

Listening Responsibly: Reflections on Music and Ethical Experience in the Thought of Jan Patočka

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Phenomenologically speaking, to listen to music is to interpret a moving whole which encompasses the movements of distinct individual notes, melodies, harmonies and rhythms. In listening, we notice that there is not simply a distinct sequence of auditory events but an unfolding of both future and past temporal moments that allows us to concentrate on different aspects of its performance. We might concentrate on just one instrument or part, or extend our listening to the piece as a whole, always moving back and forward along a temporal horizon which transcends any singular or particular “now” moment. For Patočka, the being of music can be thought of in this very movement, its tension, the rising and falling of its activity which is open to our interpretation. To listen to a piece of music could then be said to keep open this temporal transcendence of the present which refuses to yield one particularity over another and allows the experience of the movement itself to be what is fundamental to music as a whole. In this paper I suggest that a similar metaphor or analogy of appreciating music underlies Patočka’s own concern regarding understanding our shared experience and actions with others. Thus ideas such as temporal unfolding, movement, dissonance, amplitude, harmony and rhythm become central concepts in understanding ourselves and our relationships to other people which refuses to interpret human beings as particularities or objectivities that can be ordered or valued in separation from the actions and performance of human life as a whole.

Introduction

In its chief dimension, human life is a seeking and a discovering of the other in oneself and of oneself in the other.¹

In his book *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, Bruce Ellis Benson argues that the way a musical work comes into existence is “best described as improvisatory at its very core” because it is “not merely the act of composing but also the acts of performing and listening”.² Music is always in one sense or another, and to different degrees, performed in an improvisation of different concrete human actions that constantly evolve, shape and change the possibility of any individual musical work. To name just a few, a particular piece of music is realised in the interplay between the composers’ motivation and musical understanding, the performers’ capabilities, and the audiences’ historical situation and expectations. Inspired by the hermeneutical analysis of Gadamer, Benson suggests that the goal of music understanding is fundamentally “a dialogue” played out in a “fusion of horizons” between the composers, performers and listeners.³

However, Benson is also careful to point out the danger in using a metaphor of a “fusion of horizons”, in “that—in fusing with the other—the ‘otherness’ of the other is lost”.⁴ This danger is plausible because “since music making is something that we inevitably do with others (whether they are present or not), musical dialogue is fundamentally ethical in nature”.⁵ The multiple “voices” of any musical situation become distant when, through a sort of “deafness” to the influence of other people, we only replicate and repeat them through a passive absorption and

¹ Jan Patočka, “The ‘Natural’ World and Phenomenology”, in Jan Patočka, *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, trans. Erazim Kohák. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 260.

² Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 163-64.

appropriation of their participation. The influence of composers, performers and listeners must somehow be heard. The danger is that “mere repetition does not usually compel us to *listen*”.⁶

In response to this, Benson suggests that the improvisational and dialogical nature of musical works have at base an ethical responsibility, which in a certain manner must be constantly protected and secured.⁷ A securing which is expressed through an explicit commitment to listen to the plurality of music practice itself that precedes the aesthetic goals of any individual work or artist. Yet such a listening is difficult because it demands not just paying attention to the multifarious modes of musical engagement but also simultaneously “responding” to them, being responsible for them. Being responsible is possible because we make a difference in what we play, never entirely repeating, nor wholly ignoring. We are compelled to perform in dialogue, to a listening that simultaneously assumes responsibility through an explicit attentiveness to others.⁸ In this sense our attentiveness is a willingness to perform or participate with others in the renewal of musical works that both seeks to understand what is being played as well as contribute anew to its style and character. Such an act requires a careful sensitivity to the influence of others as well as the desire to participate in a unique way. Benson describes this bi-directional interplay between the passivity and activity of musical dialogue as a type of performative “tension”, a tension which is necessary for giving voice to the plurality of participants in music. For Benson,

A dialogue can only be maintained if there is a pull exerted by both sides. The danger for genuine dialogue, then, is not the presence of tension but its loss or imbalance. A dialogue is only possible when each partner both holds the others in tension—that is, holds the other accountable—and feels the tension of accountability exerted by the other ... Of course, in order to “feel that pull”, one needs to be able to listen to the other.⁹

