving the listener's body that we might be able to account for the musical experience and its symbolic dimension.

Keywords. sound arts, electroacoustic music, listening, intersubjective approach, body, time.

El papel del cuerpo en la definición contemporánea de un enfoque intersubjetivo de la música

Resumen. La música electroacústica y las artes sonoras son prácticas definidas por la dimensión fundamental de su relación sensible con la materia. En este sentido, podrían definirse como prácticas experimentales que implican una experiencia corporal singular. Escuchar el material sonoro por sí mismo nos lleva a considerar su naturaleza táctil, lo que evoca una dimensión poco explorada de nuestra percepción sensible.



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Universitat de València (España)

Los musicólogos Salomé Voegelin y Mariusz Kozak estudian, respectivamente, la implicación corporal en la escucha musical y la participación del cuerpo en la definición de la temporalidad musical. Sus trabajos revelan un cambio de tendencia que desplaza el enfoque del análisis de la noción de objeto a la de espacio. De hecho, la noción de espacio incluye la existencia del cuerpo que escucha como una «red de intencionalidades» (Merleau-Ponty).

Por lo tanto, sería interesante revisar las cuatro funciones de la escucha de Pierre Schaeffer: *ouïr*, *entendre*, *écouter* y *comprendre* (Schaeffer) desde un enfoque ecológico de la percepción. Andrea Valle identifica el papel fundamental de la función auditiva, describiendo la escucha icónica (Valle), donde las cuatro funciones de la escucha están constantemente interconectadas. Es en este movimiento constante de tensiones que involucran el cuerpo del oyente que podríamos explicar la experiencia musical y su dimensión simbólica.

Palabras clave. artes sonoras, música electroacústica, escucha, aproximación intersubjetiva, cuerpo, tiempo.

Electroacoustic music and sound arts: experimental practices

Electroacoustic music and sound arts, by virtue of their reliance on technical devices for recording and sound synthesis, are practices that lead us to conceive music differently. From the 1950s onwards, with the emergence of *musique concrète*, electronic music and tape music, developed respectively in France, Germany and the United States, it became possible to approach musical composition using recorded sounds, or those generated by synthesis, without using instruments, symbolic writing and scores, abandoning melody, harmony and rhythm. This music falls within the realm of audiovisual art, of which cinema is a part, insofar as the sound and visual recording devices are based on the same technical operating principle of sampling, at a speed that exceeds the threshold of perception, making it possible to obtain the illusion of continuity of movement.

The importance of listening in composition thus becomes fundamental: it is no longer a question of implementing predetermined compositional rules, but of opening the imagination by listening to sounds. Composing with recorded or synthesized sounds now offers the possibility of working with sound material in a sensitive way, as in painting, and this represents a considerable change in music.

The fundamental role of listening in the creative process has led artists and musicologists to define this music as experimental. The use of this term, as composer and musicologist Riccardo Wanke points out, does not limit the category of *experimental music* to the music of the American movement described by Michael Nyman, or to the music that John Cage defined as “an act whose result is unknown”¹. Instead, for example, sound artist and professor Alvin Lucier prefers to “simply accept”² the term *experimental music* rather than *new music*, *contemporary music* or *avant-garde music*, all of which are too generic

¹ Cage, J. (1961). *Silence, conférences et écrits*, Contrechamps Éditions, 15.

² Lucier, A. (2018). *Eight lectures on experimental music*, Wesleyan University Press, x.

in his view. In the 1960s, Pierre Schaeffer seized upon this term to define the particular approach that characterizes *musique concrète*:

Like the physicist, the experimental musician uses, as we have seen, sound objects that are physically identifiable, and questions perception. Like the physicist, he intervenes in sounds through precise manipulations. However, his approach is different and specific: he does not seek to establish a system of correspondences between the variation of an elementary physical dimension of the object and the variation of a sensory value but can determine the extent to which the combination of physical characteristics of the object corresponds to the perception of simple structural relationships between the various objects thus proposed to musical listening.³

However, if creative processes are experimental because they are based on the sensitive experience of listening, the work of sound art is not necessarily so. As Edgar Varèse asserts: "I don't write experimental music. I experiment before making music. Afterwards, it's up to the listener to experiment"⁴. We can see that experimentation characterizes both the creative process and the reception of this music. The works represent ever-new models of sound organization, and listening to music becomes a novel experience, a primarily corporeal encounter between the sound phenomenon of the work and the listener. The meaning of experimental simply recalls the importance of the listener's presence and activity, which involves the body and not just the intellect.

