

Thoughts on my music practice

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Music is intrinsically underspecified—it cannot transmit a precise, unambiguous message, but only offer fragments from which meaning can emerge. This fundamental indeterminacy is not a shortcoming; it is the very space where interpretation becomes possible. In my compositional practice, I do not seek to tell a story, but to create the conditions for one to be imagined.

Narrativity, in this context, arises not from the music itself, but within the mind of the listener. Narratologist Monika Fludernik describes narrativity as a process happening in the mind of the receiver of the artwork¹. Literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan also proposes that the narrative signification should be interpreted as a cognitive construction or a mental picture². For Paul Ricœur, “all the potential of music can be summarised as a fundamental isomorphism between the hearing experience and the pre-narrative structure of the experience.”³ This pre-narrative structure is what interests me most. I consider that music can actually define a narrative frame by building tensions and resolving them. Musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez demonstrated this in an experiment: he asked children to listen to *L’Apprenti sorcier* by Paul Dukas and then recount its story. All the stories were different, but they all shared a similar structure⁴. Michel Imberty calls this the *proto-narrative envelope*⁵ and, quoting Didier Anzieu at a colloquium at IRCAM, notes that “a story is not narrating an event, but transmitting the rhythm, the speed, the

¹ Fludernik, Monika (2009). *An Introduction to Narratology*. Routledge.

² Ryan, Marie-Laure. (2004). “Introduction”, in *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p. 8.

³ Ricœur, Paul. (1983). *Temps et Récit*, Tome 1, Paris, Éditions du Seuil. (My translation).

⁴ Nattiez, Jean-Jacques, « L’enquête ethnomusicologique comme expérience humaine et exploration de l’inconnu », in *Profession musicologue*, Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2007

⁵ Imberty, Michel. (1997). “Can one seriously speak of narrativity in music?”, in Gabrielsson, Alf (éd.), *Third Triennial ESCOM Conference: Proceedings*, Uppsala, Département de Psychologie, Université d’Uppsala, p. 13.

slowness, the twists and turns, the cuts, the burstings with which an event [...] was experienced or re-experienced by one or more consciousnesses.”⁶

Marion Guck articulates this idea even more radically when she writes: “sounds do not become music until they have entered a person, until they have been heard or imagined and attended to. Music exists only in the interaction between sound and the body-and-mind of an individual.”⁷ This premise—that music emerges between some musical sounds and a person—underscores the fundamentally relational nature of listening. What is often called “the narrative” in a piece of music is not a property of the sounds themselves but something constructed by a listener’s interpretive activity, their memories, their cultural background, and their capacity to project and imagine.

This framework implies a specific relationship to time. In my work, I understand time as something constructed jointly by the listening body and the musical object. Sound unfolds in time, but it also shapes how time is perceived. Drawing from phenomenology—particularly Merleau-Ponty’s reinterpretation of Husserl’s temporal schema⁸—I see musical time not as a linear sequence of instants but as a field where retention (immediate past), primal impression (present), and protention (anticipated future) coexist and interact. This is how a melody—or any musical event—can be grasped as a form in motion. If we position ourselves at one specific moment in time, we can access only one unique note of a melody, hence not perceiving it as such. This temporal schema offers us a window in which we perceive the different tones leading us to group them as an entity that we call melody.

Helmut Lachenmann’s distinction between sound as object and sound as process⁹ also plays a key role in my thinking. I often work with perceivable processes—musical events

⁶ Imberty, Michel. (2018). “L’expérience musicale et la conscience intime du temps”. Colloque à l’Ircam, Paris, les 10 et 11 avril 2018 : <https://medias.ircam.fr/xb6f4d2> . (My translation).

⁷ Guck, Marion A. 1996. “Music Loving, Or the Relationship with the Piece.” *Music Theory Online* 2 (2).

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge.

⁹ Lachenmann, Helmut. 1996. “Klangtypen der Neuen Musik.” In *Musik als Existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1966-1995*, edited by Helmut Lachenmann and Josef Häusler, 1–20. Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel.

whose internal change can be tracked—because they create expectations and suggest trajectories. In this way, time is not simply a container for events but a dynamic structure co-created by listening.

I am also aware that prolonged exposure to a single material—especially if it is rich or complex—can lead the listener to abstract it, to stop hearing its internal variety. At that point, they begin to expect either a transformation or the appearance of a contrasting object. As a composer, one of the challenges is to anticipate these perceptual thresholds and shape the music accordingly, to avoid uniformity without defaulting to contrast for its own sake.

