

4715

HAMILTON, A.

2007

CHAPTER 4

## THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Conductor Sir Thomas Beecham's delightful quip that 'The English people may not understand music, but they absolutely love the noise that it makes' trades on the fact that music *is* the sound.<sup>1</sup> But what is it to hear sounds as music? This chapter explores the *acousmatic thesis* that to hear sounds as music involves divorcing them from the worldly source or cause of their production. The concept of the acousmatic was developed in the 1940s and 1950s by *musique concrète* composers such as Pierre Schaeffer. *Musique concrète*, we saw in Chapter 2, is early electronic music, which has no performers and so no visual element to engage audiences or listeners. Its exponents believed that 'listening without seeing' allowed sounds to be more easily appreciated for themselves. When traditional, non-electronic music is performed, in contrast, the circumstances of its production are fully visible. But it could be argued that listening without seeing – acousmatic listening – captures something essential to truly musical experience.

The acousmatic thesis is associated with the enduring abstractionist position illustrated in the previous chapter under the heading of formalism. This position detaches music from the world, making it the most abstract of the arts – a pure 'art of tones'. However, the acousmatic thesis does not strictly imply the latter position. As advocated by Scruton, for instance, commitment to a pure art of tones is qualified by a humanistic understanding that the concepts of music, dance and human gesture are interlinked. My argument is that, even so, the acousmatic thesis neglects the importance of the human production of musical sounds to which appreciation of music makes

essential reference, and which therefore limits music's abstract nature. It also neglects the way that our experience of music also refers to the nature of sound-producers – the instruments – as physical objects and the physical phenomena of sound-production. It is not true that music is the object only of metaphorical perception, therefore, as Scruton maintains; attending to sounds as part of the human and material worlds is a genuinely musical part of musical experience.

#### THE ACOUSMATIC EXPERIENCE OF SOUND

Scruton, in *The Aesthetics of Music*, develops what I term the acousmatic thesis as follows. In musical experience, he writes

we spontaneously detach the sound from the circumstances of its production, and attend to it as it is in itself ... The acousmatic experience of sound is precisely what is exploited by the art of music ... The history of music illustrates the attempt to find a way of describing, notating, and therefore identifying sounds, without specifying a cause of them.<sup>2</sup>

Later, he writes that

The person who listens to sounds, and hears them as music, is not seeking in them for information about their cause, or for clues as to what is happening. On the contrary, he is hearing the sounds *apart* from the material world. They are detached in his perception, and understood in terms of their experienced order: this is ... the acousmatic character of musical experience ... the notes in music float free from their causes ... What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object: the organization that can be heard *in* the experience.<sup>3</sup>

Zuckerlandl, quoted by Scruton, in some ways anticipates this general position: 'Tone ... does not lead us to the thing, to the cause, to which it owes its existence; it has detached itself from that; it is not a property but an entity'.<sup>4</sup> Other writers also adopt this position, for instance, Edward Lippman:

Hearing is satisfied with its own objects, and has no need to relate them to further objects and events of the outside world. This is especially evident in the case of tone and tonal configurations ... [Sonority's] ontological status is clearly that of an object peculiar to hearing; it can not be located at all in environmental space.<sup>5</sup>

The key thought behind the acousmatic thesis may, I think, be presented as follows: an economy of meaningful sound appears to liberate sounds from the need to have a worldly source, and so music escapes the gravitational pull of its causal origin. What remains in musical experience is its non-worldly or musical cause or rationale.<sup>6</sup>

We saw in Chapter 2 how Scruton, agreeing that no intrinsic properties of sound are required, argues in opposition to modernist conceptions that melody, rhythm and harmony are necessary yet non-intrinsic. For him, these qualities are properties not of sound, but of tones, that is, pitched sounds, and sound becomes musical tone when organized by pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony. Scruton develops his account of tones through traditional defining features of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony. Timbral and spatial aspects of music, which seem to relate sounds to the circumstances of their production, are interpreted by him in a manner which he believes is compatible with the acousmatic thesis. He makes various distinctions between the acousmatic and non-acousmatic realms, distinguishing acoustical experience of sounds (non-acousmatic) from musical experience of tones (acousmatic); the real causality of sounds from virtual causality between tones; the sequence of sounds from the movement of tones that we hear in them.

Scruton links the acousmatic thesis with the claim that tone is the intentional object of intrinsically metaphorical musical perception. Thus, the objective but phenomenal acousmatic realm exhibits a 'virtual causality' between tones, in contrast to the real causality between sound-producers – musical instruments included – and sounds. Virtual causality is found in melody, where we hear not just change, but movement – a rising and falling in pitch, and tension and resolution. It is also found in rhythm: 'To hear rhythm is to hear a kind of animation ... Beats do not follow one another; they bring each other into being ... and breathe with a common life'.<sup>7</sup> Talk of movement is metaphorical – only the

performer's body and limbs, the instrument and air molecules, literally move – but essential to the experience of music.<sup>8</sup> This important and persuasive thesis of the *necessary metaphorical perception* of music is discussed later in this chapter, in its relation to the acousmatic thesis, and in Chapter 5.

It is essential to recognize that the acousmatic thesis is a claim about how musical sound is *experienced* – with or without reference to its physical cause – not about how it is *known* to have that cause. In acousmatic experience, the thesis says, the listener knows that the sound has a physical cause, but it is not that which they attend to. Rather, they attend to the imagined or virtual causality present in the musical foreground, and which is 'heard in' the medium. What motivates the acousmatic thesis – I would argue – is this process of 'hearing-in', which shows interesting parallels, and contrasts, with the concept of 'seeing-in', the twofold experience of painting and picturing developed by Richard Wollheim. While the latter phenomenon is much discussed, its aural equivalent is almost entirely neglected, and it is a valuable feature of the acousmatic thesis that it corrects that neglect. The problem with it is that aesthetic experience embraces the non-acousmatic, just as it embraces the non-representational element in painting, and so ultimately I reject it. Nonetheless, I show that the thesis yields significant insights into the nature of musical experience and expresses an important dichotomy in terms of which the experience of music can be understood. I conclude this chapter by proposing a twofold account of musical experience involving both acousmatic and non-acousmatic – a duality apparent in other sound-arts and sound-design, and in any aesthetic experience of sound.

