Mediating from within: metaxical amplification as an alternative sonic environment for classical music performance
Amaral, H.

Citation
Amaral, H. (2022, November 17). *Mediating from within: metaxical amplification as an alternative sonic environment for classical music performance*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3486333

III – Multiphonic Attention

> Things and thoughts advance or grow out from the milieu, and that's where you have to get
> to work, that's where everything unfolds.
> (Gilles Deleuze)

This chapter outlines the notion of multiphony which surfaces from the perspective of metaxical amplification. I understand multiphony in the context of this research project in a broad sense, covering a wide acoustic spectrum, containing sounds belonging to the musical work as well as sounds external to the work. As such, it throws open wider opportunities to attend to sound. Investigating these opportunities, I discuss how they affect the roles and relationships of performer and listener as they become entangled with broader theoretical considerations on listening and attention.

As I discussed in the Introduction, classical musicians and listeners have, either knowingly or unknowingly, participated over a long period of time in a shift in habitus conditioning them to pay attention to music in a focused way, with no ears for sounds other than those belonging to the musical work. This process is reflected in the establishment of performance environments that are still dominant today. Of concern to me is how to break from a sedimented mould which prevents individuals from engaging with sound in new ways. As media theorist Yves Citton (2018) suggests, it is probably impossible to restructure a sedimented mode of listening and attention if one remains within the same performance environments. Instead, it is either necessary to relocate music to less conventional spaces or to reconfigure the environments in which one usually encounters it. In my grounded performances, using metaxical amplification, I have sought to do the latter. My strategy, as described in the previous chapter, has been to juxtapose two sonic universes. On the one hand, classical music, which musicians and concert habitués are trained to attend with great focus and with certain expectations regarding timbre, pitches, rhythmical structures, form and its unfolding in time. On the other hand, the emergent amplified sounds, whose temporal unfolding and acoustic characteristics – although associated with specific events (a car passing, the honking of a siren, the breathing of the performer, the action of the piano) – are, at the outset of the performance, largely undetermined and unpredictable. These different sonic universes mobilise different modes of listening, hence different ways of engaging with sounds. Therefore, when they are juxtaposed a multiphonic situation is established in which one must juggle between these different modes of engagement. This offers an opportunity to rethink and reconfigure attention. What happens in the open moments in which a transition takes place between these different modes? What reinventions and which transformations occur in these spaces?

Grounded performances as multiphonic assemblages

When I began to analyse *Interferences* and *touchez des yeux*, the notion that best resonated with my artistic exploration was 'polyphonic assemblages' as theorised by

anthropologist Anna Tsing. Inspired by music and the philosophical thoughts of John Cage, Tsing (2015, 24) uses the notion to explain how heterogeneous elements such as humans, landscapes, objects, sounds or animals work together to 'make life':

> For those not musically inclined, it may be useful to imagine the polyphonic assemblage in relation to agriculture. Since the time of the plantation, commercial agriculture has aimed to segregate a single crop and work toward its simultaneous ripening for a coordinated harvest. But other kinds of farming have multiple rhythms. In the shifting cultivation I studied in Indonesian Borneo, many crops grew together in the same field, and they had quite different schedules. Rice, bananas, taro, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, palms, and fruit trees mingled; farmers needed to attend to the varied schedules of maturation of each of these crops. These rhythms were their relation to human harvests; if we add other relations, for example, to pollinators or other plants, rhythms multiply. The polyphonic assemblage is the gathering of these rhythms, as they result from world-making projects, human and not human.

For Tsing, the issue is how to consider assemblages as open-ended gatherings. Commonly, the heterogenous elements that compose an assemblage are viewed under a common purpose or denominator. However, to reduce an assemblage in such a manner – for instance to reduce farming to its output, as is usual in commercial farming and in a capitalist paradigm centred on productivity – is to overlook the myriad relations and potential outcomes unfolding within a plantation field and amongst the elements that compose it, such as its different crops, other plants, insects, the weather, the farmers, etc. Instead, an awareness is needed that relations can generate other purposes and possibilities, breaking beyond the logic of a closed system. To try to capture this potential, Tsing proposes to look at assemblages 'polyphonically'. As in polyphonic music, which Tsing (2015, 23) defines as 'music in which autonomous melodies intertwine', the movements of the different elements that compose an assemblage are not subordinated to a melody or a dominant voice or purpose that determines and conditions these movements. On the contrary, they establish their own direction, crossing each other sporadically in moments of consonance or dissonance, and generating a variety of rhythmical patterns that cannot necessarily be apprehended through a stable pulse. In this kind of music, attention is turned simultaneously to two or more stimuli (voices), and the information coming from these different voices is processed in parallel. As Arrau (in Horowitz 2011 [1983], 103) used to say about fugue playing, it is 'necessary [for the pianist] to follow every voice with the ear'.

Tsing's polyphonic approach has intrigued me. Applied to my metaxically amplified performances, it seemed to invite a form of openness and a listening attitude that would cover a sonic landscape broader than that of the musical work, and which was not solely oriented towards the work, although elements in these grounded performances – for instance the presence of a pianist who sets the performance in motion or the fact that the performances were announced as performances of specific works – still suggest a certain aesthetic framing. However, the idea was that their outcome would be defined on the

spot through the unforeseen interactions between their agents.[41] To put it more simply, the general intention when conceiving grounded performances was to create a situation that 'lets things happen', independently of whether the effects would be positive, negative, pacifying or productive. In terms of aesthetic framing, there are in fact similarities between grounded performances and Cage's *4'33*. The piece frames the 'performance' of ambient sounds by providing a setting and a duration, but it neither defines what these sounds will be nor what they will do. In grounded performances, the musical work provides a similar frame for listening to the environment as represented by the emergent sounds. The difference between my grounded performances and Cage's *4'33*, however, is that in the latter, the performer does not interact with the emergent sounds, while I, despite having practiced the Schubert sonata and the Brahms study 'by the book' before the performances, was ready to deviate from the score if the occasion presented itself; or, to put it in more subjective terms, if the circumstances were right and I felt like it.