This phenomenon is closely related to what Gaonac'h and Tulving¹⁰ call *implicit perception*: the capacity to detect differences in an environment even without consciously identifying or interpreting them. One might think of a man listening to a conversation in Russian, a language he does not understand. When the conversation shifts to Chinese, although he remains unable to decipher the content of either language, he still perceives that a change has occurred. He recognizes, in an implicit way, that the sonic environment has been transformed. In music, a similar mechanism often operates: listeners can sense that something has shifted—texture, timbre, density—without necessarily being able to articulate precisely what or how. This sensitivity to difference without explicit comprehension is a crucial dimension of listening. It allows us to perceive contrast, novelty, or development in musical materials that may otherwise remain opaque.

To communicate within this open framework, I turn to Relevance Theory¹¹ (Sperber and Wilson), which emphasizes the shared cognitive environment between communicator and audience. This is possible because composer and listener inhabit the same world: we experience the same reality, shaped by similar perceptual and cultural structures. Moreover, the two academics point out another need to be met for the addresser to reach the addressee: the addresser's message should be relevant enough to be worth

¹⁰ Daniel Gaonac'h. (1998). *Mémoire*. In O. Houdé, D. Kayser, O. Koenig, J. Proust & F. Rastier (eds), *Vocabulaire de Sciences cognitives*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, pp. 256-58.

¹¹ Sperber, Dan; Wilson, Deirdre (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN 978-0631198789.

the effort of the addressee to process it. Hence, imagining a sense in the music depends on the goodwill of the listener.

Causality becomes a useful tool in this context. By shaping musical material to evolve through perceivable transformations, I can suggest lines of cause and effect. The listener, recognizing these as part of their own experiential logic, perceives coherence, tension, or development—not because these are inherent but because they resonate with shared expectations. I also find Gibson's theory of ecological perception captures even more precisely the notion that meaning consists in a system that emerges when organisms interact with their environments¹².

When it comes to anthropomorphism, I do not treat musical elements as characters in any fixed sense. Rather, I work on their potential to become characters—on their capacity to generate a sense of agency, gesture, or interaction. Through dynamic behaviors or contrasting profiles, sounds can begin to feel animated, as if they were capable of intention. This blurs the line between material and metaphor, inviting the listener to project subjectivity onto abstract forms. Werner Wolf describes music as anthropomorphic¹³ in the sense that musical material can be perceived as grumpy, sad, angry, or affectionate—qualities that are not in the sounds themselves but attributed to them through the listener's interpretive activity.

With intertextuality, I make use of what Irène Deliège calls *external similarity*, as opposed to *internal similarity*¹⁴. Internal similarities are those perceptual relationships that exist within the work itself—between motifs, textures, or forms. External similarities, by contrast, are those that connect the music to something outside it: a genre, a reference, a memory. Using an external similarity can trigger recognition, resonance, or even critical distance. It is not about quotation or pastiche but about placing the listener in

¹² Gibson, James J. 1986. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. New York: Psychology Press.

¹³ Werner Wolf. (2018) "Narrativity in Instrumental Music? A Prototypical Narratological Approach to a Vexed Question", in *Selected Essays on Intermediality (1992-2014): Theory and Typology, Literature-Music Relations, Transmedial Narratology, Miscellaneous Transmedial Phenomena, Studies in intermediality*, Brill, p. 480-500.

¹⁴ Irène Deliège. (2007). "Similarity Relations in Listening to Music: How Do They Come into Play?", *Musicae Scientiae* 11, n° 9.

relation to something beyond the work, allowing that extra-musical association to enrich their interpretive process.

This practice has deep historical roots. In the Baroque and Classical eras, composers relied on a system of *topics*—musical conventions that signified particular affects, characters, or ideas. Leonard Ratner, Robert Hatten, Eero Tarasti, and Kofi Agawu have all written extensively on how these topics functioned as an intertextual code, allowing composers and listeners to share a repertory of references and associations. A dissonant diminished chord might signify the presence of the diabolical, or a sudden shift to the minor mode could convey sorrow. These conventions offered a kind of shorthand: a way to gesture toward an extra-musical meaning through a recognizable stylistic device.