The notion of presence is thus relevant to the characterization of the musical experience, as it expresses the listener's physical involvement: all the senses participate in perception, although the auditory organs are the preferred receptors. In this respect, it is important to specify that the particularity of the sense of hearing does not give access to a substantially different reality than the sense of sight. There is recurrent discourse that instilling the idea that hearing enables us to reach the real phenomenon more directly and objectively. However, it's an ideological trap to accentuate the duality of seeing and hearing. Rather, in the audiovisual experience, our senses are simultaneously active and there is no need to separate their functions; they work together to apprehend reality. Music philosopher Jonathan Sterne is very clear on this point:

There is no scientific basis for asserting that the use of one sense atrophies another. The audiovisual litany is ideological in the oldest sense of the word: it is derived from religious dogma. It essentially takes up the spirit/letter distinction that has long existed in Christian spiritualism. [...] Hearing leads the soul to the spirit, sight leads the soul to the letter.⁵

Listening to music thus requires the active, multimodal presence of the listener.

Tactile listening

Taking into account bodily presence during listening leads us to describe the ear's encounter with sound matter for its own sake with the aesthetic notion of haptics.

³ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux*, Seuil Éditions, 170.

⁴ Varèse, E. (1972). The Varèse album [LP], Columbia Masterworks.

⁵ Sterne, J. (2003). *The audible past*, Duke University Press, 16.

In the fields of painting and cinema, Walter Benjamin⁶, Marshall McLuhan⁷, and Gilles Deleuze⁸, have defined the nervous nature of perception through the concept of haptics, summoned and further revealed by twentieth-century art. Gilles Deleuze makes the link between Paul Cézanne (cited in this connection by Marshall McLuhan before him) and Francis Bacon in the work he dedicates to the concept of haptics:

This is the very general thread that links Bacon to Cézanne: to paint sensation, or, as Bacon says in words very similar to those of Cézanne, to record the fact. It's a very tight and difficult question to know why a painting touches the nervous system directly.⁹

By stimulating the viewer's nervous system, the work is said to have the capacity to recall living gestures, thanks to its particular perceptible qualities.

The tactile dimension of the musical experience would then be carried by the very character of the sound material, which can only be conceived through its apprehension in time. In this respect, Riccardo Wanke identifies a particular access to the tactile dimension of sound in music, in the texture brought about by the distortion effect, used in both contemporary instrumental and electronic works:

When we listen to distorted blocks of noisy sound – as in Verrando's or Pan Sonic's music – we experience a sense of saturation, as if the sound material is physically filling a kind of container. We have the sense of pressure but also of restriction and a channelling of energy forces. In this sense, distortion of sound makes us experience a surface.¹⁰

The surface is a line of confinement produced by the force of gravity, which exerts pressure on matter. This pressure corresponds to the physical character of sounds, but it also represents an activity carried out in time: the notion of pressure implies a notion of surface and cannot be imagined outside of time. Interpreting the tactile from a temporal perspective makes it possible to study more closely the activity of the body involved in listening to music, which proves to be a necessary factor in understanding the works.

Qualifying the role of the body in listening to music: Mariusz Kozak and Salomé Voegelin

The function of the body in listening to music is explored both in musical analysis and in musical creation. In composition, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, we see the same tendency to create compositional models that empirically take into account the perception of sound phenomena in the creative process. To cite the most striking examples in instrumental music, Gérard Grisey

⁶ Benjamin, W. (2013 [1935]). *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, Payot et Rivages, xv.

⁷ McLuhan, M. (2017 [1961]). *La galaxie Gutenberg: La genèse de l'homme typographique*, CNRS Biblis, 93.

⁸ Deleuze, G. (1981). *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, Seuil.

⁹ Deleuze, G. (1981). *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation...*, 33.

¹⁰ Wanke, R. D. (2021). *Sound in the ecstatic-materialist perspective on experimental music*, Routledge, 52.

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composed directly on musical time, “perceptible time, not chronometric time”, which he called “the flesh of time”¹¹. Pauline Oliveros's *Deep Listening* sound practice, though in a different aesthetic vein, also takes account of bodily presence in sound practice through the use of yoga and meditation exercises.