It was in this quest for open-endedness that I connected with the 'polyphonic' world of Tsing. Nevertheless, considering polyphony from the perspective of a classical musician, I am aware that behind the seemingly independent voices of polyphonic genres like fugues, lie complex compositional rules. There is also a dominant tonality to which the voices are subjected. And because of this, fugal polyphony as a qualifier is perhaps not best suited to open-ended gatherings if one would like to consider the different elements as agents in their own right, and not as an instrument working towards a finite purpose. For these reasons, 'multiphony' may seem a more appropriate term.

---

[41] How to announce and frame the performances was a complicated topic. *touchez* was performed in the context of a festival dedicated to presenting the music of Franz Schubert and was announced as an expo-performance and an artistic research project on his *Sonata in B-flat major D.960*. The format of the performance was left vague in order to accommodate the photo exhibition by Karen Stuke, but also to suggest that the performance would offer unexpected perspectives on the well-known piece. Yet, it was difficult to determine opening times. I had conceived the performance as a situation in which the audience could go in and out between the different concerts of the festival. But since it was decided that *touchez* would be the beginning of each evening, it was necessary to set a start time and a duration (1hour), recommending that visitors should spend at least twenty minutes in the space. The result of these instructions was that visitors came either early and then sat in the performance for a whole hour, or else they arrived just before the next concert. So there was a large flux of movement at the very beginning, and then again at the very end but almost none in-between. This became a problem as I explained in the second chapter, since the performance depended on the audience leaving and entering. In *Interferences*, I used a different strategy by announcing the performance as a performance of the Brahms study. While I had initially not wanted to do so – I was afraid that the performance would be perceived as a direct 'attack' on the traditional performance conventions instead of a proposal to start a new musical conversation – it ended up being more interesting. The expectations that it created brought along a certain friction: expecting to listen to a conventional version of the study made the audience more likely to experience the emergent sounds as disturbances. This had not been the case in *touchez*, where the lack of concrete expectations partly neutralised the disruptive effect of the emergent sounds. Against a background of concrete expectations, the contrast between the different types of sounds was more pronounced and the tension greater in *Interferences*. As I will show in this chapter, this activated listening and attention more productively.

Redefining attention

To consider an assemblage and associated forms of listening as multiphonic is to account for the messiness that invariably transpires in open-ended environments. In these environments, attention is spread amongst heterogeneous events, which are left relatively free to unfold at their own pace and according to their own logic. Using a concept emerging from poststructuralist thinking, one can say that attention is decentred. Decentring avoids the privileging of some voices over others. The concept was used by Jacques Derrida (1967, 280) to problematise authority and the notion of a foundational text or prime source of texts (a 'transcendental signified'), but it has since been adopted in other disciplines such as postcolonial studies and museology. In their effort to deconstruct the canon or canonised collection displays in various ways, contemporary museums seek for instance to include in their collection works by artists held on the side-lines of history, or to replace shows traditionally themed along the 'great lines' of (art) history with exhibitions highlighting alternative historical narratives, such as *The Poetics of Democracy*, a recent exhibition of the Reina Sofia Museum about artistic expressions neglected during the dictatorship in Spain (Bishop 2013).[42]

In music, this approach has become known through the works of composer and theatre director Heiner Goebbels, which are characterised by the absence of the expected, including traditionally central performance elements such as text, plot or dramatic protagonists. Although Goebbels (2010, n.p.) speaks of an 'aesthetics of absence', central elements do not actually disappear in his work, but are instead just treated differently. What he does is using elements such as light, music, bodies or space as independent agents. In *Stifters Dinge* (2007), for instance, many pianos piled together at the back of the room create their own music in ways only indirectly related to the texts and music heard through the loudspeakers. In the staged concert *Eislermaterial* (1998), the centre of the stage is empty, creating a counterpoint to the complex musical actions undertaken by the musicians seated on the side. This avoidance of a centralised focus on a protagonist, a main theme, or a text has a de-hierarchising function. If a text is no longer treated as central, part of its 'authority' is transferred to other theatrical elements, resulting in what Goebbels calls a 'division of presence' between these elements. In short, instead of serving as media or support for the music-theatrical text as they do in conventional music theatre, elements such as light, bodies or space acquire agency on their own and take centre stage. While they were formerly strategically arranged to *converge* towards a common goal, these elements now *interact* without a common goal, or rather, towards a multiplicity of goals. For Goebbels, decentring

---

[42] Lately, in the effort to include more voices of those minorised for their ethnicity, class, gender or sexual orientation, decentring as a curatorial strategy has become crucial. I have recently been part of an extensive research programme on music curatorship by the German Federal Cultural Foundation which dealt with the issue of decolonisation in the contemporary music scene, at the level of artists represented in concerts but also attending to the presence of segregated minorities in areas such as production, management, artistic direction or criticism. Results of the project are published in Freydank and Rebhahn (2019) and Curating Contemporary Music (2020). See also Born (2017) and GRiNM x OnCurating (2020).

represents an opportunity to notice and create interest in things that were until then ignored. At the same time, it gives a larger scope for co-composition by the audience, who can fill in the blank spaces between the independent voices with imaginary relations. Additionally, it causes a tension connected to the desire for the thing that is absent or no longer central. Goebbels's works often exploit the audience's desire for the 'missing thing' by momentarily showing or evoking it obliquely. This is what I referred to in Chapter Two when speaking about the tension created by the constant disappearance of the actor's body in *ou bien le débarquement désastreux…*.