#### PYTHAGORAS AND *MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE*

Composers in the tradition of *musique concrète* did not espouse the acousmatic thesis in the form that Scruton presents it. As we saw in Chapter 2, *musique concrète* was among the earliest uses of electronic means to extend the composer's resources to non-tonal sounds. (Non-tonal in the sense of 'not based on tones' – as opposed to atonal, 'not based on the tonal system of major and minor keys'.) Unlike traditional composition, it did not depend on performers to interpret or realize a notated score. As we saw in Chapter 2, when Pierre Schaeffer founded the school of *musique*

*concrète* in the 1940s, he used the primitive recording technology of disc-cutters and tape-recorders to create compositions from a montage of everyday and natural sounds – mechanical and human noise, as well as more traditional musical materials such as the piano and other instruments. These sounds were modified in various ways – played backwards, cut short or extended, subjected to echo-chamber effects, filtering out or reinforcing of certain frequencies, or varied in intensity – which in later *musique concrète* had the effect of destroying clues about the source of the sounds.<sup>9</sup> The term *concrète* is meant to convey the idea of working directly or concretely with sound material, in contrast to the composer of traditional music who – according to exponents of *musique concrète* – works indirectly or abstractly through a system of notation which represents the sounds to be made concrete. *Concrète* also conveys the genre's concern with natural, real-world source-sounds, though in theory recorded electronic sounds were not forbidden.

While *musique concrète* typically treats and often transforms 'worldly' sounds from everyday life such as footsteps, trains and doors slamming, pure electronic music from the Stockhausen tradition – initially known by its German designation *elektronische Musik* and sometimes referred to as sound synthesis – is produced at least in part by computer synthesis. However, despite the ideological divide between *musique concrète* and pure electronic music, most practitioners were not purists. In *Hymnen* from 1966–7, Stockhausen used recorded sounds of national anthems, which are recognizable though they are also transformed, in the early 'Gesang der Jünglinge', which uses recordings of a child singing, there is an even closer affinity to *musique concrète*. Today, while the French and German traditions have come together, distinct tendencies are still apparent.<sup>10</sup> But the historic divide between *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik* now concerns how the composition is realized in the performance-space as much as the kind of material exploited – hence the contrast between sound *diffusion* of acousmatic music and sound *reproduction* of taped music.<sup>11</sup>

For Schaeffer, a composition is experienced acousmatically when a curtain has been lowered between its constituent sounds and their previous worldly existence. In this situation, which the medium of recording privileges, sounds are treated as objects divorced from their sources or causes. Schaeffer took the term 'acousmatic' from Pythagoras' alleged practice of lecturing to students from behind a

screen so that they would attend to the words and not the speaker; the esoteric or religious sect of Pythagoreans were called *akousmatikoi*, 'those willing to hear'. Thus, Schaeffer wrote, 'We can, without anachronism, return to an ancient tradition which radio and recording follow in the same way today, restoring to hearing alone the entire responsibility of hearing a perception ordinarily leaning on other sensory evidence'.<sup>12</sup> The *musique concrète* tradition took up the term 'acousmatic', and later exponents often described their work as 'acousmatic music'.<sup>13</sup> They tend to describe 'acousmatic listening' as 'listening without seeing' – though Schaeffer is concerned not just with how listeners should perceive sounds but also how composers should treat their material. In both cases, he maintains, one should ignore the physical origin of the sounds employed and appreciate them for their abstract properties. Schaeffer also termed the process 'reduced listening', arguing that recording encourages it through the possibilities of listening without seeing and indefinite repetition. Sound reproduction has a double role: 'to retransmit in a certain manner what we used to see or hear directly and to express in a certain manner what we used not to see or hear'.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Schaeffer seeks to reconcile technology with nature, treating the medium of analogue recording like the curtain which concealed Pythagoras from the *akousmatikoi* – excluding visual experience while enhancing experience of the sonorous object.

Strictly, reduced listening should not be equated with listening without seeing; rather, it is listening that is enhanced by not seeing. The object of acousmatic or reduced listening is what Schaeffer calls a sound-object (*objet sonore*), apparently discounting the common-sense assumption that sounds are temporal processes rather than things: 'When [sound recognition] is effected without the aid of sight, musical conditioning is shaken up. Often surprised, sometimes uncertain, we discover that much of what we believed was only in fact seen, and explained, by the context'.<sup>15</sup> Schaeffer recognized that a Pythagorean curtain will not discourage our curiosity about causes, to which we are instinctively drawn. But he maintained that reduced listening counteracts this tendency.<sup>16</sup> (Compare the constant repetition of a word – its meaning is forgotten as one is drawn to the sound itself.) At first, where we are ignorant of what is causing the sound, we want to know what it is; with practice, however, the desire dissipates.<sup>17</sup> It

should also be noted that one can desire to *know* the origin of the sound, while at the same time *experiencing* it acousmatically.