In the field of musicology, both in Europe and the United States, there is a growing body of research that aims to take into account the listener's bodily experience during the reception of a musical work. Sarah Benhaïm's¹² aesthetic surveys of noise music fans, and those of Catherine Guesde and Pauline Nadrigny¹³, are symptomatic of the desire to understand music on the basis of both physical and mental experience.

On this subject, Salomé Voegelin and Mariusz Kozak develop reflections on bodily engagement during musical listening using a phenomenological approach. In his recent work on embodied musical time, the musicologist Mariusz Kozak refers almost entirely to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, first and foremost to the notion of motor intentionality, in which the body plays a primordial role in perception: “These clarifications finally allow us to understand motricity unequivocally as an original intentionality. Consciousness is originally not an I think that, but an I can”¹⁴.

On the basis of these philosophical concepts, Mariusz Kozak questions and defines the particularities of musical temporality, the role of the body, and the way in which meaning is grasped during the musical experience. Time is defined by the musicologist as the form of the listener's interaction with the music, an embodied lived time that is generated by the encounter between the listener's body and its environment.

To clarify his intersubjective stance, Mariusz Kozak uses Merleau-Ponty's notion of “flesh” to identify in this link the generating principle of musical time. Like a two-sided membrane that vibrates, the subject's body and the surrounding world participate in the same reality; the flesh is the common, invisible entity that supports and enables the interaction between the body and the world; the flesh, synonymous with Being, is differentiated from the latter by the fact that it is embodied in the body. Mariusz Kozak sees musical time itself as a “network of intentionalities”¹⁵: time is the dynamic form created by the relationship between beings and the world. Mariusz Kozak's model of embodied musical temporality is structured around the tendencies of anticipatory and omphalic listening. In particular, the “omphalic” notion refers more to a bodily attitude:

¹¹ Grisey, G. (2008), *Écrits*, éditions MF, 79.

¹² Benhaïm, S. (2016). Entre écoute réflexive, immersion sensuelle et confrontation: Les amateurs à l'épreuve de la musique noise, *L'autre musique*.

¹³ Guesde Nadrigny, C. P. (2018). *The most beautiful ugly sound in the world: À l'écoute de la noise*, éditions MF.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1976). *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 160.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1976). *Phénoménologie de la perception...*, 440.

Derived from the Greek word ὀμφαλός (meaning navel) the term designates a central orientation, and I use it here to refer both to the concentration of bodily attention in the present moment (the center, as it were, of our temporality) and to the physical convergence of bodily activity around the torso (the center of body's gravity).¹⁶

If, for Mariusz Kozak following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “the body secretes time”¹⁷ for Salomé Voegelin, musical reception involves tactile and indeterminate sensations. Salomé Voegelin constructs an intersubjective-immanent model, where the object and the subject are formed simultaneously and continuously, one on top of the other, without losing their respective independence and particularities:

The sonic reality is intersubjective in that it does not exist without my being in it and I in turn only exist in my complicity with it; and it is generative in that it is the sensory-motor process of listening: presently producing one's honeyed-ness from one's position of listening centrifugally into the world.¹⁸

In the intersubjective model proposed by Salomé Voegelin, perception is considered (as in Schaefferian theory) to be an act of synthesis, but unlike Schaefferian theory, listening is an immediate and continuous activity that engages the whole body. The philosopher of music also refers to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, through which she formulates a generative model of musical time, in which temporality arises from interaction with the listener. While Voegelin defines the nature of the listening experience as necessarily subjective because the sound exists in the listener's “ear”, during listening the object and the subject are simultaneously constructed in a reciprocal manner:

This is a continual production that involves the listener as intersubjectively constituted in perception, while producing the very thing he perceives, and both, the subject and the work, thus generated concomitantly, are as transitory as each other.¹⁹

Taking the body into account contributes to the tendency to conceive of the work of sound art as an environment, whose temporality would be represented by the present, “omphalic” moment: the space of interaction between the sound phenomenon and the listener. A study of these two approaches reveals a shift in tendency, which consists in valuing the notion of space despite the notion of object. Space, unlike an object that can be grasped and its contours distinguished, is presented as a formless state. The notion of space as a “network of intentionalities” includes the existence of the listening body. This space is not necessarily localised, as in the case of soundscape composition, but rather represents the link, the interaction of the listener's body with the sound phenomenon.