Musical responsibility, as Benson portrays it, should seek and promote the tension of listening that is at the heart of any dialogue, in which the plurality of participants is explicitly acknowledged and all are equally held accountable for its unfolding.¹⁰

I suggest, in a parallel with these ideas that such a responsible listening to others as a “performative tension” is of benefit when considering Patočka’s understanding of responsibility in connection with the primacy of the plurality of human existence. Taking up Patočka’s own conception of human existence as a movement that is akin to the unfolding a melody,¹¹ the ethical commitment to a renewed understanding of listening might well be relevant in all facets of human life, not just musical life.

For Patočka, like music, our individual life is not something substantial, given before hand, as if we could simply read the notes of our own predefined score. Instead, it must be constantly improvised, played, performed. Resembling the dynamics of music, we express our life through the tensions,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 188, emphasis in original. To give one possible broad example might be the “lack of feel” that we often attribute to musical performances that seemingly just “repeat” the music in an almost automated fashion without the necessary expression or engagement in the audience and between the performers themselves.

⁷ His own word for this ethical motivation in musical practice he calls “stewardship”. See “The Responsibility of Stewardship”, *Ibid.*, 187-191.

⁸ I suggest Benson’s claim is here equivalent to Gadamer’s understanding of openness to the other where “this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another”. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), 355.

⁹ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 171.

¹⁰ Benson himself makes no claims about the aesthetic value of such “performative tension” in music but I believe it would be an interesting further study to think through the influence of tension as an integral part of what makes a musical performance influential or moving.

¹¹ Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohak, ed. James Dodd, (Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1998), 47.

style and rhythms of the many moments that punctuate it. Yet our own life is not an entirely individual and spontaneous act either. We are necessarily confronted with other people's styles and rhythms that constantly counter punctuate and augment our own. To perform our own existence then presupposes a song that is already underway and in which we must first join in through learning and listening to those close to us.

Given such a musical analogy, I suggest that when Patočka says "it is this structure of the other, as nearer to us than we ourselves and correspondingly near to themselves through us" he is emphasising not only an inter-subjective formal structure but also an ethical possibility.¹² In describing the differing depths of our relation towards others, Patočka explains that originally we are met with the other in the form of an "acceptance" or "prepared warmth" that covers our lacks and needs before we can do so for ourselves.¹³ Before we are capable of our own lives as independent thinkers and actors we first rely on those who accept us into the world and procure and provide for that which we cannot achieve for ourselves. For example, we are fed, bathed, and imitate and repeat others walk, talk and play. This is not an unimportant or insignificant aspect of our life. Patočka explains how such a "past" is un-thematically withheld in the movements of our own body—for example the particular bodily dexterity that needs to be imitated and learnt from others in order to play a violin.¹⁴ Our movement within the world always expresses and incorporates others with whom the styles and techniques of life are handed down to us in the form of a passive acceptance of tradition. Tradition can only be "procured" through the hands and arms of others. Thus, for Patočka, we are,

From the start of life immersed, rooted, primarily in the other. This rootedness in the other mediates all our other relations. The other is primordially those who looks after our *needs* before we can and do begin to look after them with them.¹⁵

To begin to "look after" our own needs means we overcome such a passivity of learning from others and take up our own practical dealings in life as an individual. We begin to explicitly understand our own existence in terms of what we need and desire and take up things in a meaningful way in relation towards our own independent life *as a whole*.

However, as with our originary mode of sensing the other in terms of need, such a meaningful situation in which we use and make things always presupposes our life with other people. In this type of mode of relating to things in the "present", we are equally compelled to procure and provide for those who cannot. In this practical mode of being with others Patočka says:

We can only accept the other by risking ourselves, by attending the other's needs no less than our own, by *working*. Work is essentially this self-disposal of ourselves as being at the disposal of others.¹⁶

From our passive acceptance into the world of others develops a secondary acceptance of the mutual responsibility to respond to other people's needs (as well as our own) in the mode of "active" work. The very foundation of our lives then seems to have a certain mutual tension of being in the world in two different senses of relating to the needs and interdependencies of each other in that "it has its source in the factual dependence of life on itself".¹⁷ On one hand, we relate to others in a mode of aesthetic and emotional dependency, an acceptance of bodily individuation and survival; on the other, a burdening and weight surfaces as we accept the need to work and

¹² Patočka, "The 'Natural' World and Phenomenology", 258.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁴ Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, 44.

