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Écoute musicale et musicienne dans la pratique interculturelle

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article aborde la fonction de l'écoute en contexte de collaboration musicale interculturelle, en faisant référence à un certain nombre d'exemples tirés de l'expérience de l'auteur au sein du groupe vietnamien/suédois The Six Tones. À travers les concepts d'écoute de Pierre Schaeffer, l'article suggère que l'échange culturel prenne place dans un champ liminal, entre les traditions. Cette approche requiert une ouverture particulière qui peut se développer à travers une écoute musicienne, une forme d'écoute qui cherche activement à « innover dans la facture des objets sonores. »

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Musical and Musicianly Listening in Intercultural Practice

Stefan Östersjö

Listening is the origin of musical creativity. The musical ear organizes our perceptions. Furthermore, the composer Roger Sessions reminds us of how our listening also "creates, discovers, or becomes and remains aware of relationships between sounds, between musical ideas, and between rhythmic accents, motifs, phrases, periods, sections, movements. In the largest sense it develops into […] musical imagination."[1] This paper explores the function of listening in musical creativity through examples drawn from the work of the Swedish/Vietnamese group *The Six Tones*.[2]

The Six Tones are Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (who plays đàn tranh) and Ngô Trà My (who plays đàn bầu), two Vietnamese performers, and the author on the guitar (also playing many other stringed instruments). The point of departure for the group is to create an encounter between traditional Vietnamese music and contemporary Western modes of expression, employing mutual learning as the main method. Since 2006, The Six Tones has collaborated with composers and improvisers in Asia, USA and Europe, in an exploration of how musicians can engage in the creation of music which operates in a liminal space, between traditions. Over the years, the group has developed an increasingly interdisciplinary and explicitly political and conceptual practice, as a platform for the creation of experimental music theatre, choreographed work, film and installation art.[3] But how can we best understand the nature of music created in such globalized or intercultural contexts? How does musical creativity operate in a field where musical traditions meet, are cross-fertilized, contrasted and confronted?

But how can we best understand the concept of globalization in the field of musical performance? The term globalization is sometimes criticized on

1. Sessions, 1971, p. 31-32.

2. www.thesixtones.net (consulted on January 21, 2018).

3. See further Nguyễn & Östersjö (2017).

the grounds that many relations are merely transnational or limited to industrialized countries.[4] In the case of music, globalization demands a similarly nuanced understanding. Early examples of the global spread of music are closely linked to European colonialism. The development of "colonial" music in Latin America constitutes an early example, where European baroque music blended not only with the musical traditions of the native Americans, but also with the music of African slaves.[5] In contemporary society, influences go increasingly in more than one direction. The global spread of brass bands[6] and music education curricula in schools[7] are further and more widely spread examples of globalization in music in the first half of the 20th century. Further, new forms of music production related to recorded media developed, and thereby added a new perspective on international and globalized music.[8] Recording technology has indeed transformed musical listening. Not only can we today have immediate access to recordings of music from practically any part of the world, but also to music that may have its origins a 1000 years back in time. Donald Greig describes how the contemporary musician is "surrounded by a multitude of conflicting ideologies and aesthetics of performance,"[9] very much due to the development of recording technology:

> singers today are bombarded by different styles and idioms (and are practised in them), a situation which must have a determinant effect upon their aesthetic sensibility. […] The contemporary singer's ears are not innocent, then, and can never hope to undergo some kind of aesthetic cleansing whereby immersion in fifteenth-century polyphony can rinse away the stains of experience of music from the past six hundred years.[10]

Hence, one essential impact of globalization is how it affects musical listening, an impact which is to a large extent dependent also on the development of recording technology. Already in the 1950s, the composer Pierre Schaeffer was deeply engaged in the shift in our listening which resulted from the new possibility of hearing a precisely identical recorded sound. He finds that

> since the recorded tape indisputably gives the same *physical signal* each time it is played, the listener can perceive the same sound object. Then his repeated listening acts as a series of rough sketches. He is *working on his ear* as the instrumentalist *worked at his instrument*.[11]