¹⁶ Kozak, M. (2020). *Enacting musical time: The bodily experience of new musics*, Oxford University Press, 220.

¹⁷ Kozak, M. (2020). *Enacting musical time: The bodily experience of new musics...*, 249.

¹⁸ Voegelin, S. (2010). *Listening to noise and silence*, Continuum, 10.

¹⁹ Voegelin, S. (2010). *Listening to noise and silence...*, xii.

Pierre Schaeffer's four listening functions from an ecological approach

Having identified this shift towards the notion of space, which envelops the body during listening, it then becomes interesting to re-examine and retrace Pierre Schaeffer's four listening functions from an ecological approach to perception.

In the original diagram, the four listening functions are first distributed along two intersecting axes, where each element making up a sector (see table below) is characterised by a double entry: objective-subjective and concrete-abstract. A listening function is objective (*écouter* and *comprendre*) when we look at the object of perception, or subjective (*ouïr* and *entendre*) when we look at the activity of the perceiving subject. It is concrete when “listening turns towards a concrete given, as such inexhaustible, though particular”²⁰, and abstract when “we retain from the object only those qualities that will enable us to relate it to others”²¹.

If we classify Pierre Schaeffer's four listening functions from a temporal perspective, the first function of listening is *ouïr*: “to perceive with the ear, to be struck by sounds”²². According to Pierre Schaeffer, the sense of hearing is closer to the sense of smell than to the sense of touch or sight, which can be more intentionally oriented.

4. COMPRENDRE	1. ÉCOUTER	
— pour moi : signes	— pour moi : indices	
— devant moi : valeurs (sens-langage)	— devant moi : événements extérieurs (agent-instrument)	1 et 4 : objectif
Émergence d'un contenu du son et <i>référence</i> , <i>confrontation</i> à des notions extra-sonores	<i>Émission</i> du son	
3. ENTENDRE	2. OUÏR	
— pour moi : perceptions qualifiées	— pour moi : perceptions brutes, esquisses de l'objet	
— devant moi : objet sonore qualifié	— devant moi : objet sonore brut	2 et 3 : subjectif
Sélection de certains aspects particuliers du son	<i>Réception</i> du son	
3 et 4 : abstrait	1 et 2 : concret	

Figure 1 - Table of TOM listening functions²³

²⁰ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux...*, 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Chion, M. (1983). *Guide des objets sonores: Pierre Schaeffer et la recherche musicale*, Buchet-Chastel, 25.

²³ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux...*, 116.

The second type of listening is *entendre*: etymologically, to manifest an intention to listen; it is to select from what we perceive, what is of particular interest to us, in order to qualify what we hear. Hearing defines a human capacity to choose, which may or may not be linked to rational reasoning. *Écouter* is to aim for meaning, through sound. It is a utilitarian action, for example: “I’m trying to infer information about how the engine works”²⁴. Finally, *comprendre* is “the mind no longer content to accept a meaning, but abstracts, compares, deduces and relates information from different sources and of different kinds; it is a matter of clarifying the initial meaning, or extracting an additional meaning”²⁵.

Andrea Valle proposes a graphic model for relating Pierre Schaeffer’s four listening functions, which helps to further define the role of the *ouïr* function:

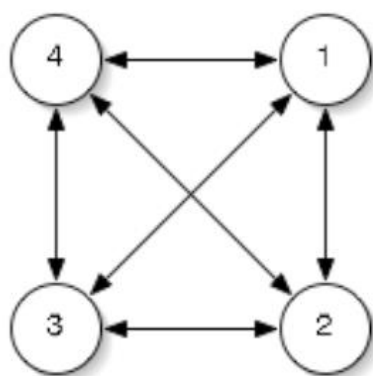


Fig 2 - Graphical modelling of Andrea Valle’s four listening functions²⁶

The composer and music semiologist sees the listening process as a continuous circulation between the four listening functions mentioned: *ouïr*, *entendre*, *écouter* and *comprendre*. Putting the four listening functions into situation offers an ecological perspective from which to study musical listening and also enables Valle to define the concept of listening practice:

A listening practice is a graph K_4 where some paths are more frequent than others: in other terms, every practice determines a specific weight for each involved edge. This weight represents the value of each relation among the modes in that practice.²⁷

Listening practices are characterised by particular circulations between the four functions. After an in-depth study of these circulations, Andrea Valle defines the pivotal role played by the *ouïr* function. In his introduction to the table of functions, Pierre Schaeffer had already pointed out the complementary nature of the listening functions in a situation where the listener is constantly creating “partial objects”²⁸, which complement each other as the phenomenon is

²⁴ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux...*, 107.

