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Classical Phenomenology and the Epistemological Clarification of Music Analysis

ABSTRACT

Background

At the turn of the 20th century, not music but philosophy as a discipline stood on the brink. The newest science – psychology – redefined questions of meaning by taking account of empirical evidence in the brain, and in the face of such research, the tradition of philosophical idealism risked irrelevance. Were ideas now somehow reducible to material causes? But how, then, would we be capable of sharing or communicating anything like knowledge? In response, Edmund Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900/1901) took up the concerns of epistemology (i.e. the possibility of knowledge as such), not only offering a critique of psychology's over-reach but, more importantly, proposing a new science of science – a *Wissenschaftslehre* – that would apply itself to investigating the relations between the natural laws of empirical psychology and the ideal laws of logic: this new science he termed, 'phenomenology'.

After the turn of the 21st century, music analysis finds itself in a remarkably similar situation; the contemporary domain of music analysis seems to be ceded to a new science – music cognition – that, by mapping the dynamic functions of the brain, promises to offer an empirical account of the phenomenon of musical meaning. Yet, like the psychologism that Husserl refuted in 1900, the science of today risks reducing musical meaning to the natural acts of the subject, ultimately undermining the possibility of musical knowledge (i.e. the musical idea as such). What, outside of a certain expression of the state of a particular human brain, does music mean? And how, without an idea in hand, would it be possible to communicate a musical meaning to others (e.g. as in a chamber music performance)?

If, on the one hand, empirical science focuses on the *act of cognition* and understands this as the genesis of meaning, on the other hand, a certain strain of idealism operative in music theory emphasizes the *idea*. The two approaches operate according to diametrically-opposed frameworks. But phenomenology, through the notion of intentionality, looks precisely at the *correlation* between act and ideal meaning, in this way providing an epistemological ground: connecting the acts of the subject with objective laws of logic. As we come to understand thanks Husserl's analysis of the *intentionality* of consciousness, our experience takes place neither exclusively on the side of objects (i.e. reducible to natural acts of cognition) nor exclusively on the side of subjects (i.e. restricted to an inner, ideal realm that cannot access the world); that is to say, according to phenomenology, consciousness is neither a material container into which experiences are placed or 'stamped' through a causal relation between objects, nor a

solipsistic realm where the world is merely the world that *I think*. Intentionality shows us a relation between object and subject as non-independent parts of a whole (e.g. as the experience of consciousness itself), where 'subjects' and 'objects' come face-to-face in the constitution of knowledge.

Aims and repertoire studied

The aim of my research is to explore the applicability of classical Husserlian phenomenology to our present situation in music analysis. Drawing upon the third logical investigation of the *Logische Untersuchungen* – on mereology, or the study of parts and wholes – I examine what Husserl terms the 'logical laws' of independent and non-independent parts, thinking them through *in terms of time-consciousness* by focusing on Husserl's phenomenological explorations of the musical melody. For Husserl, melody is a 'whole' not unlike the whole described as intentionality: the notes of the melody function as non-independent parts, i.e. as *moving parts of time*.

If we are to examine the mereological relation of these parts, we must then come to terms with the various 'parts' of time-consciousness. An early text by Husserl *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1893-1917), provides the philosophical ground of my inquiry; this text is particularly suitable for application to musical concerns, growing as it does out of Husserl's positive reception of the work of Carl Stumpf (particularly, his *Tonpsychologie* of 1890). Husserl calls upon the musical melody as a time-object useful for a phenomenological investigation of time. According to Husserl in *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (and in accordance with Stumpf's empirical psychology), the past *is perceived as past* (and not as a present representation of the past) through *retention*. Retention is a capacity distinct from the capacity for memory. Memory concerns re-presentification: it makes the past *present* through a representation of original sensorial impressions. But, according to Husserl, it is essential that retention *not* be reduced to a present of the past (otherwise the streaming-away of the present would lack all quality of *pastness* – it would shift straight to a *present representation of the past*, as a memory). Retention functions not as a repository of sensorial impressions that, through an act of re-presentation, would make every 'past' into a 'present'; rather, it sustains the past as absence – as potential (and in this capacity serves as *access* to memory, but itself is empty of content).

Methods

Developing Husserl's themes, I make two claims: 1) that musical meaning unfolds thanks to the capacity of retention, specifically, and 2) that the relation of the parts of time to retention operate according to objective laws of logic. When we consider Husserl's claims about retention and apply his thinking in *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* to the

third logical investigation of the *Logische Untersuchungen*, we see that although the present is always streaming away, the *relations* between parts of time (because they arise in accordance with a whole that is retention) are ideal: numbers do not pass away. For example, a melody is never expressed all at once, in the present, but its notes-having-passed and notes-yet-to-come form a kind of obverse ‘side’ or unheard ‘part’ of a whole that is sustained through retention. Thus, it is our capacity for retention, not particularly our grasp of the present, that makes possible the ‘whole’ of a melody and, at another level, the form of a piece of music.

Implications

Phenomenological analysis illuminates the relationship between what is most subjective (i.e. inner time-consciousness) and what is most objective (the ‘laws’ of mereology). In this way, phenomenology offers a potent methodology for contemporary concerns in music, for it shows that it is not necessary to oppose the empiricism of music cognition to the formalism of music theory; rather, through phenomenological analysis, we can illuminate the specific relation between the cognitive act and formal meaning in terms of time and logic, thus providing a clarification of their common epistemological ground.

Keywords

Musical epistemology; musical cognition; psychology of music; phenomenology.

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