The playing now: A philosophical investigation of present time in music

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Introduction

Music, such as the duration of a musical piece or length of a concert, can be measured by metronomes and clocks in objective time (chronos). However, playing an instrument, singing, attending a concert, listening to a record or reading a musical score are musical activities also experienced as subjective time (kairos). Music has an intrinsic temporal dimension of experienced time, often including an intensification of the present moment, coexisting intertwined with its measurable dimensions. This makes music a fascinating object for philosophical exploration.

Musical practice embodies temporal phenomena like pulse, tempo, timing, ad lib, accelerando and fermata. The musical present can be viewed as a moment of semantic fullness, a meaningful moment. Music can carry narrative, which is a related phenomenon, also containing intrinsic temporality. Furthermore, music can be improvised in the present moment. The tonal texture of music is experienced as a context, a coherency with an intrinsic temporality. This symposium is set to investigate how music can be experienced, philosophically speaking, in the present moment. In order to do this, we introduce a number of prominent Western philosophers who have taken an interest in the phenomenon of time by using the phenomenon of music as a lens: Saint Augustine, Husserl, Bakhtin and Ricoeur.

Augustine: Time and the extendedness of the mind (Lia Lonner)

In his Confessions, Augustine (n. d.) formulated his problematization of time: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not" (XI, xiv:17).

Augustine views the concept of time as full of complexity and contradiction: "How can time exist if the past is no longer, if the future is not yet, and if the present is not always?" (XI, xx:26). How should we regard the relationship between the passing of time and the present, Augustine asks. On one hand, time can be measured; on the other, time is subjective and connected to the person who experiences it. The now – the present – does not have an extension, Augustine argues, but it is the moment in which the future moves to the past. Time should not be divided into three times: past, present and future. He suggests that three times coexist in the mind: "a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future", that is, memory, observation, and expectation, respectively.
This leads Augustine to the conclusion that time can be extendedness. But what is extended? Augustine suggests that it is an extendedness of the mind itself. He illustrates the process of change in the present and the complexity of different aspects of time – the dynamics of expectation, observation, and memory – in his example of the process of reciting a psalm. This process emphasizes the relationship between the whole and the parts, as well as the importance of the present.

This section of the symposium will focus on how this process, and the extendedness of the mind, can be related to the performance of music.

**Husserl and the intrinsic temporality of music (Susanna Leijonhufvud)**
Modern phenomenology investigates time – and other phenomena – with respect to its essence of experience. This is not to dismiss the time that can be measured with watches and calendars (chronos) but to direct interest to how time is or can be experienced. In doing this, phenomenology aims to describe time as a phenomenon with scientific stringency. Husserl points out that musical tones linger and fade rather than disappear from our consciousness (Husserl 1995:§24). Therefore, music serves as an example of a phenomenon with intrinsic temporality (Zahavi 2003:80-98). Husserl aims to investigate time *per se*, as a dimension of all experiences. He suggests that our consciousness is not caught in the perceiving of the limited now but rather as a *width of presence* (Zahavi 2003:80-98). Tones in a melody do not replace each other abruptly as they are brought into existence; they present themselves as perceived in the past accumulating in a sedimentary phase of the 'now'. The 'now' is rather a temporal unit, which arises, persists and perishes. The second tone is presented in relation to the primal tone and simultaneously as it perishes in a stream of presences, "ein Erlebnisstrom", which due to its essence of temporality cannot start nor finish (Husserl 2004/1913, §81).

This section of the symposium will relate the intrinsic temporality of music to concepts like primal impression, retention, and protention.

**Bakhtin and the musical 'now' as meaningful time (Hanne Fossum)**
An important characteristic of the musical experience as an "encounter" is its instantness; music is something that touches or even hits you in your inner being and that changes you (Bollnow, 1959). Such a momentous experience is reported by Schmitt (2005), describing how an encounter with Mozart’s music as a young man made him stop thinking about taking his own life: "One day, he sent me some music. It changed my life. It actually saved my life." The mature Schmitt continued to experience Mozart’s music in the same momentous way. He was always taken by surprise by these encounters, which occurred like a flash of a lightning: in a concert, on a street corner, in the departure lounge at the airport (ibid: 5).

The musical 'now' could thus be viewed not only as a moment of musical tones, but also as a moment of significant, meaning-charged communication. The aspect of meaningful time could be related to Bakhtin’s (1986, 1981) philosophy of language, especially the notions *utterance* and *chronotope*.

According to Bakhtin, the smallest unit of communication is not a grammatical unit like a word or a sentence, but instead a unit of communication of meaning: the utterance. A
complete utterance is characterized by a semantic fullness of value (Bakhtin 1986: 74). However, the utterance may be as small as one word that can be said in a moment, and it may be as extensive as a whole novel.

Closely linked to the utterance is the chronotope ("time-space"), in which "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible..." – or even audible (Bakhtin 1981: 84, 258). Meaning itself is chronotopic, since “every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (ibid: 258). The chronotope defines genre, and it determines the image of man in literature. Of special interest to this investigation is the “chronotope of encounter”, which is marked by a high degree of intensity in emotions and values, as well as by frequent use of temporal link-words as “unexpectedly”, “suddenly” and “at just that moment” in novels belonging to this chronotope (ibid: 92). This illustrates how the temporal element is predominant here, as Bakhtin claims (ibid: 243). It also shows the similarity between the temporal element in these novels and musical experiences of the encounter type. But also the “chronotope of adventuretime”, “a time of exceptional and unusual events, events determined by chance, which (...) manifest themselves in fortuitous encounters”, which leaves a deep and irradicable mark on human beings and their entire life, is highly interesting in the context of this investigation.

Bakhtin himself is not dealing with the chronotope in other areas of culture than literature, but his frequent use of metaphors from music, such as polyphony, voice (Bakhtin 1984), orchestra, the movement of a theme (Bakhtin 1981: 292, 263) etc., indicates that he considers meaning in language as highly analogous to meaning in music.

Thus, in this section of the symposium, Bakhtin’s thinking will be applied to music.

**Paul Ricoeur and musical improvisation as narrativization of the threefold now (Sven Bjerstedt)**

Paul Ricoeur (1985) investigates the concepts time and narrative with reference to the contradictory character of reflection on time as put forward by Augustine. The only possible response, Ricoeur contends, is narrative activity, emplotment. He turns to the concept of mimésis in Aristotle’s Poetics, focusing on the human activity of organizing events through emplotment. Based on Augustine’s analysis of the extension of the mind between expectation, memory, and attention, Ricoeur develops a theory of a threefold mimesis: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration.

Ricoeur’s investigation turns out to be a complex strategy to approach questions of personal identity. Narrative imagination can explore permanence and change, the "is" of identity and the "is not" of difference. Narrative identity is an identity that changes (Kristensson Ugglia, 1994).

Ricoeur’s time-oriented analysis of narrativity may prove quite helpful to understanding a multitude of aspects of practice and reflection in all of the time-based arts. This section of the symposium will present exemplifications of how this analysis may be relevant to musical improvisation where there is an intensification of the present as well as an awareness of past–future dimensions, pointing to the need for multidirectionality in the musical improviser’s attention (such as, for instance, the ‘storytelling’ perspective often ascribed to jazz improvisation; cf. Bjerstedt, 2014).
After this introductory presentation, the symposium continues as a dialogue between the perspectives provided by these philosophers.

References