As previously suggested, a similar form of desire can be associated with grounded performances, generated by the quest to follow the progression of the musical work. The experience of the listener in *Interferences*, as became apparent from conversations with audience members and from my own participation as a listener, was initially one of tension, created through the juxtaposition of Brahms's study and the emergent sounds that did not formally belong to the work. This juxtaposition provoked a constant oscillation between different modalities of attention. There was, at first, an overwhelming desire to listen to the musical work in the traditional and structural sense. As I explained in Chapter One, when one listens to a musical work, moments of synthesis are required to be able to consider it as a piece of music and to grasp musical time. Synthesis enables the perception of single notes as indecomposable melodies, motives or harmonic progressions, where each note, chord, and beat only makes sense if experienced in relation to the ones that come before and after. If we just listen to the notes, we would no longer hear a melody, but rather a series of disconnected sounds. This requires a form of concentration that leaves one only halfway in the present, while also oscillating between anticipating and remembering what one has heard. However, in *Interferences* and *touchez*, other stimuli claimed one's attention, interrupting structural hearing and precluding the synthetic experience. These stimuli were not always related to each other, nor did they have an intended meaning. They were just sounds, best experienced phenomenologically as sonic events with their own acoustic characteristics beyond some origin or signification. The attention, therefore, fluctuated between following melodies and harmonic progressions, letting oneself indulge in these emergent sounds, and forming new musical constellations by connecting environmental noises to the musical sounds. One could say that this fluctuation between different listening modes – structural, phenomenological, associative – could happen in relation to any music. Here, however, it is emphasised by the instability generated by sonic interruptions. In a performance like *Interferences*, where the musical work consists mainly of one voice, the desire to follow the single line was particularly strong, making the interruptions all the more disturbing. Without the possibility of synthesising what one heard, the experience of listening, became more fragmentary. Listeners could either become confused or find new ways to navigate these discordant sounds.

In grounded performances, attention is decentred due to the ambiguity provoked by media appearing in other ways than expected. The ambiguity is related to the coexistence of the representational universe of the musical work and the more prosaic

or everyday universe of the emergent sounds. Thus, the piano is simultaneously experienced as the source of the musical sounds and as a machine producing noisy sounds like the thud of the pedals and the striking of the hammers. The pianist performs the musical piece but also improvises. Because the transitions between these roles are not always clear, questions come up: when does the composition ends and the improvisation start? When is the sound of the piano part of the performance and when is it only noise? Theatre actors have explored such ambiguities extensively in postdramatic plays such as the Wooster Group's staging of Chekov's *Three Sisters*, *BRACE UP!* (2003). Here, ambiguity comes from the audience not knowing whether the actors are rehearsing or reciting their lines. Indeed, the staging uses the theme of self-deception present in Chekov's drama to problematise this issue more broadly, starting from a deconstruction of the fictive nature of drama itself. There is a constant disruption of the illusory reality of the play when non-fictional elements belonging to the reality of the staging are inserted into the performance, for instance, actors rehearsing or giving instructions to the production crew or other actions normally confined to the 'backstage' of a scenic production. As a result of this oscillation between fiction and reality, the staging holds the audience in a state of unresolved confusion. This perceptual instability is well-expressed by performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008, 99) 'radical concept of presence', which she uses to indicate the disorientation and the self-awareness created when the borders between the real and the fictional, the ordinary and the representational are not clearly demarcated. My own performances thrive in this in-between and the unstable moments during which the listeners, caught between the conflicting energies of the symbolic universe conveyed by the music and the familiar but displaced sounds of steps or passing cars, become intensely engaged in the process of perceiving, questioning, doubting and making sense.

These ambiguities and instabilities ask for a revision of familiar notions of attentive listening. Traditionally, the expected and desired mode of listening to classical music, as described in Chapter One, consists of doing so absorbedly, 'with complete attention to the music' (Weber 1997, 678). Listening in this way is part of the quest to relate to the musical work both in terms of the sensations, feelings or emotions it may evoke, and intellectually, looking for structure and the relationship between its parts. This view of attention is backed up by classical theories and definitions of attention that have prevailed since the 19th century. For instance, renowned psychologist William James (1931 [1890], 403-404), writing in the late 19th century, affirms that,

> Every one knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called distraction, and Zerstreutheit in German.

For James, paying attention is a targeted and purposeful action consisting of 'taking possession' of a particular object, like a hunter catching prey. In other words, the

attentive individual has eyes and ears for the perceived object only and detaches it from its environment so that perception of the object can be digested more clearly. In an analogy with vision, one could say that attention functions like the zoom of a camera or a looking glass with different levels of magnification. The more we magnify the object of our attention, the less we notice that which surrounds it. Also, paying attention is no neutral activity and can, according to James, be done more or less 'effectively', depending on what the individual can infer from the observation of the object.[43]

James's definition of attention, and variations thereof, are still commonplace, despite the 'crisis of attention' that I have described in the Introduction. In sources such as the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2022b), for example, attention is defined as 'a state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain aspects of the environment rather than on others'. Katherine Hayles (2007, 187), studying attention in educational settings in the early 2000s, characterised the type of attention that is aimed for in schools as the ability of 'concentrating on a single object for long periods […], ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged'. And in classical philosophy, attention is viewed as the ability to focus on an object with the goal of gaining a better knowledge of that object, as well as a better knowledge of oneself through this object (Alloa 2010). This feedback loop between the object of attention and the attending subject, whereby learning about the object teaches the subject something about themselves, corresponds to the kind of epistemic transcendence one generally looks for in classical music, where one uses the music to become an improved version of oneself (see Chapter One).

