In the symposium

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

The intrinsic temporality of music according to Husserl
Susanna Leijonhufvud

Different phenomena of time
Edmund Husserl, the prominent figure of modern phenomenology, pays attention to the phenomenon of music when he is to investigate the phenomenon of time. As music is understood as a phenomenon constituted in and by temporality, music is a suitable choice when we are to understand time according to Husserl. From our point of departure, as philosophers of music education, this phenomenological investigation of musical time can also aid our understanding of the comprehension of the phenomenon of music *per se*.

Husserl distinguishes between *phenomenological time* and objective *cosmic time*. A significant aspect of phenomenological time, in comparison with cosmic time, is that phenomenological time cannot be measured by the position of the sun in the sky, or by any other physical mean (Husserl 2004: §81). In this presentation I will present Husserl’s conclusions of his phenomenological analyse of time and try to sum up what these findings can tell us about how it is possible to experiences some musical phenomena within the overall phenomenon that we name *music*.

According to Husserl, the moment of time we know as a ‘now’ should not be understood as a one-dimensional singularity but rather as a two-dimensional phenomenon stretching out between *retention* and *protension*. Husserl claims that the singularity of the ‘now’ cannot be understood without its extension between a recapture of the past and without a reach towards the future. Within those two intrinsic qualities, imbedded into the ‘now’, the progressive tension between *re-* and *pro-* constitutes a *direction* of consciousness as a stream in motion.

The experience of music, and more precisely musical tones in a sequence, is used in order to investigate this stream of consciousness and hence progression of time. Husserl concludes that, given the nature of how tones are presented in their givenness, consciousness cannot be understood as a sequence of dis-joint moments but rather as a continuous *stream*, “a necessary form of conjunctions between experiences” (Husserl 2004: §81, my translation).

Music as a temporal phenomenon
Music claims space. That space is, for one, an extension of time. Husserl does not investigate the totality of this time and how such a totality can be experienced. Nor does he, in the texts I have read, investigate how the two different types; cosmic and experienced time, relates to each other. The phenomenological investigation presented in the references for this paper does not explore experienced time in a certain piece of music nor how a moment in music can be experienced as duration. Husserl is investigating the momentary ‘now’ and how that ‘now’ is a moment of tension with an extension that stretches between the past and the future.
Husserl concludes that this extension must constitute a width of presence. This conclusion is based on the experience of the givenness of tones in a sequence.

Husserl presents how he is experiencing how tones in a melody do not replace each other abruptly as discrete entities when they are brought into existence; they are presented in a particular mode of givenness. Tones that have sounded present themselves from their givenness in the past as they are accumulating in a sedimentary phase of the present tone presented in the 'now’. The ‘now’ is then understood as a temporal unit; which arise, persist and perish. The seconde tone is presented in respect to the prima tone, and simultaneously in the prima tone as the seconde tone perishes in a stream of presences, “ein Erlebnisstrom” (Husserl 2004/1913, §81). This is based on the experiences of how musical tones linger and fades rather than disappear from our consciousness (Husserl 1995:§24). As their presence fades they are not primarily remembered but rather co-presented but in a different mode compared to their prima givenness.

An attempt to explain this abstract thinking into a graspable example, Husserl uses a description of musical tones:

…the same tone that previously existed as a real now is yet the same, but moves back into the past and constitutes thereby the same objective moment of time. And if the tone do not cease, but lingers, and throughout that duration appears as substantial the same or substantial changeable, can we not then by evidence (within certain limits) grasp this, that it lasts or change? (Husserl 1995: 102)

The width of presence
In this presentation the focus onto the phenomenon of time is the moment of ‘now’. Husserl understands this singularity as a phenomenon of width as he states that the punctual now is a width of presence (Zahavi : 82). The Danish prominent phenomenologist Dan Zahavi illustrates this with a picture where the primal impression α correlate to the now phase κ, the retension β correlates to the past phase λ, and the protension γ correlates to the future phase µ of the object. In an analyse of the of the primal impression of the now, the dimensions of retension and protension are synthesised as a width, i.e. the distance between κ and λ. Consequently of Zahavi’s picture β and γ are presented simultaneously as α and not in sequence with α. Therefor retension and protension should not be regarded as a recollection and an expectation but as co-presented modes of changing givenness from the earlier primal impressions of the past tones in the musical sequence. More precise the β should perhaps be visualised as a β’ and the γ as ‘γ’.

Figure 1. The relation between the primal impression-retension-protension and the different temporal phases of the object.

(a modification of the picture from Zahavi 2003:84).
The experience of a tone in a melody
I will play a sequence of tones on an instrument at hand to present how Husserl explains the stream of consciousness with tones presented in what he name primal impression, retention and protention based on a presentation made by Dan Zahavi (2003:84-85).

Playing example:

Consequences regarding the width of presence developed towards other musical phenomena
If we are to understand music through Husserl’s ideas of experiences the present as a width of presence where a primal impression (α), a tone in a sequence of tones, is experienced on the background of earlier sounded tones. The tone at the moment of α is co-presented, as it does not disappear from consciousness but rather vanishes and fades into a sedimentary experience of that tone. If the tones C, D and E are played as the sequence above shows, the E is experienced as an Ed as well as a Ec. The tones of C and D are co-presented in the E (and not with the E).

Even if musical tones can be expressed one after another as discrete entities, they cannot, according to Husserl, be experienced as such. This understanding of how the consciousness experience the ‘now’ as a width of presence where previously played tones are co-presented as their presence lingers into the present tone, “filling” the present tone with something that could be described as a character of the tones in the previous past. Perhaps we can interpret Husserl’s thinking into an example where C and D in this case provide the E with a certain character. Maybe we can understand this extension of presence not only in a temporal dimension of extension but also as a spatial dimension. Consciousness, thought of in this way, could provide us with an understanding of how it is possible to distinguish a C from a B♭ or a D♭. These ideas of temporality in a sequence of tones propose how the width of presence presupposes the possibility to experience a sequence of tones but also musical phenomena such as melody, harmonic sequences, tonality and form. It might also opens up for an understanding of the plasticity, or malleability, in the experience of the ‘now’. As the width of presence is experienced and cannot be measured this would be possible. Experiences of tempo, timing, eternity, the fermata, or the ad lib could be understood by the width of presence.

Suggestions for further implications of understanding music as a multi-presented phenomenon
Husserl does not pay any particular interest in an investigation of the phenomenon of music as such. Rather music plays the part of a mean in order to understand time and consciousness (and furthermore; intentionality). However, given this understanding of music as a temporal phenomenon with moments of width, stretched between retension and protension I would suggest that this thinking can carry us even further by understanding how it is possible to experience different phenomena of temporality within music as well as how the thinking can shape an understanding for the phenomenon of musical harmony or disharmony with the same character of the idea of a continuous stream of consciousness based on tensions. The
temporal extension of the ‘now’ could be understood as intertwined with a spatial dimension of the extension in order to constitute music as a phenomenon.

End of this presentation

References