The presence of recorded music is an aspect of globalization which is "working on the ears" of musicians around the world. The lack of "innocent ears" may indeed constitute a serious threat to the preservation of traditional music cultures. How then could a musician evade the threat of surfing on the surface of many cultures, and instead find ways of "working on one's

4. Schirato & Webb, 2003.

5. Grases, 2014.

6. Brucher & Reily, 2013.

7. Cox & Stevens, 2010.

8. Wetzel, 2012.

9. Greig, 1997, p. 150-151.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Schaeffer, 2017, p. 270.

ears" with the aim of inviting musical change, a listening which seeks the unexpected?

This is where the concepts of musical and musicianly listening, developed in the writings of Pierre Schaeffer, are useful. Musical and musicianly listening are defined by Michel Chion in the following way:

> Generally speaking *musical* listening or invention refers back to traditional heritage, to established and accepted structures and values, which it attempts to rediscover or recreate; whilst *musicianly* hearing or invention seeks rather to locate interesting new phenomena or to innovate in the facture of sound objects. The musical attitude rests on old values; the musicianly attitude actively seeks new ones.[12]

12. Chion, 2009, p. 39.

Chion continues by noting how these two modes of listening are indeed not in opposition, but better understood as modalities that complement each other: "By going backwards and forwards, by successive approximations between these two approaches, it might be possible to discover and establish values for a new music."[13] But how can such an understanding of a musician's listening contribute to an understanding of intercultural collaboration? First, the notion of mutual learning, of sharing musical traditions, and creating new music from a gradually deepening mutual understanding, is not sufficient to describe the practice in our group. Rather, we would often find ourselves in a no-man's land, between the aesthetics of our respective cultures. We have previously analysed rehearsals and performances of a specific traditional piece (see further Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2013), where the artistic aim was to develop strategies for how to transition from performing "inside" the Vietnamese tradition to free improvisation (which we at the time considered as a largely "Western" tradition). But rather than moving from one tradition to the other, we increasingly found that we weren't anymore firmly situated in either of these traditions. The difficulties we experienced in making aesthetic judgement in this working process may then be understood as the result of working in a liminal space, where such values are not yet established.

13. *Ibid*.

If the attitude of musicianly listening is that of actively looking for the unexpected in a sonic material, in intercultural exchange, this may demand a particular openness in relation to the other, but also in relation to other musical traditions. When understood also as a practice set in a social context, Schaeffer's conception of musicianly listening strikes a note similar to Gadamer's discussion of the conditions for the hermeneutic experience, where he advocates for a radical kind of openness, an openness that is the result of listening[14]: "Anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship."[15] Even though the Gadamerian concept of openness may constitute an

14. For a further discussion see Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2013.

15. Gadamer, 2004, p. 355.

argument for a method based on mutual learning, we have come to realize how there are irreducible entities in the other that remain in a sense closed to us. We find Édouard Glissant's claim for the "right to opacity" a useful figure of thought, in order to grasp the complexity of intercultural exchange. Rather than "understanding," "*coexistence*" may be the outcome, through which various forms of expression are woven together, and in order to "understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components."[16]

16. Glissant, 1989, p. 190.

The pair of musical and musicianly listening cuts deep into the embodiment of the musician, whose tacit knowing is a musical backbone which can be understood as a performer's habitus.[17] If "musical listening" then, is resonant with tradition, its counterpart, "musicianly listening" constitutes a resistance to the performer's habitus, in a manner which Coessens and Östersjö discuss as an expression of hexis,[18] with reference to Lachenmann's notion of "denial of habit":

> If we imagine the performer interacting with the affordances of musical materials, there is a risk of falling into instrumental habits—in other words, *clichés*. The critical perspective that Lachenmann provides may offer useful clues to a more general understanding of the function of hexis in musical creation. In an aesthetic experience allowing such a position on a denial of habit, the exploration of the affordances of musical material can be understood to oscillate between an affirmative phase, where resonance between the instrument and other musical materials are in focus, and a critical phase of denial, where a "compositional" reading attempts to decompose these habits. The hexis of a performer needs to be continuously understood as a complex interplay between processes of "resonance" and "critique" or "resistance" — a "critique" that constitutes this denial of habit in musical performance[19].