---

[43] I have noticed that the terms attention and listening appear interchangeably in my research notes. In attempting to differentiate them and, especially, through the comparison of English and French sources, I found out that they are etymologically very close. The French word for listening is *écouter*, which shares the root of the English 'to auscultate', which literally means leaning or bending the ear. Attention comes from the Latin 'ad' (to, toward) + 'tendere', meaning stretching to or toward. 'Leaning' or 'bending' the ear alludes to the way we slightly bend our neck when we want to hear, but the actual physical act of listening happens through the stretching of the tympanic membrane. '[T]o listen is to 'tendre l'oreille' – literally, to stretch the ear – an expression that evokes a singular mobility, among the sensory apparatuses, of the pinna of the ear', writes philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2002, 5). For Nancy, the tension of the ear 'stretching' indicates an intention and a curiosity, making me think of certain animals whose ears are literally 'on the lookout'. Following this etymological approximation, listening is a form of attention paid by the ear. Indeed, many sources, including Pierre Schaeffer (2017 [1966], 75-76), conceptualise listening in terms similar to those used by James. Schaeffer affirms that listening is intentional and 'utilitarian'. For him, listening is a means to infer something about a sound that we hear. Therefore, when we 'listen' to sound, we tend to focus on its 'message', on what the sound tells us. An example is the motor of a car: one listens to the noise of the motor not to indulge in its vibration but rather because if it is sounding strange, it might tell us that the engine is about to fail. So, for Schaeffer, listening is always a project and a means: one targets sounds whose meaning one wants to understand and with the purpose of doing so. As a rule, in classical music, the 'project' of the listener is to make sense of a musical work and sounds are attended to as forming part of the work, approached semantically (ibid, 83) and with an ear for the aesthetic appreciation of their artistic content.

Philosopher Emmanuel Alloa (2010, n.p., my translation) is critical of this intentionality because it reduces attention to the analytical realm, ignoring its broader sense of a first contact, or a primary awareness of the world:

> Whatever the angle of view: it is always a logic of the proper that is implicitly called for, as opposed to an attitude of dispersion, distraction and lack of attention. Although this opposition completely misses the modulating dimension of attention - in certain situations such as in analytical treatment for example, the floating attention may be more able to 'grasp' what is at stake -, it only reverses the prejudice of reflexivity which has always conditioned the role of attention in philosophy. From this perspective, attention will only be granted on the condition of leading to a higher awareness of properties, whether in the form of a return to oneself or a grasp of the objects.

With a 'logic of the proper', Alloa is referring to the third phase of what he sees as a tripartite process. When I pay attention, there is, first, a moment of awareness, a vague sensation of presence that will be confirmed in the second phase, when I acknowledge the presence of a specific object. This leads to a third phase in which I recognise this object, attributing properties to it, and searching for similarities and correspondences with what I already know or expect. In a process of qualification, it is inevitable that I can only understand something that is external to me based on what I already know. However, there are degrees of flexibility in how I mobilise this knowledge. When I grasp an object with an intention that is too fixed, I might be preventing other types or areas of knowledge from being activated, and I will therefore create for myself an image of the perceived object that is possibly too limited.

To avoid such limitation, one must remember that attention does not always need to be synonymous with intention. Instead, Alloa reminds us that intention is only a modality of attention among many others, such as the floating attention mentioned in his quote above. For instance, psychanalyst Sigmund Freud was very interested in this form of attention, which he characterised as hovering or suspended (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*) (Freud 1999 [1912], 377-378). In this state of mind, the psychoanalyst listens to the patient without preconceptions and without paying attention 'to any one thing the client says' (APA 2022a), but by remaining open to unexpected connections, associations or emotional reactions of the client as expressed by nuances in the voice, body posture or pauses in their speech. In this form of attention, associations rise involuntarily in the consciousness of the perceiving subject, and refer to past experiences, lessons or knowledge, interweaving subjective experience with objective knowledge, and materialising into new knowledge, insight and ideas (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Like many theatre directors in the postdramatic tradition, Goebbels (2010, n.p.) also counts on this type of attention from his audience. Influenced by Freud, Surrealism and the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, he sees the 'blank spaces' left for the imagination of the audience as conducive to a more poetic logic. This logic resembles dream thoughts, whose essential quality is a non-hierarchy of images, movements and words. Dream thoughts form a texture that resembles collage, montage and fragmentation

rather than a logically structured course of events, constituting therefore a great model for non-hierarchical theatre and musical aesthetics.[44]

Yet, while floating attention considers the object of perception in relation to aspects of the context in which the object becomes manifest, it still does not give a satisfying account of the relationship between object and the environment in which it is perceived, in the sense that the perceiving individual is still positioned outside of the environment in which perception occurs. The environment is treated like a kind of box from which one extracts the objects of one's interest. This seems to me to be an incomplete perspective. We do not live in an environment, we 'are' this environment (Citton 2018, n.p.). Therefore, it is impossible to take oneself (or something) out of an environment, or to make the environment disappear. Stated differently, this distancing from the environment only makes sense from the psychological point of view of an individual who is already conditioned to consider the act of paying attention and their position towards the attended object in a detached way.

Refining these views on attention, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre explains the workings of perception in a more subtle manner. He demonstrated how individuals can become oblivious to their environment without ceasing to exist within it. Sartre (1956, 9-10) thinks of attention in terms of transformation: the environment does not disappear, it is transformed into an object of attention. He gives the example of entering a café to meet his friend Pierre:

> It is certain that the café by itself with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps which fill it – the café is a fullness of being. And all the intuitions of detail which I can have are filled by these odors, these sounds, these colors, all phenomena which have a transphenomenal being. Similarly Pierre's actual presence in a place which I do not know is also a plenitude of being. We seem to have found fullness everywhere. But we must observe that in perception there is always the construction of a figure on a ground. No one object, no group of objects is especially designed to be organized as specifically either ground or figure; all depends on the direction of my attention. When I enter this café to search for Pierre, there is formed a synthetic organization of all the objects in the café, on the ground of which Pierre is given as about to appear. This organization of the café as the ground is an original nihilation. Each element of the setting, a person, a table, a chair, attempts to isolate itself, to lift itself upon the ground constituted by the totality of the other objects, only to fall back once more into the undifferentiation of this ground; it melts into the ground. For the ground is that which is seen only in addition, that which is the object of a purely marginal attention. Thus the original nihilation of all the figures which appear and are swallowed up in the total neutrality of a ground is the necessary condition for the appearance of the principle figure, which is here the person of Pierre.