¹⁵ Patočka, "The 'Natural' World and Phenomenology", 260.

¹⁶ Jan Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1996), 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

secure for others those things which they made available to us. One is a passive receiving and the other an active procuring. What emerges is a certain dialectic of our belonging with others in which the dual modes of intimate need and self-disposal in work form a rhythmical foundation.

Yet this rhythm presupposes a certain bondage to repetition at this level of shared meaning that Patočka thematises as characteristic of the nourishing and sustaining “cyclical earth”.¹⁸ Our experience of one another is not explicitly orientated but rather lived at the level of an iterative and particular responding to one another in the name of living. To give just one example is the punctuation of life in the dual modes of the everyday and the holiday. I move in the day of my work to secure the monetary needs to enjoy myself in the sphere of recreation. At work, I order myself and others in the mutual task of efficiency in order that I can release from such burden and submerge into the festival, the world with others in the mode of mystical bonds and aesthetic desires, resisting objective work roles, placing us back in our originary need for emotional comfort in the acceptance of others. Patočka explains that we sense this movement between these two ways of being with other people as a type of “burden” and “alleviation”:

The burden which humans accept and which inevitably accompanies them throughout life is itself accepted in an atmosphere of alleviation; the rhythm and interpenetration of burden and relief are the scale of the sense of life on which we oscillate as long as we live.¹⁹

This “oscillation” or rhythm between burden and relief demonstrates a particular dependence on others for our own self-understanding. That is, when we oscillate through the world of work and play we are presupposing a certain sensitivity to the inherent social modes of providing and receiving. The pressure to work, which compartmentalises the meaning of our lives and the meaning of others around us into an endless array of particularities and tasks alienates and subjugates an originary dimension of belonging that seeks out a “non-objective” embracing—a meaning and relation to others that resonates deeper than the simple accounting for and working alongside other people. Yet such a relief can only be temporary. The problem is we never truly escape a cycle or repetition of mutual dependence on each other. We end up ever repeating the same phrases and the same notes where the movement of human life is subverted to the rhythmic cycles of organic life. To put it in other terms, we are not really “performing together”, “truly listening to one another”, but rather taking turns at responding to the routine needs of individual wants and desires (be it an individual, community, or empire). For Patočka, this understanding of human existence organises into power relations, which think human beings “as a helper or an obstacle in access to the things that are the means of life”.²⁰

Patočka, however, believes that inherent to these modes of being with others is born a third possibility, a certain *freedom* in relating to other people, one in which we mutually grasp and make explicit the feeling of responsibility towards others through a living which is in dedication to them. What is important is here the level of cyclical and particularised repetition is re-appropriated and made problematic. Whereas the first two regions of relating to others is inherently acted out in the oscillations of mutual interdependence and need, this third possibility seeks to respond to others explicitly by asking what is unique about human life as a life lived together.²¹ Rather than co-dependence, the shift is towards co-existence, which “shakes our bondage to life” and in which

¹⁸ Patočka, “The ‘Natural’ World and Phenomenology”, 260.

¹⁹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 31.

²⁰ Patočka, “The ‘Natural’ World and Phenomenology”, 261.

²¹ Patočka sees a definitive rupture in responsibility towards others and the questions of living together in a community that was founded in the Ancient Greek polis: “In the community, the polis, in life dedicated to the polis, in political life, humans make for an autonomous, purely human meaningfulness, one of a mutual respect in activity significant for all its participants and which is not restricted to the preservation of physical life but which, rather is a source of a life that transcends itself in the memory of deed guaranteed precisely by the polis”., Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 63.