#### A BROADER DEFINITION OF 'ACOUSMATIC'

The concept of the acousmatic is not restricted to what, for most listeners, is the rather specialized domain of electro-acoustic composition. It has a broader application, as Scruton's work shows – and it is his thesis which is my main concern. In fact, Scruton and exponents of *musique concrète* differ concerning both the definition of the acousmatic and its application. First, the definition. To reiterate, in describing their work as 'acousmatic music', those in the *musique concrète* tradition cite the Pythagorean definition of 'acousmatic' as 'listening without seeing'.<sup>18</sup> Compare this definition with Scruton's broader and subtler characterization of acousmatic listening as excluding both thought and awareness of the source or cause of the sound. On his account, such listening could occur while the cause of the sound is visible; so while both Schaeffer's and Scruton's senses of acousmatic involve detaching the sound from its circumstances of production, they should not be equated. (A third possibility is listening without knowing the cause – 'awareness' conflates the second and third possibilities.) Recall Scruton's description of the acousmatic character of musical experience: 'The notes in music float free from their causes ... What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object: the organization that can be heard *in* the experience'.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, when someone hears musical sounds, they may gain information about their cause, but Scruton's claim is that in musical listening we spontaneously detach such information. This descriptive claim contrasts with the more prescriptive claim of the Schaefferians. According to Scruton, we do not have to choose to listen to musical sounds acousmatically but do so quite naturally and spontaneously; Schaefferians – thinking in terms of 'listening without seeing' – believe that the listener has to make an effort to forget the origins of the sounds. As my later arguments show, I believe that the Schaefferians are nearer to the truth here.

Scruton and Schaeffer also differ fundamentally over the application of the acousmatic. Schaeffer focused on experience of non-tonal sounds or noise, which before his time music had hardly embraced, while Scruton applies his concept to what *musique*

*concrète* composers regard as traditional music. For Scruton, indeed, typical cases of *musique concrète* would not qualify as music. However, Schaeffer's followers, at least on occasion, have allowed that acousmatic experience can apply to traditional music. Luke Windsor, for instance, allows that there is 'both *intentionally* acousmatic music and music that is more *coincidentally* acousmatic' – presumably he means *musique concrète* and traditional music respectively.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, *musique concrète* compositions are indeed compositions – that is, while reduced listening involves a concern with sound itself, in which one develops a heightened attention to the nature of individual sounds, one returns to the whole, incorporating that new attention into the complex totality. While *musique concrète* is sound-art or a precursor of sound-art, it shares many of the traditional concerns of music.

I need to say more about the contrast between acousmatic and non-acousmatic. Sound experienced in terms of its cause – as the sound of some event such as a door slamming, a dog barking or a clarinet being played – has been or might be described as: significant, anecdotal, associative or dramatic sound; or, conceived explicitly as a kind of experience, the purely acoustic, the practical, the literal, the documentary, the non-aesthetic. The description 'purely acoustic experience' could apply just as well to the acousmatic as to the non-acousmatic case, and so is best avoided – I will return later to the suggestion that the acousmatic is simply the aesthetic as applied to sound. 'Literal', 'practical' and 'documentary' have the right connotations.<sup>21</sup> Say I am walking in the woods and hear a creaking sound above me. An acousmatic response would be, 'That's a very interesting high-pitched sound, intermittent and rising in intensity' – perhaps it could be located in Schaeffer's taxonomy of sound-objects. A non-acousmatic response, in contrast, might simply be (looking up) 'Is that a branch about to topple onto me?' – hearing is subservient to sight in information-gathering.<sup>22</sup> The acousmatic experience of sound excludes its literal qualities – as in the case of music, the listener detaches the sound from its worldly source or cause. In contrast, literal experience of sound involves a practical or technical interest. Rescuers listening for the cries of survivors buried by an earthquake treat those sounds practically and not acousmatically; a sound engineer's concern with a recording may be literal in contrast to a musician's. Medical students are taught to listen for certain rhythmic patterns in a heartbeat, and their listening must be

non-acousmatic; they are searching for information – for symptoms of a disorder – not for musical properties.<sup>23</sup>

Is it really possible to experience non-musical sounds acousmatically, as I have just assumed? The rationale of *musique concrète* is that it is possible, while the impression given in Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Music* is that it is not. However, elsewhere Scruton writes that 'our language for characterizing sounds tends to describe them in terms of their normal source – dripping, croaking, creaking, barking. But reference to a source is not essential to the identification of the sound, even when it is compelled by the attempt to describe it'. He continues: 'music is an extreme case of something that we witness throughout the sound world, which is the internal organization of sounds as pure events [detached from a cause]'.<sup>24</sup> Such a position opens the way to a genuinely non-musical sound-art with elements describable by Schaeffer's taxonomy of non-musical sounds. Certainly it is the case that sound phenomena which are not music or sound-art have acousmatic – one might say musical – aspects, such as the rhythm of a train engine or the melody of speech patterns. A heartbeat is a natural rhythm, birdsong is melodic; nature can be musical, even if is not music. Music, as argued in Chapter 2, has to be an intentional production.

#### OBJECTIONS TO THE ACOUSMATIC THESIS

The acousmatic thesis faces some strong objections, which in my conclusion, result in its defeat – both the acousmatic and the non-acousmatic are essential aspects of musical experience. The issue is a subtle one, however, and needs careful handling. The question is not whether ordinary musical listening involves attention to both cause – instrumental or vocal medium – and melody, rhythm and so on, but whether these are both fully musical aspects of musical experience. I do not say that Scruton denies these two aspects of listening; my argument is rather that he wrongly denies that the non-acousmatic aspect has a genuinely musical status.

The most important objections to the acousmatic thesis are now considered in turn.