---

[44] As I will show in the next chapter, the reference layers to a musical work in the performances of MusicExperiment21 are also based on this idea of a hovering attention and on the creation of associations which can ground one's understanding of the work as part of a larger aesthetic-epistemic network, rather than as a defined entity (de Assis 2018, 40).

In this example, Sartre thinks of attention in terms of his 'project', which is to meet his friend Pierre. Entering the café to meet Pierre, Sartre experiences it as 'a fullness of being', as a lively environment composed of objects, people, lights, smells, colour, chatter, and so on. However, since his purpose is to meet Pierre, he is not able to acknowledge this lively environment as such, regardless of whether Pierre is there or not. Why is that so? Sartre's experience is guided by his expectation of meeting Pierre. This expectation becomes the filter through which he experiences his environment. Thus, if meeting Pierre is his project, Sartre will perceive the café in function of Pierre. If Pierre is there, the café becomes a confirmation of Pierre's presence. However, if Pierre is not there, his presence will still be felt in the café; in fact, the entire café will become a confirmation of the absence of Pierre. Therefore, the café and the elements that compose it do not disappear in Sartre's perception. Rather, the environment is transformed into an object of attention, or into the negation of this object. In brief, whether Pierre is there or not, the centrality of Pierre in the shaping of Sartre's café experience is so absolute that he can see nothing but Pierre; he can only see Pierre, present or absent, in everything that he sees. As such, the café does not disappear; it still exists but it has been neutralised. Its elements have lost their identities and have, even if in *via negativa*, become Pierre.

These considerations echo the concern I expressed in Chapter One about the way the focus on the work in traditional classical music performances shapes an experience in terms of expectations, the performer's mental activity when evaluating their performance, the response of the audience, the discourse around musical performances, and the relationship between performer and audience. An example is how scholars like Sanden (2009) and Beaudoin (2021), interested in the noise of Gould's creaking chair, have analysed it in function of what it does to the piece. For instance, Beaudoin (ibid, n.p.) presents a meticulous analysis of the recording of Schönberg's *6 Little Piano Pieces* Op.19, using spectrograms, statistics and diagrams to visualise by the millisecond the temporal coincidences between the creaks and Gould's performance of Schönberg's composition. What the analysis shows is how Gould's sound-producing movements increase in passages that are metrically free or unclear. This suggests that the creaking of the chair functions as a representation of the performer's inner pulse. This example considers the noise made by the chair in its relation to the interpretation of the work, and not with respect to a larger situation of which both work and noise are part. This was also the conclusion of Christina Vanderhaeghe's unpublished review of *touchez des yeux* mentioned in Chapter Two. Because of an excess of elements in the performance, and the fact that the interferences were not as eloquent or disruptive as I had expected them to be, Vanderhaeghe was not sure as how to understand what she heard and saw. As a result of her confusion, she sought to understand the situation in terms of common knowledge about Schubert and the sonata. Resorting to a topos in music history, the relationship between a composer's death and their last works, her review described the atmosphere of the performance as a successful illustration of Schubert's disorientation when writing the sonata shortly before his untimely death.

Compared to the definitions that I examined earlier, I find Sartre's thoughts more relevant for reconsidering attention within the context of grounded performances. Even though his example shows how an individual becomes insensitive to the environment, and how their perception becomes narrowed when guided by a single object of attention, the relevance of Sartre's definition remains because it does not posit attention as an 'extermination' or 'eradication' of an environment. Rather, it explains attention as the attribution of power to one central element, which neutralises and even annihilates the environment in which it is contained. This would suggest, more productively, that a redistribution of power through, for instance, the decentring of attention, could help recover or reconfigure the environment.

This is precisely what I seek when metaxically amplifying my grounded performances and positing them as multiphonic assemblages: to de-hierarchise the traditional division of roles between the different elements of a performance so as to avoid that the musical work dominates and determines the artistic experience. Recalling the definition of metaxy, its main affordance is that it makes clear that perception never happens in a vacuum but rather within and through a particular environment. Grounded performances highlight this idea by emphasising the capacity of the performance environment and its different elements to function as mediators or receivers of a musical work without being reduced to doing only that. As a consequence, it is much more difficult for the musical work to obnubilate or dominate the whole perceptive field. By way of illustration, this means that while the piano remains a medium which I used to perform the Schubert sonata, due to the close microphoning, it is also perceived as a sounding machine whose hammers and levers have their own sounding properties, creating their own music in parallel to the conventionally musical tones. This also means that, while I may set out with the intention of performing the Schubert sonata, I can also allow myself to improvise beyond my role as the sonata's interpreter. The audience, in turn, is engaged in listening to the sonata, but as they do so their renewed awareness for the environment leads them to seek relations in-between the sounds that belong to the sonata and all other sounds present or absent in the environment. So the environment, as a medium for the perception of both musical and environmental sounds, becomes a transformative field. When interpreting Schubert, I pay attention to the environmental sounds without neutralising them in my consciousness. Instead, I go towards them, reacting to them through my playing. The same happens to the listeners, whose relationship to the music is destabilised by the perception of the environmental sounds, forcing them to reorganise their listening experience. The environment, for them, is like a lake; not a lake in which they fish, but a lake in which they swim.