17. Habitus refers to how socially acquired embodied schemata and artistic expert know-how are combined, for instance in a musical performer, in a specific field, which "tends to favour experiences likely to reinforce it. . . . to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 61).

18. Coessens and Östersjö suggest that in performance, a performer's habitus is manifested in an expression of hexis, activating embodied skills and techniques while also being "constitutive of artistic choice, reflection, and action" (Coessens and Östersjö, 2014, p. 336).

19. Coessens & Östersjö, 2014, p 341.

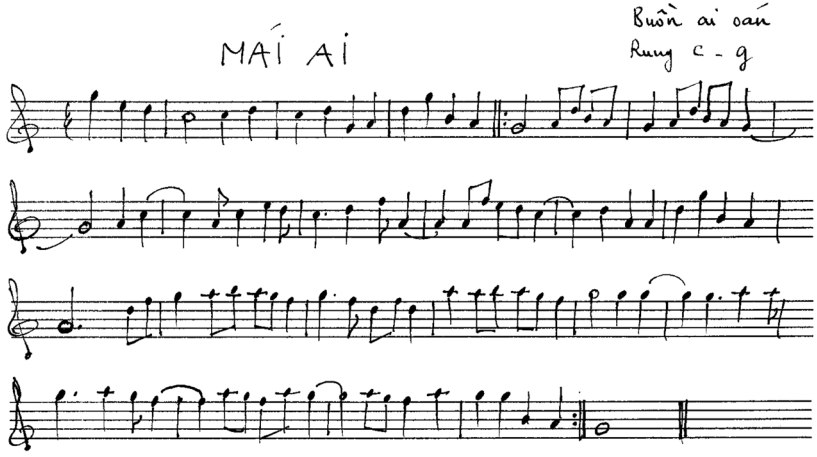
Clearly, the pair of musical and musicianly listening may also be understood through the processes of resonance and resistance. Musicianly listening is constituted partly by a denial of habit. It activates a curiosity, wishing to give sound to something beyond a known meaning. But a theory of habitus and hexis in musical performance builds on an embodied and multi-modal understanding of human perception with which Schaeffer was not familiar. We will return below to the question of what such an ecological perspective on musical performance implies in the construction of a phenomenology of listening.

This paper follows the fate of a traditional Vietnamese tune through two projects with The Six Tones, also involving the American composer Richard Karpen. The piece is often called *Nam Mái* and is commonly found in *Tuồng* theatre, a Vietnamese form of theatre which shares common traits with

Beijing opera. It is in the *Ai* mode, which affords a grave and serious expression. Since *Tuồng* is dramatic theatre, normally also bent towards tragedy, this mode is rather common here. In *Tuồng*, it functions as instrumental music to be played during recitation. However, the piece has several names and some prefer to call it *Mái Ai*, which would indicate that it is not typical of the *Ai* mode, but somewhere in-between the seriousness of this mode and lighter musical forms (see Figure 1). It should be noted here that the Vietnamese modes are characterised more by the nature of the ornamentation, i.e. the type of vibrato and articulations, than the set of pitches. There are examples of modes, like *Oán* and *Xuân*, where the pitches are the same but the ornaments are different, and they are used in slow, serious and happy, fast music respectively.[20] In the travel to a different musical tradition, a Vietnamese tune is likely to transform from such an ornamentation-driven identity to a new nature defined by pitch and melodic structure.

20. For a further discussion see Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2013.

FIGURE 1 A notation of *Nam Mai*, or *Mái Ai* as it is called here[21].



21. In this mode, the *B* natural is microtonally flattened, the *F* natural is slightly sharpened and a vibrato ornament is added to *C* and *G*.