#### *Timbre*

In its everyday sense, timbre is, precisely, the quality or tone colour of a musical note which distinguishes different types of musical

instrument, or the individual qualities of different vocalists. Timbre comprises those qualities of a musical sound which relate it most directly to its source, even if pitch, rhythm and harmony also do so to some extent – a high pitch is unlikely to be produced by a tuba, though when it is, it has a special timbral quality. Experience of timbre must therefore be regarded as non-acousmatic; if it is an essential part of musical experience, as it surely must be, then the acousmatic thesis is undermined. When listening to a piano concerto or a jazz pianist, one cannot help thinking 'piano', and so it is essential to the musical experience that one attends to its causal origin. Timbral qualities include resonance – in the case of voiced sounds, for instance, the quality imparted by the action of the resonating chambers of the throat and mouth and nasal cavities – harshness, roughness, mellowness, nasality, reverberance, shrillness and stridency. Acoustically, these qualities are 'impure'. Pure tones – those lacking other than a fundamental frequency – can occur in music, but most musical tones are composites of partial vibrations of the vibrating body as well as vibrations of the whole mass. A typical violin tone is relatively rich in overtones, while the flute and tuning fork are closer to a pure tone – though even these have noise elements, such as the breathy sounds of the flute.<sup>25</sup>

### Space

Acousmatic experience cannot involve awareness of the spatial origin or movement of sounds, which clearly concerns their cause or source. Therefore, acousmatic experience is not sufficient for the appreciation of those kinds of music which aim to achieve spatial effects through placement of groups of performers or sound-producers – where it is important that one attends to the direction of the sounds. Despite the examples of Baroque antiphonal music and nineteenth-century compositions with off-stage musicians, such a purpose was not prominent before the twentieth century. But it is central to contemporary compositions beginning with Stockhausen's *Gruppen* and *Carré*, though prefigured in some ways by the work of Charles Ives. Almost from the start of his career, Stockhausen wished to undermine traditional concert-hall stereo listening. Describing *Gruppen* rather grandiosely as the first example of 'spatial music', he demands specially designed halls with moveable seating to allow his music's 'theatrical polyphony' to be realized:

Musical space has been fixed in the western tradition ... [its] function has been neutralized ... we are not birds, ... and would rather sit in one spot ... most of the audience can't even stand, let alone move during a concert, so our perspective on musical space is utterly frozen ... If I have a sound of constant spectrum, and the sound moves in a curve, then the movement gives the sound a particular character compared to another sound which moves just in a straight line. Whether a sound moves clockwise or counter-clockwise, is at the left back or at the front ... [are] configurations in space which are as meaningful as intervals in melody or harmony.<sup>26</sup>

### Virtuosity

Acousmatic experience cannot involve awareness of virtuosity in performance, so it will not allow for appreciation of music where this is a significant element in the listening experience. It is part of one's experience of Liszt's *Transcendental Studies*, or Paganini's *Caprices*, or Louis Armstrong's 'Swing that Music', that these are technically extraordinarily difficult; a recording of Liszt's pieces where the right-hand part was over-dubbed using two hands would lose the elements of devilry, risk, excitement and relief. This point applies to other expressive qualities too: the sense of strain generated by the first violin part in the 'Cavatina' of Beethoven's Op. 130 string quartet – which calls for very high positions on the lower strings of the instrument which are very taxing for the performer – is an intrinsic part of that quartet's expressive power. These qualities are apparent audibly, but also visually, hence the final objection to the acousmatic thesis:

### Non-auditory experience of music

We feel as well as hear sounds. Some music seems to emphasize this fact, for instance, Edgard Varèse's, where a sense of sound as vibration is integral. As we saw earlier, Schaeffer's concept of the acousmatic was built on the assumption that where sight is involved, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to experience sounds while abstracting from their causal origin. When we witness a musical performance, experiencing musical sounds as humanly produced seems inescapable. We see, as a direct causal process, how the music is energized by the actions of performers.

The visual aspect of performance creates tension, as when we

see the percussionist raise the hammer to beat the drum or a pianist perform a daring leap. The gyrations of the conductor and pianist are vital to the audience's comprehension, and an accent accompanied by an outflung arm seems to become more intense. Many of these effects arise through music's primitive connection with bodily gesture, and especially dance.<sup>27</sup> But electronic music creates its own kind of tension, since listeners cannot prepare themselves mentally for the sounds that will occur. What is seen – or not seen – affects what is heard.

All of the preceding objections to the acousmatic thesis arise from the fundamental fact that music is an art of performance. We do not attend musical events simply for the auditory realism or perfection unattainable through recordings; rather, we want to see as well as hear the creation of musical sounds.<sup>28</sup> So the acousmatic thesis seems obviously false. This reaction is premature, however. There is a further defence of the thesis, one which involves a broadening of the concept of the acousmatic. Consider again the timbral objection. According to this further defence, in listening to a piano concerto one abstracts from the particular but not the general cause – one experiences the sounds as those of a piano, but not necessarily of *that* piano, the particular instrument causing the sound. To experience the sounds as those of a particular instrument is to adopt the attitude of a piano-tuner, piano salesperson, piano-maker or pianist in professional mode, looking for the best instrument to use – an aesthetic concern, certainly, but only indirectly an aesthetic concern with the improvisation or work being performed. (In the case of the salesperson, aesthetic judgement is totally at the service of getting information about the quality and market value of the piano.) Acousmatic experience can be disrupted by such experience of the particular cause – thus we say that an out-of-tune piano spoils one's pleasure in the music. The fundamental aesthetic concern with a particular piano is that it allows the performer to make good music.

The result of this line of argument is a *qualified acousmatic thesis*: to hear sounds as music is to abstract from their particular cause but not necessarily from their general cause. As it stands, however, this qualification is not sufficient. The experience of a general cause – 'piano' but not 'that piano' – can occur with improvised music as well as composition; but in instrumental and especially vocal improvised music, the particular and not the

general cause seems essential to musical experience. When I am listening to the singing of Billie Holiday, Mose Allison or Bob Dylan, it is part of my musical experience and enjoyment that I do not abstract from the particular cause and do not abstract from its production by a particular individual. I do not, for instance, experience the sounds as just having some generic cause, for instance, 'African-American jazz singer'. It may well be that particular features of vocal sound emphasize the non-acousmatic.<sup>29</sup>

There is a further development of the acousmatic thesis which, though elusive, offers a response even to this seemingly decisive objection. It is based on the claim of a necessary metaphorical perception of music – which in one form is central to Scruton's treatment – and argues that the perception of 'piano' is metaphorical not literal and that the content of perception is culturally mediated. This consideration applies to experience of general and particular causes alike. A vivid example is the experience of piano sound. Keyboard music of the Classical and Romantic eras – from Haydn up to Bartók in fact – which has so shaped our perception of the piano, is so concerned with the projection of a legato sound that it makes us forget that true legato is impossible on the instrument. It is possible with strings, brass and woodwind, where the envelope of sound is extinguished as the player moves from one note to the next, without overlap and, if they wish, without any gap.