²⁵ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux...*, 110.

²⁶ Valle, A. (2008). Tableaux et gravures: A graph model for Schaeffer’s theory of listening, INA-GRM & Université Paris-Sorbonne (MINT-OMF), 4.

²⁷ Valle, A. (2008). Tableaux et gravures: A graph model for Schaeffer’s theory of listening..., 3.

²⁸ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux...*, 118.

apprehended and listened to again. However, if all the functions make it possible to form partial objects, *ouïr*, which represents being struck by sounds, cannot deny its objectivity:

But, if the *ouïr* refers to the virtual, pure sound object, while the other modes are related to partial sound objects, the quadripartition is in some way unbalanced, as the *ouïr* becomes an abyssal vanishing point. The negative objectivity of the *ouïr*, intended as a liminal, in itself inaccessible, pure audibility, ensures the possibility of the circulation among all the different practices.²⁹

This is why Andrea Valle recognises the function of *ouïr* as the pivot, the surface of contact with sound matter, to which the listener constantly returns in order to construct the hearing object. The circulation of the four functions, constantly passing through the *ouïr* function, then forms a spiral, or a circle, if the sound phenomenon has no metre. Highlighting the relationship between the four listening functions helps us to understand the statement: “to listen is also to know how to listen”³⁰. The cultural nature of listening had already been pointed out by Pierre Schaeffer:

The specialist isolates himself in relation to the world of banal meanings originating in sector 3 [*entendre*]; but in so doing, he institutes a new world of meanings, which in turn brings into play in a new sector 3 finesses of perception - finesses whose banality is soon consecrated by habit - which perhaps constitute the germ of the development of other subsequent auditory practices. Thus the one-upmanship of qualifications appears to be unlimited. In other words, all practised listening suggests specialised attentions that will make it banal.³¹

This reference to the contingency of the function of *ouïr* leads Andrea Valle to consider the practice of listening as an iconic activity:

The listening practice is in some way ‘iconic’, as new determinations are brought to the sound object. Here, iconicity must be intended in the Peircean sense, as a certain relation of structural dependency between the sound object determined by the new listening practice- and the sound object intended as the origin (in itself inaccessible) of all the listening practices.³²

The action of *ouïr* considered from an iconic perspective allows us to conceive of the incessant renewal of listening during which we succeed, or fail, in forming units. With regard to the complementary relationship between the four listening functions, it then becomes interesting to study them from a temporal perspective.

Ouïr has been defined as an action of reception and according to Andrea Valle, as the pivot of perception; *entendre* and *écouter* are characterised by the desire to aim at the sound phenomenon, to move towards it; “to understand” is more akin to an intellectual activity of deduction. From a temporal perspective, we could describe the four listenings as intertwined activities that define contact with the sound surface (*ouïr*), temporal orientation (*entendre*), the ability to organise

²⁹ Valle, A. (2008). Tableaux et gravures: A graph model for Schaeffer’s theory of listening..., 4.

³⁰ Valle, A. (2008). Tableaux et gravures: A graph model for Schaeffer’s theory of listening..., 2.

³¹ Schaeffer, P. (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux*..., 125.

³² Valle, A. (2008). Tableaux et gravures: A graph model for Schaeffer’s theory of listening..., 4.

events in time (*écouter*) and the way in which meaning is inscribed in an abstract and symbolic framework (*comprendre*). The actions are said to be intertwined, because there is an interdependent relationship between them, with one enabling the other to take place: *ouïr* contracts the information through sensation, but it is only through hearing that we recognise it in the present moment; *écouter* is formed after a certain amount of time, through the sedimentation of sensation and the formation of the present; “understanding” would depend on all these stages combined, this action is the only one that could take place after the musical experience, but if it occurs during listening, the other actions must continually support it and not contradict the deductions made.