Before further exploring these transformations, I will discuss attention in this fluctuating environment as a form of swimming. Attention conceptualised as swimming is no disengagement from an environment, but a way of moving and acting within a multiphonic assemblage. There is no foreground and background, but gradations of intensity in the way one approaches and interacts with the heterogeneous agents composing the assemblage. One of the most pertinent examples of what I refer to as

swimming is a moment that occurred during *Interferences*, when a siren-like sound reigned the space for several minutes. As the performer, I listened intently to the siren, and played softer and softer to enhance the contrast between the expressivity of the siren and the music, pausing sometimes to acknowledge the more punctual sounds of horns honking or cars passing by. It could well be that I, in those moments, didn't grasp these sounds 'together' in a literal sense. I cannot exclude the possibility that my attention was moving quickly between them instead of hearing them at the same time. In this sense, I was 'distracted', distraction defined here as the attention of an individual pulled apart by heterogenous but simultaneously present impulses. Nevertheless, even if I did not follow each sound all the time, I was profoundly aware of their co-presence. There was no question of detaching a single sound from its larger context. Instead, attention manifested itself as levels of intensity in the way I was present and reactive to these sounds, and in which they were present and reactive to me. Within this broad understanding of attention, several intensities and modalities might coexist, including 'intentional' or focused attention, but also non-intentional, distracted, wandering or hovering attention. In the case of grounded performances, this explains why performer and listener can focus on the work, while also being productively distracted by other sounds, and not simply bothered by them. In the best of cases, these other sounds are not disturbances but new possibilities for reconfiguring the experience of classical music as a grounded phenomenon. This means for me a sonic landscape where all sounds graft on one another: random sounds taking roots in classical music, and classical music growing from random sounds.[45]

A transformative field

When discussing the roles and positions of performers and listeners within grounded performances, swimming is an interesting metaphor. Although immersed in the water, one cannot forget to swim, otherwise one risks to drown. This means that one is aware of swimming, in much the same way that one, in a grounded performance, is aware of oneself listening. Also, swimming requires high adaptability. One must deal with waves and currents, and change swimming style accordingly. This is also what I find myself doing when performing as part of the multiphonic assemblage. Although I practiced the Schubert sonata and the Brahms study before the performances of *Interferences* and *touchez*, I did not remain indifferent to the emergent sounds. When a particular sound claimed my attention, I did not hesitate to change the course of my interpretation in function of what I heard. I reacted to these sounds by exploring different voicings,

---

[45] Complementing what has been discussed here so far, Ruth Herbert (2018, n.p.) speaks of an ecological approach to listening. In her definition, distraction is re-framed as 'potentially richly polysemic and perceptually inevitable'. Ecological listening, for Herbert, is a form of listening that is relational and heteronomous rather than self-referential. The listener is regarded as entangled in a musical assemblage made of interactions between subjective perceptions, personal knowledge and the environment. To listen ecologically means to listen within and to a physical environment and its fluctuations. According to Cobussen (2017, 35), this evolves the 'manifold interactions' between bodies (human or nonhuman) and environment.

dynamic ranges, articulation, pedal effects and tempi. I used repetition and modified the duration of notes and pauses accordingly. Sometimes I skipped certain passages or changed their order. The only element I did not change were the pitches. I also reacted by recording and playing back fragments of the performance, using a loop pedal, and I played with the volume of the audio feedback. In this sense, I was improvising, that is, freely engaging with the environmental sounds, the amplified noises, the notated material, and the piano. This flexibility has made me re-examine the notion of musical improvisation.

Musical improvisation is a reaction to a musical idea, an environment or other circumstantial factors, which ask the performer to mobilise their skills and experience on the spur of the moment, in an unpremeditated way. In this sense, the improvising musician is not unlike a *bricoleur*, described by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss as a handyperson who 'works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman' (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962], 16-17). Unlike the craftsman, who uses only specialised tools and materials, *bricoleurs* must make do with whatever is at hand. They look around for things that are at once contingent and teeming with potential, a potential which will only become apparent within each new circumstance, and in contact with similarly contingent things. Thus, when the circumstance arises, they use both their practical and theoretical knowledge (including intuition) to react to and activate their materials.

A good example of a musical bricolage is a concert by the Taku Sugimoto quartet (described in Cobussen 2017). The musicians played very sparsely, reacting to the sounds of the environment and improvising with these sounds, but also remaining silent to make space for these sounds to unfold: 'The musicians' creative inhabitations of the venues and their attentive listening lead to temporary, cautious, and sensible acoustic interventions and infiltrations, strongly influenced by the rooms' acoustics. The space is no longer a static object, not simply a given […] but has turned into a live instrument: Sugimoto and Chang are playing the space; they can be considered as organisms adapting themselves in order to cope with the environment' (ibid, 164). Another example of a bricoleur at work is guitarist Marc Ribot. As Cobussen (2017, 35) reports, Ribot's performance with the Fell Clutch Trio in Rotterdam in 2007, was altered due to a broken amplifier. Instead of stopping the concert to fix or change the amplifier, Ribot continued to play, integrating the noise of the broken amp in the music. His decision to interact with this unforeseen noise brought newness into the situation, newness understood here not as a something previously unseen or unheard-of, but as a reconfiguration of the environment that revealed unforeseen possibilities.

Understood as a form of bricolage, improvisation for the classical musician consists in 'find[ing] new ways of inhabiting old forms' (Cobussen 2017, 22). As such, it presents an occasion for the performer to 'recycle' their playing abilities, which in my case are tightly connected to traditional piano techniques and the score. When improvising in my grounded performances, I also learned how to listen *reactively* and how to take the time

to listen to sounds as they unfold without simultaneously preparing in my mind what I would play next, and without seeking to control these sounds. Instead, the sounds of the piano and the environmental sounds share the stage. Music-making thus becomes 'transitive' (Ernst 2013, 67) rather than purely interpretive. The performer acts in direct reference to and in contact with the surrounding objects and sounds, rather than in function of a predetermined message or meaning.

Improvising with the environment in this manner is not an easy task for me as a classically trained performer. Performers are viscerally connected to musical traditions, and it is very difficult to break free from musical notation and performance conventions, from entrenched habits and rehearsed movements. Cobussen (2017) reflects on how the level of openness and the agency of the performer vary in different musical styles. Of course, music performances always involve improvisation, simply because they happen in a live environment that remains to some extent unpredictable. For instance, the acoustics, venue and the available keyboard will always influence certain decisions regarding tempo, volume, intonation, and dynamics. Cobussen argues that beyond these uncontrollable factors, the musical choices that a free jazz musician like Ribot can make during a performance are not fundamentally different from those of a classical pianist like Evgeny Kissin. What differs is the nature of the constraints that guide these choices or, as he puts it, their creative space. In the case of Kissin, this creative space is determined by the horizon of the score and, as I will discuss in the next chapter, by the nature of the relationship that the performer has with the score. The attitude towards the score and the performance traditions will indeed determine whether they will just adjust a rehearsed interpretation in the moment of performance, or whether they will modify this interpretation in order to engage with the unexpected circumstances. If they do react to the unexpected, however, performers might discover abilities that they perhaps did not know they had, and they can reposition themselves *within* an environment instead of *towards* the work.