Listeners ignore the decay of the piano's sound and accept the aspiration to a perfect legato as real. The gestures of the pianist help to sustain this illusion – and so the visual experience of an illusory cause supports rather than opposes the acousmatic thesis. Charles Rosen comments that

we hear the sounds in a Beethoven piano sonata as if they were sustained by string instruments or voices ... More than any other composer before him, Beethoven understood the pathos of the gap between idea and realization, and the sense of strain put on the listener's imagination is essential here.

A piano of Beethoven's time is ideal because of its greater inadequacy for conveying such an effect, he continues, but adds wryly that the modern piano is sufficiently inadequate to convey Beethoven's intentions.<sup>30</sup> The sound of the piano is perceived metaphorically, as akin to a legato string sound, even though, on

reflection, listeners recognize that the instrument cannot really produce this sound. The phenomenon is one of the profound mysteries of Western art music.

Another illustration of metaphorical perception which, strictly speaking, does not involve illusion, is the experience of declamatory French horns, for instance in a Bruckner symphony. Here one immediately perceives a horn-call, with its connotations of hunting and the chase; the sounds are heard as organized into a distinctive musical phrase, with conventional or cultural connotations. Yet, of course, this is not literally a horn-call, but a cultural construct whose effect partly derives from the historical practice of horn-calls. Even sounds which appear to call particular attention to their causes, such as 'dirty' sounds – the bottle-slide technique of the blues guitarist or the growling or squeaking noises produced by a free jazz saxophonist – are objects of metaphorical perception. Dirty sounds tend to be stylized imitations of the human voice by an instrumentalist. It is perhaps no coincidence that Western art music, with its profound structural concerns, has a preference for pure over dirty sounds – hence the subversive impact of John Cage's prepared piano sounds.<sup>31</sup> But still, to say that dirty sounds are stylized is to regard them as possessing a cultural overlay – to regard them as objects of a metaphorical perception.

#### THE TWOFOLD THESIS

The preceding responses, I believe, are not sufficient to save the acousmatic thesis. There is a literal as well as metaphorical dimension to musical experience; but since the claim of necessary metaphorical perception does not strictly imply that all aspects of musical perception are metaphorical, the latter thesis is both weaker and more plausible than the acousmatic thesis. (Though it is questioned in connection with rhythmic movement in Chapter 5.) The acousmatic thesis is too prescriptive about what musical experience involves. Part of the pleasure in listening to music is a sensuous pleasure in sounds, which may not involve acousmatic experience. And there is a further issue. Attempts to broaden the acousmatic – such as the qualified acousmatic thesis described earlier, which admitted experience of causes in a general sense – may succeed simply in equating 'acousmatic' with 'aesthetic' (as

relating to sound). On this view, musical experience is not experience of sound divorced from its cause; rather, it is experience which involves an aesthetic attitude towards its cause. A Kantian conception of the aesthetic holds that aesthetic experience of sounds divorces them from their original context and does not treat them as providing information. If the acousmatic is interpreted as 'not involving an interest in information about the cause of the sound', it simply becomes the Kantian aesthetic as applied to sound. This is a definition towards which Scruton himself sometimes inclines.<sup>32</sup> But although it may well be that the genuinely musical experience is essentially aesthetic, the upshot is that the acousmatic ceases to be distinctive.<sup>33</sup>

In place of the acousmatic thesis, I propose a *twofold thesis*, which says that listening to music involves both non-acousmatic and acousmatic experience and that both are genuinely musical aspects. (In the case of singing which involves a text, the experience becomes threefold; one can listen non-acousmatically to the voice, attend to its musicality acousmatically, or focus on the meaning of the words.) This thesis is implicit in the work of various writers. For instance, William E. Thomson comments that

Tone differs from noise mainly in that it possesses features that enable it to be regarded as autonomous. Noises are most readily identified, not by their character but by their sources; e.g., the noise of the dripping faucet, the grating chalk, or the squeaking gate. Although tones too are commonly linked with their sources (violin tone, flute tone, etc.), they more readily achieve autonomy because they possess controlled pitch, loudness, timbre, and duration, attributes that make them amenable to musical organization.<sup>34</sup>

And composer Jonathan Harvey writes: 'One is constantly alternating as a listener between delight in the sound and delight in the structure, depending on the composer's emphasis (and the player's)'.<sup>35</sup> Even those sympathetic to Pierre Schaeffer have recognized that musical experience is twofold in this sense. In his investigation of *musique concrète*, Luke Windsor holds that 'for the listener at least, attempts to break through the acousmatic "screen" in order to ascribe causation to sounds are an important facet of musical interpretation'.<sup>36</sup>

The analogy with Richard Wollheim's twofold thesis of 'seeing-in', concerning the experience of pictorial representation, is deliberate. Wollheim's claim is that one experiences a picture non-representationally and atomistically, as a set of marks on a surface, and also representationally. For Wollheim,

seeing-in permits unlimited simultaneous attention to what is seen and to the features of the medium ... if I look at a representation as a representation, then it is not just permitted to, but required of, me that I attend simultaneously to [pictured] object and medium ... though of course [my attention] need not be equally distributed between them'.<sup>37</sup>

The analogy with musical experience is that just as looking at a painting involves experiencing or being involved in both the represented scene (the Nativity or the peasant's boots) and the means of representation (paint-marks on canvas), so listening to a piece of music involves experiencing the sound as part of a musical world of tones and as having physical properties and origin. This twofoldness may reflect the contrast between atomistic and holistic experience – the acousmatic is holistic experience of musical structure, while the non-acousmatic is atomistic experience of individual, merely causally related and meaningless sounds.

