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‘For whom the bell tolls’: Listening and its Implications

Response to John Butt

DAVID R. M. IRVING

When John Donne (1572–1631) penned the following oft-quoted phrase, he had no reservations about the implications of a bell’s symbolism, whether it called his co-religionists to prayer or marked their passing: ‘And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.’ In another passage from the same Meditation, the poet also seemed to profess a belief in the impossibility of divorcing oneself from one’s surroundings: ‘Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings?’ In other words, he suggested that no one who possessed full auditory capacities could ignore perceptible sonic stimuli (and their import) within his or her environment.

The reasons why modern humans produce organized sound with the deliberate aim of eliciting an emotional response — that is, the reasons why we perform music — range from biocultural necessity to social function, and from aesthetic desire to religious ritual. Yet since the late nineteenth century historical musicologists have focused most of their energies on the study of European musical ‘works’, by which we refer loosely to discrete, notated musical compositions that constitute a ‘canon’. As Reinhard Strohm has shown, the work-concept can be dated back to the fifteenth century, and at the beginning of the sixteenth century, according to Rob C. Wegman, ‘the musical work came to be defined in terms of its durability, its capacity to transcend the immediate decay of musical sound’. It was only around 1800, however, that the ‘regulative work-concept’, as Lydia Goehr terms it, began to shape

1 John Donne, ‘Meditation XVII’, Devotions uponEmergent Occasions, and Several Steps in my Sickness [sic] (London, 1624), 416. (A portion of this Meditation’s text was popularized in the poem ‘No man is an island’; and the phrase ‘For whom the bell tolls’ provided the title of a novel by Ernest Hemingway, published in 1940.)

2 Ibid., 415.


Western public taste and values in music. We may ask, of course: What about other musics? Is the work-concept universal, or is it culturally specific to the West? Do practitioners and observers of musics from non-Western cultures listen to music or hear it in ways that are fundamentally different from those employed by their Western cousins? But before we move on to tackle such broad questions, we should acknowledge that even if our discussion is restricted to the constructed canon and practice of Western art music, as John Butt’s has been, we are still faced with an immeasurably complex field, taking into account the multiple layers of meaning, interpretation and intentionality that are implicit in the canon.

In addressing the question of whether musical works contain an ‘implied listener’, Butt has shown how the listener can be categorized as ‘implied’ or ‘internal’. The tripartite scheme of listening proposed by Butt has raised additional issues about aural perceptions and social functions of different musics, and leads, appropriately, to no concrete conclusions, but provokes more questions than it answers. Through examinations of large-scale narrative vocal works, Butt has discussed the role of the listener in determining how a piece might be constructed by the composer and executed by the performer. In this brief response, however, I aim to problematize the theme of this discussion further by proposing an alternative set of categories, punctuating my text with some historical vignettes and illustrative examples, before arguing that the implied listeners contained in musical works are usually culturally specific. My three categories are: (1) musical works for the listener; (2) musical works not for the listener; and (3) another significant area of social practice on which there has been complete silence in the discussion so far (or an ‘implied listening’): that of domestic musical works and the practice of the amateur musician – particularly in cases where this is an activity carried out in isolation.

The extent to which some musical works do contain implied listeners is epitomized in the famous anecdote about the teenage Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the Vatican. As the story goes, the singers in the Sistine Chapel jealously guarded the source materials for Gregorio Allegri’s setting of the Miserere, a work considered by a seventeenth-century pontiff to be so beautiful that it could not be squandered through public dissemination and reproduction. In this sense, it was intended for listening and reverent appreciation in a unique location. Young Mozart, however, brazenly set the notes to paper from memory several hours after his first hearing, forever demythologizing this work, and in 1771 Charles Burney published another

6 There were, however, some exceptions to this rule, for which papal dispensation was given. See Charles Burney, The Present State of Music in France and Italy: or, The Journal of a Tour through those Countries, Undertaken to Collect Materials for a General History of Music (London, 1771), 275–81.
7 See Leopold Mozart’s letter to his wife dated Rome, 14 April 1770; The Letters of Mozart and his Family, ed. Emily Anderson (London, 1985), 127.
version that was released for general consumption. Any ‘implied listener’ in this work was thus endowed with the roles of consumer, reader, performer and analyst, amongst others, more than a century after its original composition. Allegri’s Miserere thus moved from the gift economy within which it had been produced (that is, it was written for a patron rather than being offered for sale on a commercial basis) to a market economy, where it was commodified, reified and objectified.

We should remember that within ecclesiastical spaces, of course, there has always been an awareness of differences in auditory perception, particularly during the early-modern period, with ‘loud’ and ‘soft’ instruments being used in different contexts, and with the rood-screen making a physical, visual and auditory barrier between high and low classes, between elite patrons and common spectators. For commoners, strains from the choir might provide the only access to the enactment of ritual from which they were visually excluded. Were these plebeians the principal listeners implied in musical works that were performed there? Possibly not. Butt refers to pieces of sacred Renaissance polyphony that do not require an earthly audience, although he acknowledges that ‘such repertories at least require a performer, and performance itself is impossible without a considerable degree of ingrained listening practice’ (p. 6). However, this observation leaves aside thousands of sung Masses over the centuries, which were paid for by bequests and performed for a divine audience in order to release the souls of their wealthy founders from purgatory (although not all of the musical settings of the Mass would be recognizable as ‘musical works’, according to the definitions offered above). Historically, church music has functioned primarily to inspire awe, reverence and devotion – or, as some might suggest, to alleviate considerable tedium. The often extravagant villancicos (devotional vocal music in vernacular languages) that were performed in churches throughout the Iberian world from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, for example, acted as a means of attracting and entertaining churchgoers – the implied listeners in this case.