Nam Mái made its way into the collaboration between The Six Tones and Richard Karpen, in the morning of the second working day on the film *Seven Stories*. We had set out on a project – also including the choreographer Marie Fahlin and the director Jörgen Dahlqvist – which was to follow rules similar to those of Dogme 95: each scene should relate to a story from a specific play from *Tuồng* Theatre. Its choreography should be developed from gestures in this story and the music should be created on the same day as the film was shot. The film was also to be a documentary of its own

creation.[22] The play for the second day was Đào Tam Xuân, the story of a female general whose husband was executed due to the ill doings of the queen, and whose son was killed when attempting to prevent the execution. We started the session by presenting music from *Tuồng* theatre to the artists involved. As the first piece, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy played *Nam Mái*, and we decided on the spot to use it for this scene. Obviously, when she played the piece here, she was using her musical listening and the performance traditions of traditional Vietnamese music. This is how Richard Karpen describes his encounter with the piece:

> I was immediately drawn in to *Nam Mái*. It was not a matter of simply "liking" the melody or being attracted to the musical qualities. In the case of *Nam Mái*, hearing it created an instant response in my thoughts and in my body. I heard it as if I had heard it before and it opened up a range of abstract memories and feelings. There is certain music that acts like a "carrier signal"; in fact I now think that this is exactly what music mostly is in general. As our brains "process" musical "signals," deep memory connections are triggered, as if we were searching for meaning, perhaps scanning memory in order to assemble an "image" in order to decode the carrier. It seems that emotional memory is where the brain finds the most effective set of pathways for decoding music and so our response is emotional. One could make the point that all sensory stimulation acts as a carrier that triggers memory. But we're talking about music and my experience over many years is that music is an especially complex carrier signal that the brain processes by searching deep and wide across "universal" and individual experience, not of music but of everything. Our responses to the searching through emotional memory are perhaps the most complex we have as humans. I love that the word "sublime" is used in physical science to describe the passing of materials from solid states directly into vapor without first becoming liquid. It's a perfect metaphor to help us think about how music acts directly on memory without the intermediary state of literal meaning, and that we would describe the most powerful of musical experience as being sublime.[23]

It is not obvious how to analyze this statement. Is Karpen using musical listening here, and responding to *Nam Mái* as if it were a piece of Western music? Or, is it perhaps "cultural listening," which, following Schaeffer, may experience musical identity in "the message, the meaning, the values it conveys"?[24] I would rather understand it as a reflection on an embodied experience at the level of musical "universals," which can be understood as derived from a shared "interconnected network of cognition, emotion, motion, and expression."[25] In Karpen's account, we can see the complexity of how musical perception is situated in between the cultural and the biological spheres. Any intercultural collaboration is bound to emphasize this inbetweenness. Here, the performance of *Nam Mái* draws Karpen into a creative encounter with

22. While these rules functioned quite well as a springboard for the creative process, we failed to predict the complexity of the post-production process and the film is still waiting to be premiered.

23. Karpen, personal communication, February 26, 2017.

24. Schaeffer, 2017, p. 87.

25. Leman & Maes, 2014, p. 241.

music from a culture situated straight across the globe, and yet it immediately becomes the impetus to the making of two large-scale compositions.

In the scene we created for *Seven Stories* that day, the music was structured in relation to the narrative and the choreography. Most of the music was played by myself and Ngô Trà My, while Nguyễn Thanh Thủy performed the choreography. In the making of the music "we were listening with our eyes as much as with our ears."[26] The music, for đàn bầu and Vietnamese electric guitar, was distorted, rough and often violently expressive, attempting to create a parallel musical trajectory to the story told through the choreography. Still, the two musicians made extensive use of the traditional ornamentation, transforming its traditional shapes into dense clusters of aggressive and noisy gesture. Here, we encounter a situation which is not fully acknowledged in Schaeffer's phenomenology of listening: the embodied nature of human perception. I would suggest that in this instance of musical creativity, musicianly listening is activated through an interaction with the gestural qualities in the musical material and the choreography, an interaction grounded in embodied listening.[27]

Already during the work on *Seven Stories*, Karpen got the idea of creating a triple concerto with orchestra, using this song. In further discussions, the project developed into a counterpart to *Seven Stories*, by referring to the film materials and a re-reading of the original choreographies. All negotiations of ideas for the piece happened remotely, until the last weeks before the premiere, when all artists got together again to create the solo parts and finalize the video in a studio at DXARTS in Seattle. Some months before, Karpen had sent the final score to the piece and it had very little to say about the solo parts (see Figure 2).