This 'being in and with the environment' also affects the relationship to the audience. As I mentioned in Chapter One, audiences and performers generally share a relationship that could be characterised as 'evaluative'. Performers long for the approving energy of the audience, which emboldens their performance. Simultaneously, the audience seeks in the performer, and through their performance, a confirmation of expectations, either towards the musical work, or as related to the virtuosity, sensibility, or any other characteristic of the performance. As a result of these reciprocal expectations, the relationship between audience and performer becomes more of a transaction than a shared experience. Even though the music unites them, the relationship that both share with the musical work is so subjective, so entrenched in their own mental space, that it cannot be convincingly stated that they are listening to the same thing. Unexpected events change this relationship. When a sudden noise interrupts a performance, it creates a moment of togetherness in the act of listening. Psychologists Nameera Akthar and Morton Ann Gernsbacher (2007) call this 'joint attention', moments in which preverbal children, when absorbed by something they see, notice that an adult or another child is

focused on that same thing. '[J]oint attention involves the child and adult coordinating mutual engagement with their mutual focus on a third entity' (ibid, 2). In the moment in which the child becomes aware of the adult's engagement, they often point to the thing, and this delineates the beginning of a direct exchange between adult and child based on the mutual contemplation of the thing. Joint attention plays a critical role in the development of social cognition and communication skills in small children, including early word learning. For the audience and the performer, joint attention works in a similar way. When listening to the music, the mental space of performer and listener is dominated by a flux of protentions and retention, that is, by expectations, associations and evaluations which happen across subjective, physical and musical time. In contrast to focusing on the music, listening to environmental noises and acknowledging the sonicity of these phenomena forces their attention outwards and towards a common object. These moments of interference, then, are the true meeting points between performer and audience. They are pillars of togetherness in personal experiences that would otherwise not be synchronised.

I turn now to the possible experience of the listener. I have already mentioned the destabilisation of the perceiver's position brought about by the presence of the noisy amplified sounds. I write 'possible experience', because I have not explored the reactions and opinions of the audience on my performances beyond several informal conversations and what I could observe from my position at the piano. Nonetheless, I allow myself some general observations, including those based on my own listening experiences while performing. The attendee of grounded performances does not approach the environmental sounds with the sole purpose of attending to a musical work and interpreting it from afar. Rather, they must make sense of the situation by composing their own sonic experience using the heterogenous sonic impulses. A new attitude is required whose particularity is to constantly engage the listener into making choices about where and how to direct their attention. In a sense, the listener becomes both maker and protagonist (or rather one of the protagonists) of their own listening experience. Michael Fried (1967), whose discussion of the 'absorbed mode' was already mentioned in Chapter One, opposes this mode with an approach that he calls he calls 'theatrical'. He (ibid, n.p.) introduces the term in the context of a study on spectatorship in the visual arts to describe the way in which minimal art transforms spectators into conscious protagonists of their own experience:

> [Minimalist] sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters [minimalist] work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art 'what is to be had from the work is located strictly within

[it],' the experience of [minimalist] art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.[46,47]

Because most minimalist artworks are no self-contained objects of contemplation but objects inserted into a given space or a situation, they make no sense without the physical presence of the perceiver. With sculptures such as those of Carl Andre or Robert Morris, which take up the floor of the gallery, the position of the spectator is not anticipated in the same way as with respect to a framed painting. The spectators must move around to perceive the work, adjusting and readjusting their way of looking, becoming acquainted with the space in which they are; this becomes a central element of the artistic experience. 'The work itself and the situation it creates cannot be separated', remarks art critic Janneke Wesseling (2016, 176); the situation, the context, 'is the work' – a kind of happening of which the spectator is part.[48]

---

[46] Fried refers to minimal art as 'literal' art, since what it shows is not an object or an image that represents something else, as in figurative painting and sculpture, but the object itself, exactly, or 'literally', as it presents itself to the viewer. In this excerpt, I replace 'literalism' by minimalism following the example of art critic Janneke Wesseling in her book *The Perfect Spectator* (2017), in which she discusses Fried's essay *Art and Objecthood* extensively.

[47] For Fried, the theatrical mode represents 'the negation of art'. His ideological stance is that the artwork *is* its content and can only be considered good if one becomes absorbed by and in it. Theatricality is connected to the abstractness, meaninglessness or 'hollowness'. As Wesseling (2016, 176) writes, '[the] consequence of the all-embracing theatricality of minimal art is, according to Fried, that such art is merely "an uncompelling and presenceless kind of theatre", meaning with presenceless the fact that these objects do not reveal themselves to us immediately and neither do they seem alive enough for us to want to surrender and lose ourselves in them.' I do not share Fried's ideological viewpoint about the quality of the artwork (Wesseling doesn't either), but his distinction between a theatrical and a self-reflexive mode of viewing against a contemplative mode is useful and applicable to my present reflections. As a passing remark on the same topic: although Fried discusses this mode of viewing as a minimalist innovation (he speaks of minimal art as having 'given birth' to the spectator'), Wesseling points out that this kind of 'theatrical' art existed well before minimal art, for instance in Cubism. In front of María Blanchard's *Femme assise*, where one tries to distinguish the figure of a women deconstructed in abstract shapes, one no longer feels excluded from the work since the work has no 'story' until one starts decoding its various layers, making sense of the multiple perspectives baked into the canvas. What concerns the spectator here is not only the content of the painting but also how to perceive it. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan speaks about Cubism as a challenge to perception, noticing how this art form leads to the reconsideration of assumptions and habits of seeing. Until Cubism appeared, one used to ask what the picture was about. As long as one remains within the universe of figurative painting, what the painting shows is more important than the act of seeing. With Cubism, things changed because a painting was no longer about something but about how we look at something. Painting as a medium to explore perception became more interesting than what the painting was portraying. It is in fact in McLuhan's comments on Cubism that his famous saying 'the medium is the message' comes up, introducing his concern for how perception is structured by the medium. Going even further back in art history, Georges Bataille (1995) argues that this shift already took place in the work of Manet, whose work was not about representation but about colour, lines and forms on a two-dimensional canvas. However, I have chosen here to emphasise Fried's theory because it is specifically concerned with the repositioning of the spectator in relation to the artwork, and not only with a shifting paradigm of perception in Cubism, or an artistic alternative to purely figurative painting, as done by Impressionists like Manet.