we seek to affirm the distinctness and difference of each human life as something universal and whole rather than coincidental and particular. Patočka, in noticeably evocative language, says that:

at the centre of our world the point is to reach from a merely given life to the emergence of a true life, and that is achieved in the movement that shakes the objective rootedness and alienation in a role, in objectification—at first a purely negative movement, one that shakes our bondage to life, setting free without revealing anything further; then with a movement that positively presents the essential—as life universal, giving birth to all in all, evoking life in the other, a self-transcendence toward the other and with them again to infinity”.²²

I suggest that Patočka means here when proposing an idea of a true life that is free of “objectification” that there is always a possibility in the plurality of human life to consistently reaffirm this very plurality which characterises and makes possible any individual person. Thus, I suggest that for Patočka, the terms “universal” and “infinite” are not meanings that depend on only insight or careful reflection, or a type of self-clarification, which with patience or artistic sensitivity we could uncover absolutely or certify. Rather, what is infinite and universal is the task of being with other people in a finite way that does not depend on them in the cycle of need. What is “essential” is that we live together, this we can never escape or transcend. But in order to become responsible for this essential structure of existence we must always think again “how” this living might be achieved. If it is simply left to the machinations of need and desire we never explicitly come to see other people as equal and open to the same question.

Hence, I argue, that for Patočka, the question of responsibility lies in the tension or dissonance between the rhythm of passive and active modes of belonging with others: between the passive need for acceptance (thematized in the temporal mode of the past, desiring, aestheticism, festival) and the active task to secure life for others and oneself in work (making present, asceticism, ordering, and objectification of people into modes of production). What is problematic for Patočka is not either mode of being with others but rather the ignorant vacillation of one mode to the other. Put differently, it is the cyclical rhythm of life towards itself which needs to be brought into question in the way that we understand and listen to each other. What is truly human is holding open and also making accountable everyone in the very question of what being human means. This means to no longer defer the meaning and significance in the relationship of our being with others to the function of an organic or industrial system. But because we cannot simply dismiss or remove ourselves from these aspects of our meaningful belongingness to other people what is needed is to resist the implicit rhythmic cycle of alleviation and burden and instead constantly withhold them as two different and “dissonant” modes of belonging together. That would mean that to give “birth to all in all” and to “evoke life in the other” could only be achieved if we are capable of withholding both the passivity and activity of our relationship towards others. In other terms, that we explicitly pay attention to the depth of our dependence on others in the shaping of our individual lives through a responsible “listening”, which both “passively accepts” and simultaneously “reacts”.

For this reason, I propose that this is what Patočka refers to when talking about a type of “active tension” that moves beyond “acceptance” and instead moves towards “initiative and preparation”.²³ A life of active tension for Patočka means “one of extreme risk and unceasing upward striving in which every pause is necessarily already a weakness for which the initiative of others lies in wait”.²⁴ Although such evocative terminology gestures towards an action of individual strength and autonomy, I believe it is in fact the “extreme risk” of a life in its explicit exposure towards others that shapes Patočka’s concern for responsible life. A life exposed amplifies the tension of belonging in the world in which “its chief dimension, is a seeking and a discovering of the other in oneself and

²² Patočka, “The ‘Natural’ World and Phenomenology”, 263.

²³ A type of initiation and preparation that Patočka argues is thematic of the existential temporal modality of the “future”. See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 38.

²⁴ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 38.

of oneself in the other”. Such a “dialogic” tension presupposes a listening to others in which we must seek to understand each other and yet never fail to make this understanding problematic. Or perhaps put differently, to never let the music stop unfolding.

I contend that a similar type of active tension could very well describe the situation of musicians performing in a band or orchestra. At any moment every individual is both listening and acting, hearing the movement and unfolding of the shared experience of the music, as well as equally responding, reacting in their own unique style to contribute and renew the musical piece.²⁵ In an argument that is similar to what Benson suggests for music, we could say to perform responsibly in our own life could be described as withholding the tension at the boundary of passivity and activity which seemingly amplifies the shared experience and possibilities of all who are involved. Such a performance escapes repetition and holds open the possibility and problems of true improvisation that “compels us to listen” and inspires others to the shared responsibility inherent in the very movement of human life as a question that we are all accountable for—a responsibility that not only Patočka’s work but also political acts stand as example.

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²⁵ This is particularly true of so called “free” improvisation.