The empty staff lines in the parts for the three soloists can be understood by reference to the artistic methods which Karpen and Östersjö developed for devising composed music without the use of notation, starting with *Strandlines* (2007) for guitar and electronics.[28] *Nam Mái* is the third composition developed along similar lines by Karpen and The Six Tones.[29] The orchestral score is entirely drawn from the musical structures in *Nam Mái* and is organized in a manner which gives a certain combination of freedom and constraints for the soloists. One could think of the orchestration in *Nam Mái* a bit like a set design, providing a series of distinct scenes for the three solo instruments, or, as Richard Karpen put it in conversation with the conductor Stilian Korov before the recording session with the Seattle Symphony: "think of the orchestral part as the music in a film and that the solo parts are the film."[30] Indeed, the score also obtained this function of a set in the working sessions in Seattle. With Karpen's analogy then, we met to start making the film together, a bit like the filmmaker Mike Leigh would

26. Karpen, personal communication, February 26, 2017.

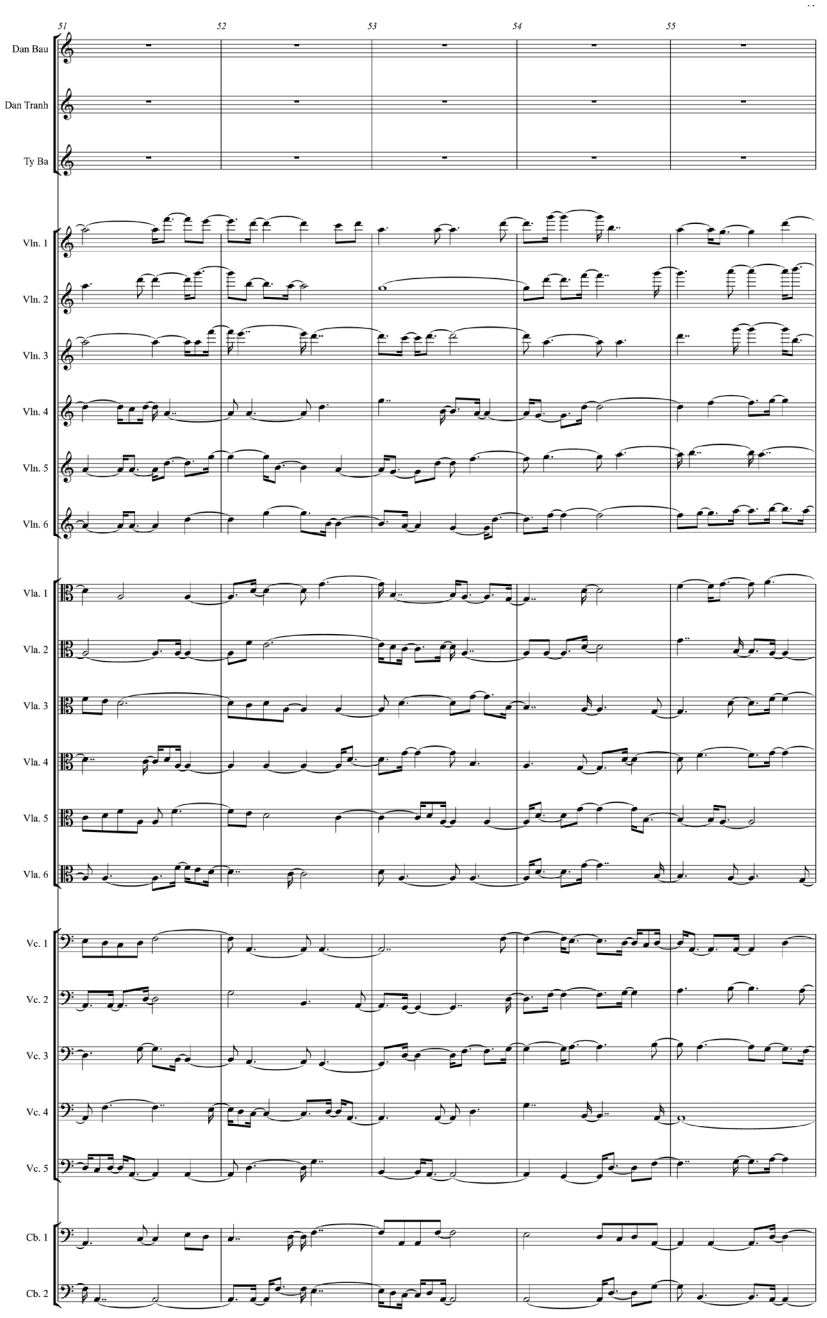
27. By embodied listening is intended an understanding of human perception of music as embodied, enacted and embedded in an environment, along the lines of the musicologically grounded theory of embedded music cognition, see further Leman & Maes, 2014.