Now as noted earlier, the question is not whether ordinary listening involves attention to both cause or medium and tonal aspects, but, rather, whether each is a fully musical aspect of musical experience. My objection is not that Scruton rejects twofoldness, but that he wrongly denies the genuinely musical status of the non-acousmatic aspect. He does indeed seem to hold with Wollheim that there is a single act of attention. Thus, while Wollheim argues that I must be able to see the cornfield in the picture in the same act of attention that reveals to me that it was produced by means of a palette knife working on chrome yellow paste, Scruton argues that I must be able to hear the phrase that opens the second movement of Brahms' Symphony No. 4 as a melodic unity, at the same time as hearing that it is sounded on the horns. According to this concept of 'double intentionality', acousmatic experience is available in one and the same act of attention that embraces the real-life causality of the musical medium; we focus on something real while attending to something that is imagined in and through it.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps Scruton is right to suggest that one should not or cannot pick out aspects like spatial properties and timbre and treat them as non-acousmatic, as if they could be the object of a distinct act of attention. The issue is not clear. However, double intentionality does not, as he seems to assume, offer a kind of proof of the acousmatic thesis, for the reason that, as I have been arguing, 'real-life causality' is a genuinely musical part of musical experience. For 'genuinely musical' here, one could substitute 'genuinely aesthetic'. The genuinely musical is not entirely imagined, entirely the product of metaphorical perception or essentially acousmatic. Nonetheless, it seems to be a consequence of the nature of sound that mediation through the concept of causality has a particular significance in musical experience that it does not have in arts such as painting and literature.

It is undoubtedly the case, however, that a more developed musical understanding tends towards the acousmatic. We say that the playing of a novice musician is beginning to make musical sense, that it is becoming less mechanical – we can experience it more acousmatically, though the mechanics of sound-production may later be exploited intentionally, as effects. (For instance, contemporary avant-gardist Helmut Lachenmann's extended instrumental techniques draw attention to the means of their production – one of his primary reasons for exploiting them.<sup>39</sup>) Likewise, a novice's appreciation of music is less acousmatic than a more developed understanding. The novice in a particular genre – Western listeners confronted with Tibetan throat-singing, for instance – will want to know how the sounds are produced. If someone cannot recognize what is the instrument being played, to that extent their musical experience is impoverished, even though they may be able to give a quite detailed description of the kind of sound – reedy, nasal or whatever. However, one might still appreciate the music without knowing the kind of instrument that is producing it.

#### A HUMANISTIC CONCEPTION OF MUSIC VERSUS MORE ABSTRACT CONCEPTIONS

In his persuasive account of music as the object of metaphorical perception, Scruton assumes what I have been calling a humanistic conception, stressing the origins of music in dance, ritual and

gesture, and its connection with human life and activity. Here I will try to develop what I mean by a humanistic account, contrasting it with more abstract conceptions. *Philosophical humanism* certainly has a meaning in other areas of philosophy. In philosophy of mind, as I understand it, it involves the rejection of materialist standpoints and asserts the personal as opposed to subpersonal or neuro-physiological nature of psychological ascription. Thus humanism counters dominant trends in this area of philosophy arising from physicalist or mind-brain identity theories and from cognitive science.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps a humanistic standpoint in aesthetics is harder to distinguish, since this area of philosophy is difficult to conceive non-humanistically. But even here some writers have tried to do so, and the cliché that music is the most abstract of the arts suggests an *anti-humanistic conception*. The cliché is pervasive, yet it is never really argued for convincingly – like formalism, as we saw in the previous chapter, to which it is related. Arising from many different directions, it amounts to a slogan more than a philosophical standpoint.

'Abstraction' proves an elusive target, in part because the opposition between abstract and humanly concrete is dialectical in Adorno's sense. That is, it belongs with those debates in aesthetics and philosophy where, as we will see in Chapter 6, standpoints that are apparently opposed turn out to be interpenetrating. That is, the opposites are not diametrical but overlapping. Thus, what at first sight appears abstract in fact has concrete, sensuous or meaningful elements. The autonomy of musical sound from its causes, which tends to separate music from the world, is one of several reasons why music is held to be the most abstract of the arts. But although Scruton's humanistic conception appears to be in tension with his advocacy of the acousmatic thesis, the concept of musical form that arises from the acousmatic does not need to be abstract.

Consider the totally synthesized electronic music which constitutes the limiting case of acousmatic abstraction considered in this chapter. While *musique concrète* drew music and life together by using everyday sounds as its material, Stockhausen's early studies were constructed from sine-tones and so were totally abstract – though as we saw, he later used non-synthesized sound-sources. However, even electro-acoustic composers apparently most committed to abstraction have adopted a humanistic standpoint and questioned whether such abstraction is possible

or desirable. Jonathan Harvey, for instance, observes that sounds in electronic music often have only vestigial traces of human instrumental performance – no one can be envisaged blowing, hitting or scraping anything. However, he maintains that this process of abstraction has necessary limits. Citing music's relation to rhythms of heartbeat and breathing and to our sense of gesticulating, walking, running and dancing, he declares it 'onomatopoeic through and through'.<sup>41</sup> It follows that acousmatic listening, which abstracts from causes, constitutes an idealized approach even to electroacoustic music. Music's autonomy from its causes is an incomplete one.