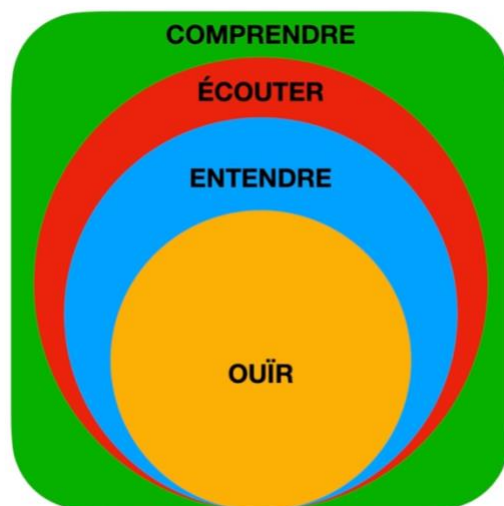


Figure 3 - Pierre Schaeffer's tangle of listening functions interpreted from a temporal perspective

The four types of listening occur at the same time, they coexist and influence each other, although the work may stimulate a particular type of listening. If we study the four listening functions theorised by Pierre Schaeffer from a temporal perspective, we can describe their respective roles in the musical experience. The link between *entendre* (abstract-subjective) and *écouter* is interesting to observe: *entendre* is specific to the perception of the present moment, while *écouter* (concrete-objective) develops over time and necessarily takes into account more “distant” past and future dimensions that accompany the present experience; these two types of listening are linked during musical reception, and *écouter* could not exist without *entendre*. However, the relationship between *ouïr* and *entendre* also needs to be investigated; *ouïr* (concrete-subjective) calls upon the surface of the “epidermal” encounter with sounds, which comes first, but which must be perpetuated and take place simultaneously with *entendre*; the latter represents the action of selecting in the present, it is the completion of an initial organisation of the sound signal in time.

The first is the active response to stimuli, or *accueillir* (to welcome) which allows the sound phenomenon to be absorbed and the vibratory signal to be translated into units of time; the second consists of *viser* (to aim), aiming at the mass of the

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sound phenomenon, making choices about the orientation or distinction of
elements in the sound framework.

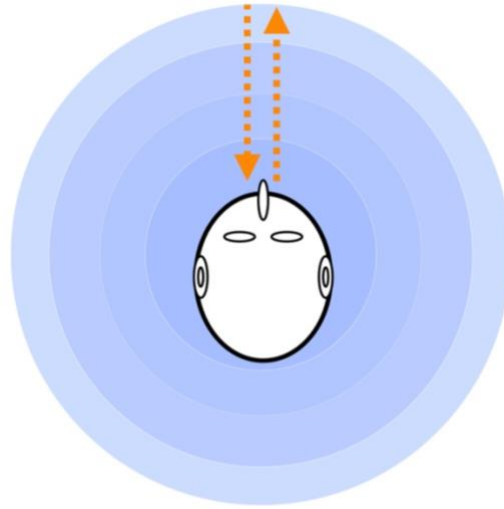


Figure 4 - Diagram of the two general listening tendencies, *accueillir* and *viser*, which come into play during the reception of a musical work

In the diagram above, the dotted arrows represent the tendencies to *accueillir* and *viser*; the first, *accueillir*, starts from the sound phenomenon and indicates the listener's capacity to absorb this phenomenon, whose sensitivity can be solicited. The second, *viser*, is drawn in the opposite direction, in front of the listener, and represents the subject's ability to select. These two actions take place at the same time, but one always prevails over the other.

The temporal perspective of the four listening functions configures the musical experience as an articulated and stratified activity. The proposed dialectic of aiming and welcoming represents the tension that defines the tactile interaction between the sound phenomenon and the active presence of the listener. The musical experience thus unfolds on several strata simultaneously, nervous, sensitive, and intellectual, which prove to be in constant communication with each other.

In the light of these reflections, equating listening to music with hearing appears to be a reduction that feeds the belief that it is possible to achieve natural musical listening. Music is, of course, heard, but *ouïr* does not represent the entirety of musical listening, although it does constitute its first fundamental foundation.

As the work of musicologists Mariusz Kozak and Salomé Voegelin shows, it is no longer a question of pitting the immediate and mediate conceptions of music against each other. Rather it is a question of including the immediate dimension - at the empirical level - in models for analysing the sound arts.

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