28. For a more in-depth discussion see Östersjö, 2008.

29. A CD with a new recording of Strandlines and a first recording of Nam Maí is forthcoming on NEUMA Records (Karpen, in press).

30. Karpen, personal communication, February 26, 2017.

FIGURE 2 Bars 51-55 of the score to *Nam Maí*, in the middle of the duo for electric guitar and đàn bầu.



draw his actors together to start creating the script and the film through a collaborative process.

In the first two sections of the piece, the đàn bầu is played in ways that do not build on traditional Vietnamese articulation and phrasing. In the joint shaping of this material, Karpen and Trà My would engage in musicianly listening, which of course was challenging and novel to them in very different respects. The piece starts with a đàn bầu solo which becomes a dialogue with the orchestra. In the second part, after a short duo cadenza together with the electric guitar and a tutti (with a short first entry also of the đàn tranh), the orchestra creates an increasingly dense texture of melodic figurations. A duo for electric guitar and đàn bầu starts, where Karpen had a very particular idea for how the latter part should interact with the orchestra. These melodic lines should be basically non-vibrato, and articulated from within the cloud of pitches in the orchestra. The rhythmical shaping of these figurations, although technically feasible, turned out to be a great challenge to Trà My, a challenge which demanded an intentional effort to find different qualities in the given musical material.

Jean-Luc Nancy asks, "What secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?"[31] When we turn towards the sonority in itself through musicianly listening, the question of musical meaning may remain as an unresolved dissonance, creating a different meaning, beyond traditional forms. Trà My describes her experience of such negotiations in the making of *Nam Mái* again, more like an activation of musicianly listening:

> The way that Richard set the piece up, I can float freely in the material from *Nam Mái*, operating the playing techniques and the sonority of the đàn bầu. I know that I cannot fully understand the intentions that Richard had with the piece but I can still draw out my own story from my subjective experience of the music, so that my sound is brought together with the sonority of the entire piece, as if we were telling the same story.[32]

Karpen and Trà My would work on this đàn bầu part in every session, and more or less before and after each time it was played. Relentlessly, they would continue to refine the material, a learning process which involves an acknowledgement of the opacity of the other at one end, and an embodied listening experience at the other. The ecology of intercultural collaboration is intrinsically built on trust. In this liminal space between traditions, aesthetic judgement is sometimes suspended. Here, musicians from different cultures and traditions interact in a site where sharing and mutual learning often must alternate with actions based on the acceptance of the opacity of the other. A

31. Nancy, 2007, p. 5.

32. Ngô, personal communication, March 1, 2017.

site, in which musicianly listening remains a central method, in the search for invention in the very fabric of the musical material.

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