The acousmatic is not the only dimension of musical abstraction. Abstraction dates back to the ancient Pythagorean concept of music as number discussed in Chapter 1. But the most important impetus towards an abstract conception of music is the rise of the work-concept in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the resulting assumption that the musical artwork resides in the score. Brahms' fairly innocuous comment, 'No one can do [Mozart's] *Don Giovanni* right for me. I enjoy it much better from the score', is taken to extremes by musical Platonism, according to which performance becomes secondary or even inessential.<sup>42</sup> The musical work is regarded as an eternal structure whose expression in sound is inessential. Glenn Gould, in his words if not the recorded performances he continued to make, advocated this metaphysical position. Platonism is an extreme expression of what I term the *aesthetics of perfection*, which emphasizes the timelessness of the work and the authority of the composer. In Chapter 7, this standpoint is contrasted with a humanistic *aesthetics of imperfection*, which values the event or process of performance, especially when this involves spontaneity and improvisation – though, again, these opposites turn out to be dialectically interpenetrating.

Modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg was an aesthetic perfectionist in this sense. He objected to the expression of the performer's personality when this obscured the truth of the work. This attitude had more justification in his time, which suffered from such Romantic excesses as Bach with huge string sections. But imperfectionists are right to reject Schoenberg's idea of performers as anonymous interpreters of a sacrosanct text – mere reproducers rather than interpreters, with no individual viewpoint. A distinct complaint about Schoenberg's music is one that also

arises from his attitude to the score – that it gives rise to the phenomenon of ‘eye music’, where structural determinants of form can be experienced only on the page, and not in performance. Schoenbergian serialism, especially in its extreme post-Second World War manifestation of total or integral serialism, is the paradigm of ‘eye music’. The tone-row and its manipulation, and in total serialism the rows governing other parameters such as rhythm and timbre, is legible in the score but not audible in performance. To refer to a piece as ‘eye music’ is rightly taken to be a damaging artistic criticism, and it is a consequence of privileging the score above performance.

The post-eighteenth-century reification of the score suggests that the idea of music as the most abstract of the arts largely dates from that era. This historical claim is also supported by music’s adherence before that time to a language model, which is non-abstract. The contrasting model of music as non-representational and without semantic content – language-like in having a syntax, yet apparently not saying anything – is also a powerful motive for an abstract conception. The concept of abstract painting, which arose with modernism, and which was realized most purely after the Second World War in Abstract Expressionism, is the clearest common use of abstraction in this sense – ‘non-depicting’ and perhaps ‘non-representational’. Such art, to reiterate, took autonomous or absolute music as its model.

Adorno’s assertion that musical material is historical – and so non-abstract – is considered in Chapter 6. Although his claim seems to undermine the idea of absolute music, in fact Adorno is an heir to its tradition – as also, in its unassuming way, is this book. In questioning the assumption that music is an abstract art, the essential role of form must still be acknowledged. It could be said that music is *abstract in form, but humane in utterance* – and utterance is essential. Bach’s music is often regarded as the most abstract sound structure, but it had meanings in its time and is realized through performance interpretation. Indeed, although form reaches its high points of complexity in the classics of Western art music, all music has a form. Again, the issue turns out to involve a nest of interpenetrating dialectical oppositions. Musical modernism, in reacting against programme music, conceives structure or form through the post-Romantic metaphor of organic unity. This is a biological and not an abstract conceit;

form is regarded as a living thing. Therefore something that at first seemed abstract in fact turns out to be concrete and humanistic. There is an echo here of the conclusion of Chapter 3, that there never really have been any true formalists – Hanslick is regarded as favouring an abstract conception, yet he defines music as sound in motion or tonally moving forms. His position also ties music to human life and gesture, therefore.

The peculiar language-like character of music is captured in Jules Combarieu’s attractive formulation quoted earlier that musical composition and improvisation consist in ‘thinking with sounds, as a writer thinks with words’.<sup>43</sup> As Hanslick rightly insisted, the idea externalized by the composer in music is ‘a tonal idea, not a conceptual idea which has been translated into tones’.<sup>44</sup> (There are ‘conceptual composers’ like Cage and Wolff whose works perhaps form an exception.) The idea of music as ‘thinking in sound’ gives no support to an abstract conception – it is a form that thinking takes, not an abstract pattern of sounds caused by thought. When it transcends the most commodified genres, music is able to synthesize the sensuous and intellectual in a uniquely intense and compelling way. It then embodies what Julian Johnson refers to as ‘the basic categories of thought: the differentiation of its materials and their discursive development within a logical sequence. It presents specifically musical ideas through specifically musical forms, elaborated in a way that engages us intellectually, emotionally and spiritually’.<sup>45</sup> Music displays a cognitive and a bodily dimension, reflecting the nature of the aesthetic itself in its synthesis of thought and experience.

The most fundamental reasons for rejecting the claim of musical abstraction lie in the facts of sound-production and performance – we hear in and through musical sounds the actions that go into their making. As Stephen Davies argues, musical instruments are not a dispensable means of making the right-sounding noises – the idea of music as the auditory bodying forth of human action is deeply ingrained. The voice, and other instruments held intimately against the body, mean that embodiment melds indissolubly with the music that is sounded: ‘[this] in its turn implicates the human body and organic processes through the ebb and flow of its pulse and rhythm, of its gestures and sighs, of its tensions and resolutions’.<sup>46</sup> Such considerations are elusive, and discussion of rhythm makes them clearer. This is the topic of

the next chapter, and it provides further evidence of the interfusion of music and human life, and thus for the humanistic standpoint. Discussion of these issues also casts further doubt on how 'metaphorical' the experience of music has to be.