This is also why, in one of my recent pieces for oboe, I incorporated the sound of the Ukrainian air alert app at the end of the work. That sound is not merely a sonic artifact; it carries with it the weight of a collective experience—fear, urgency, a state of vulnerability that is immediately recognizable to those who have lived through it or followed the war from afar. By placing this reference in the musical context, I wanted to create a sudden confrontation between the abstract world of instrumental music and the concrete reality of a historical moment. The alert tone becomes an intertextual gesture that interrupts the autonomy of the musical discourse, reminding the listener that no listening happens in a vacuum. In this way, intertextuality can be not only a means of enrichment or resonance but also of critical reflection and ethical engagement.

Contemporary music is not background music. It demands attention. It invites the listener to enter a situation of heightened awareness, where sound, gesture, and time are actively perceived—not passively consumed. Mariusz Kozak, for example, emphasizes in his work that listening is not merely reception but enaction¹⁵: a passive listener cannot perceive anything; perception must be active. This fundamental characteristic of the music I write is what leads me to compose for the concert space.

¹⁵ Kozak, Mariusz. (2019). *Enacting Musical Time - The Bodily Experience of New Music* (Oxford Studies in Music Theory) - Oxford University Press

My music is conceived for the concert setting, and this context is not incidental—it is essential. It provides a unique sensory and cognitive environment that allows me to work with:

A margin of variability, especially in electronics, which introduces openness and spontaneity. A performance is the interpretation of a message (the score) by one or more musicians. Since every performer is unique, their ability to communicate is different, and the variances between the composer's original views and the performance are a chance to be as relevant as possible in this context. Moreover, it is in the nature of concert music to be alive, to share an experience with others. When it comes to electroacoustic music, the same logic can be applied by going against the machine—programming aleatory behaviors within a frame (like the score), and designing ways for the electronics to respond to external stimuli provided by the performer.

The theatricality of live performance—gestures, presences, silences—that contribute directly to how meaning is constructed in real time. The body of the performer becomes a parameter in the understanding of the whole significance. Musicians' bodies signify this subjectivity somewhat differently because they exist in a liminal space between pure physicality (exemplified by the sheer athleticism of technical facility) and pure musicality (mediated and interpreted as particular kinds of sonic signs).

The spatiality of sound production: the bow against the string, the breath in a clarinet, the hammer striking a piano, the directional projection of a loudspeaker. These are not neutral delivery systems—they are part of the music's expressive identity. Different types of sound emission can contribute to the dramaturgy of a work: the closeness or distance of a sound source in the performance space can create immersion, clarify counterpoint, or establish a narrative tension between presence and absence.

In a world saturated with noise, the concert offers a rare opportunity to hear silence. In *La haine de la musique*, Pascal Quignard¹⁶ writes: "When music was rare, its summoning was as overwhelming as its dizzying seduction. When the summoning is incessant, music becomes repulsive, and it is silence that becomes solemn." In a world invaded by sound and music, witnessing silence together can become a moment to cherish.

¹⁶ Quignard, Pascal. 1996. *La haine de la musique*. Editions Calmann-Lévy.

This active listening is all the more important because the very categories we use to hear—like “noise” and “tone”—are not fixed. Pierre Schaeffer showed that repeating a so-called noise can lead us to hear it as musical, as a tone with identity¹⁷. Pierre Boulez, in *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*¹⁸, writes that in the lowest register of the piano, pitch perception can collapse entirely: the instrument becomes a source of noise. And Diana Deutsch's research shows how easily our brains misinterpret sound—reconstructing non-existent melodic lines or hearing ascending intervals as descending¹⁹, depending on context. These ambiguities of perception—between tone and noise, between presence and illusion—are central to my exploration of musical form and texture. They remind us that listening is not just passive reception, but an act of interpretation in itself.

Ultimately, I aim to compose not just sound, but situations of listening. I create environments in which the audience is invited to interpret, project, and imagine. The score sets the path, but it is in the listener's mind and body that the music truly comes to life.

¹⁷ Schaeffer, Pierre. 1966. *Traité Des Objets Musicaux, Essai Interdisciplines*. Paris: Editions de Seuil.

¹⁸ Boulez, Pierre. 1964. *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*. Gontier.

¹⁹ Deutsch, Diana. 1975. "Musical illusions." *Scientific American*, 233, 92-104.
And Deutsch, D. A musical paradox. *Music Perception*, 1986, 3, 275-280.