[48] Some of the happenings that took place in the US during the 1950s and 60s under the pretext of creating lifelike art are illuminating examples of multiphonic situations that are not restricted to music. In one of them, *Theater Piece Nr. 1*, which took place at Black Mountain College in 1952, artists John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Charles Olson and David Tudor framed a very familiar situation as a performance: that of

Now, it is of course debatable whether it is possible to reframe the position of the listener as a protagonist. This would suggest that, usually, the listener is *not* the composer of their own listening experience. When I started reflecting on Fried's theories, I was considering them in relation to *touchez*. During this performance, the listener was invited to move around in a sonic environment in which there was no clear focal point of reference. Instead, there was the piano placed in a corner, mostly playing very softly, and multiple speakers spread across the space playing back different types of sounds: some played back the sounds of the piano mechanics, others the sounds arising from audience's movements, others again the voice of the performer, and so on. In *touchez*, the analogy with minimalism in the visual arts and as understood by Fried, is more evident than in the case of *Interferences*. For example, the position of the listeners in-between the piano and the speakers, and the (implicit) invitation of entangling and disentangling the different sounds coming from these two sources, had, to a certain extent, the effect of experiencing the performance from *within* rather than from a more distant position as in a normal concert setting. Yet in discussions with colleagues and mentors, I was repeatedly told that listeners always construct their own experience, whether in a concert venue, listening to music in the streets or otherwise. While this might be true, I would still claim that there are differences between the 'work' that needs to be done by a listener in a grounded situation and in a conventional classical concert. Self-consciousness is an important topic here. Ideally, as discussed previously, the classical music listener is expected to be both 'centred and transcendent' (Wesseling 2016, 176): the listener is physically positioned in front of the sound source, or within an immersive sonic environment, but the composition they hear has been created for them beforehand so that they can immerse themselves in it – hence the 'transcendent', which suggests self-forgetfulness and absorption in something else than oneself. From this perspective, the listener co-composes their sonic experience but the material of this composition will be based on the musical sounds and their subjective experiences, previous knowledge, state of mind and a 'horizon of expectations'.[49] In *Interferences*, however, only part of the event is composed, and 'told' to the listener. There is no whole to be grasped and understood, but a wealth of material elements that the listener can either acknowledge or ignore. So the listener cannot linger for long in an internal realm of association and appreciation. They are constantly asked to reassess what they hear

several people doing completely different things and yet sharing the same space (Rutherford-Johnson 2020, 125). There were no time constraints or instructions other than a floorplan of the performance space defining where each artist should stand and specifying what they should do in very laconic terms ('Robert Rauschenberg: phonograph'; 'Cunningham: dance path'; 'lecture with John Cage: behind', etc.). Even though each artist had a task, this was not synonymous with a goal. Audience and artists could interact, but they could also choose not to. The important point was that they shared a situation which would develop according to whatever happened within it, or rather, whatever they *did* within it.

[49] Literary theorist Hans-Robert Jauss, influenced by the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, maintains that we carry with us a 'horizon of expectations' towards the work. This horizon is formed by our cultural, social and personal baggage: 'The reader comes to the text with his own models and values' (Jauss in Machado 2010, 60, my translation). Jauss affirms that the work is not an object that exists per se but rather 'a form waiting to be actualised', a form that 'becomes' as it mobilises the world experience of the reader (ibid).

and where they are. In contemporary music and sound art, there are many works that present similar affordances, especially sound installations or works using advanced sound spatialisation. However, it is very unusual to find this kind of approach in classical music. Therefore, I would firmly argue that there is a difference between music imposing particular meanings which require interpretation, and my projects. In them, I am posing questions, or inviting the audience to explore two parallel sonic worlds. This invitation also concerns the performer, who, like the listener, is required to stop interpreting and to start acting.

As an illuminating analogy, I think of the transparent crystal display frames conceived by Lina Bo Bardi for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) through which the audience sees the painting as well as the wider context of the museum: visitors, other paintings, themselves. In this situation, not only do they become aware of their own spectating through the reflection in the crystal; also the 'private' dialogue between paintings and audience is extended to a larger social and art historical context. We are dealing here with a reconfiguration of the relationship between artwork, display and the situation of viewing in which all agents become part of the actual artistic experience. By analysing grounded performances as multiphonic assemblages, I notice a similar reconfiguration. The artistic experience is no longer centred on the realisation and reception of a musical work. On the contrary, it encompasses the whole situation of a performance, of which musical works are but one element. This is because of the decentring of attention and the 'multiphonisation' of listening proposed in grounded performances, and because of the multiple roles that many of its agents take. Fischer Lichte (2008, 181) speaks in such cases of the transformation of performance into an event. As an event, performance becomes a dynamic process in which 'art', generally represented by musical works, is resituated within the physical and material world, 'reenchanting this world' with new perspectives, and, as Kaprow would say, making the art world more lifelike. This brings me to the next and final chapter, in which I explore in more detail the impact of this reconfiguration on the tradition of classical music performance and the understanding and function of the musical work.