## NOTES

- 1 Watson (1991), p. 331.
- 2 Scruton (1997), pp. 2–3.
- 3 Scruton (1997), p. 221. In fact, Scruton sometimes speaks of the acousmatic thesis as ideal rather than actual: 'in day-to-day matters, we leap rapidly in thought from the sound to its cause, and speak quite accurately of hearing the car, just as we speak of seeing it. But the phenomenal distinctness of sounds makes it possible to imagine a situation in which a sound is separated entirely from its cause, and heard acousmatically, as a pure process' ((1997), pp. 11–12).
- 4 Zuckerkandl (1969), p. 273.
- 5 Lippman (1977), pp. 46–7, 50.
- 6 The acousmatic thesis does not yield a criterion that separates music from speech; it seems equally plausible to claim that to experience sounds as meaningful speech involves divorcing them from the source of their production.
- 7 Scruton (1997), p. 35.
- 8 Scruton (1997), p. 92. These claims concerning rhythm are discussed in Chapter 5.
- 9 See for instance Wishart (1986), p. 45.
- 10 On the history of electronic music, see Holmes (2003).
- 11 Diffusion of a stereo source over a multi-channel loudspeaker system is the norm in *musique concrète* and implies live control during performance, and interaction with the performance space. In the electronic-music tradition, in contrast, each channel on the tape is mapped onto a single loudspeaker, implying an attempt to replicate the composer's conceived space within the performance space – intervention in performance is concerned solely with balance, not with exploiting the individuality of the space. See Harrison (1999).
- 12 Schaeffer (1966), p. 91, my translation.
- 13 According to Dhomont (accessed 2002), the term 'acousmatic music' was introduced by *musique concrète* composer François Bayle in 1974.
- 14 Quoted Palombini (accessed 2004).
- 15 Schaeffer (1966), pp. 93, 97, translation by Abigail Heathcote.
- 16 He writes: 'the repetition of the physical signal, which recording makes

possible ... by exhausting this curiosity ... gradually brings the sonorous object to the fore, [and] progressively reveals to us the richness of this perception' (quoted in Cox and Warner (2004), p. 78).

- 17 Chion (1994), p. 32.
- 18 Dack, for instance, writes that '[the] acousmatic situation must be extended to all those listening environments in which sounds are heard without any visual confirmation of their sources'; Michel Chion quotes Schaeffer's definition of acousmatic sound as 'sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause', adding '[The opposite of] visualised sound ... The acousmatic truly allows sound to reveal itself in all its dimensions' (Dack (1994), p. 5; Chion (1994), pp. 71–2, 32; Schaeffer (1966), pp. 91–9).
- 19 Scruton (1997), p. 221.
- 20 Windsor (2000), p. 9.
- 21 The term 'literal' is used by electronic composer Trevor Wishart (1996). Schaeffer writes that 'acoustic and acousmatic are not opposed like objective and subjective', suggesting that he does not want to equate the acoustic and the non-acousmatic; but the issue is not clear ((1966), p. 92).
- 22 As discussed in Lippman, 'Spatial Perception and Physical Location as Factors in Music', in his *The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Music* (1999), pp. 26–39.
- 23 The important suggestion that non-acousmatic experience is essentially multi-modal – that it involves senses other than hearing – is discussed in Hamilton (forthcoming 2007a).
- 24 Scruton (forthcoming 2007a).
- 25 A fuller discussion of the timbral objection is found in Hamilton (forthcoming 2007a).
- 26 Stockhausen (1989), pp. 101–3.
- 27 A claim defended for instance by Lippman (1977), Chapter 7, and Nettle (2001).
- 28 It is notable that Walton (1988) omits the dimension of performance from the non-abstract features of music, when surely it is of the first importance.
- 29 Lippman argues that 'the solo voice has a pronounced externality [non-acousmatic nature] ... an individual singer remains an object that insists on an external status' ((1977), p. 70).
- 30 Rosen (1999), pp. 2–3.
- 31 As Jonathan Harvey put it, 'A smooth unchanging stream of neutral timbre invites attention mainly onto metaphysical events' (e-mail communication with author – and see below, Note 35).
- 32 For instance, in the passage quoted earlier: 'The person who listens to sounds, and hears them as music, is not seeking in them for

- information about their cause, or for clues as to what is happening' (Scruton (1997), p. 221).
- 33 Hamilton (forthcoming, 2007a).
- 34 Thomson (accessed 2004).
- 35 Harvey adds: 'A lot depends on changes in articulation. If Beethoven was the first for our ears to emphasise violent changes of playing articulation, he is also the most obvious start in history to "listening to sound". A smooth unchanging stream of neutral timbre invites attention mainly onto metaphysical events' (e-mail communication with author).
- 36 Windsor (2000), p. 9.
- 37 Wollheim (1980), p. 213.
- 38 Scruton argued this in discussion.
- 39 Lachenmann, through his concept of *musique concrète instrumentale*, explores new possibilities of sound production using traditional instruments. The singing instrumental tone, which he regards as 'domesticated by tradition', is replaced by 'the detritus of sonic phenomena', with a preponderance of toneless sounds, mostly breathing, from wind instruments, and brutal grinding and scraping of the strings. (See Heathcote (2004).)
- 40 Humanism in the philosophy of mind is defended in Hamilton (forthcoming).
- 41 Harvey (1999), pp. 57, 62, and Harvey (forthcoming). Denis Smalley writes that 'we detect the humanity behind [abstract musical structures] by deducing gestural activity' – presumably, gestures associated with the production of sounds: 'Music is always related in some way to human experience' (Smalley (1986), p. 64).
- 42 Quoted in Swafford (1998), p. 570.
- 43 Jules Combarieu, quoted in Dahlhaus (1989), p. 3.
- 44 Hanslick (1986), p. 32.
- 45 The idea is developed in Julian Johnson (2002), especially pp. 61–2.
- 46 Davies (forthcoming 2007), and (2003), p. 114. See also Levinson (2002).

IN: AESTHETICS AND MUSIC