On the other hand, if one is to examine additional media of representation, it becomes clear that some musical works – or aspects of musical works – are not intended for the listener. Much of the word-painting to which Butt refers in Bach’s Passions, such as musical figures denoting clouds or the spilling of coins (the latter in the aria following Judas’s return to the Temple in the St Matthew Passion), might be self-evident in aural representation. However, visual symbolism is often contained on the page itself, requiring specific visual recognition before its meaning can be made available to the listener. One such example is the writing for treble instruments in the

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'Kreuzige' choruses of the St John Passion, where the shape of the notes draws out a cross – although this formulation probably passes unnoticed by most listeners, unless they have access to a score and are aware of these sorts of symbolism.

From the dilemma of visual versus aural, we come to yet another dimension of unlistened works: that of musical salutations and 'puzzle pieces'. Salutary works of music have long been exchanged between friends (or enemies) in musical fraternities, and offered by musicians of low socio-economic status to their patrons. Such works serve the function of greeting and/or rendering homage. Although they might be Mass settings, keyboard works or orchestral suites, they could equally be puzzle pieces or canons with no specific performance objective in mind. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists, Pietro Cerone (1566–1625) amongst them, often proposed musical ‘enigmas’, many of them canons that could be constructed from bare essentials.11 In this sense, the implications for an internalized listening practice are potentially linked to the ‘hearing-in’ process of symbol recognition as proposed by Butt, who draws this idea from the ‘seeing-in’ strategy found in philosophies of visual art. Mental perception of a musical work (as opposed to aural perception) makes little difference in this context, depending on the background of the reader.

But again, mental appreciation is often a lone activity, and if there is a danger of perceived silence, then musical practice, even solitary, might be in order. This point brings us to the issue of the performer as ‘auto-auditor’ in domestic music, and questions whether musical works composed and published specifically for solo contemplation or religious edification can function as works in which a listener is implied. Even if the exact devotional intentions of pious early-modern Lutherans – to use one group as an example – remain somewhat elusive, Butt’s second category of the listening aspect of music, that which ‘presupposes an attentive listening or even a participating audience’, can still apply. Musical works of this type certainly contain an implied practitioner, as is clearly evident, for example, in the canon of keyboard works that were produced specifically for home consumption from the sixteenth century onwards. Musical works intended for the domestic market present a category in which the performer and the audience often appear to have been conflated.

Listening, in all its shapes and forms, is the backbone of musical practice – and, as Butt has suggested, the reason for it – but it remains rooted in the contexts and cultures within which it takes place. If musical works do contain an implied listener – and here we have focused specifically on the Western canon of art music – then this implied listener is too often intended to be one drawn from a racially or culturally exclusive group, and from a particular social class. Only by questioning the sociological implications for identifying the intended audience of the composer, and

11 See Enrique Alberto Arias, ‘Cerone and his Enigmas’, Anuario musical, 44 (1989), 85–114. These examples come from Pietro Cerone’s treatise El melopeo y maestro: Tractado de música teorica y practica; en que se pone por extenso; lo que uno para hazerse perfecto musico ha menester saber (Naples, 1613).
his/her reasons for applying that choice, can we expose new layers of meaning that are bound up in culturally specific ‘works’.

Of course, many of the hermeneutic frameworks that we are attempting to construct in order to engage with the concept of listening within Western cultures of art music could be seen as inapplicable or irrelevant in the context of non-Western musical cultures (and even many types of Western popular music). In order to illustrate this point further, I should like to quote from the Mémoire sur la musique des Chinois, written in the 1770s by the French Jesuit Jean Joseph Marie Amiot (1718–93). In this publication, he points out the frustrations of an early-modern European musician attempting to impose his idea of an implied listener on members of the Chinese imperial court. Amiot arrived in Beijing in 1751, and he soon attempted to convince the Chinese literati of the ‘superiority’ of European music: he performed the keyboard works Les Sauvages and Les Cyclopes by Jean-Philippe Rameau, as well as works for flute by Michel Blavet. But these ‘made no impression on the Chinese’, as Amiot related:

I saw in their countenances only a cold and absent air, which convinced me that nothing I played was at all felt. I asked them one day what they thought of our music, and begged them to speak sincerely. They answered with the utmost politeness possible, that, ‘our music not being made for their ears, nor their ears for our music, it was not surprising that they did not feel its beauties, as they did those of their own country’. ‘The airs of our music (adds a doctor among them, called Han-lin, and then in the service of the emperor) pass from the ear to the heart, and from the heart to the soul. […] We feel, we understand it: what you have been playing has no effect on us: the airs of our ancient music were still of a higher order. They were not to be heard without rapture.’

It could be argued that Amiot and other protagonists in early-modern intercultural dialogues about music were attempting to prove (perhaps unwittingly) that an implied listener in works of Western art music could be found universally. But more often than not, they failed. This was usually because the target audience had no long experience of entrainment within a particular musical aesthetic, or because they possessed a thoroughly ingrained suspicion of foreign cultures. Most of the world’s musics are culturally, geographically and chronologically specific, and rely on the long accumulation of traditions. We see in our own times, however, that all such constructed barriers and inherited practices are gradually being broken down through the inexorable processes of globalization.

Works of Western art music – according to whatever definition we may choose – are ephemeral creatures that we can briefly capture, express or experience. But ultimately we must return to an unashamedly anthropocentric perspective to argue

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that it is not so much a listener that is implied in *them*, as a musical sentience and desire that is implicit in *us*.

**ABSTRACT**
This response highlights the cultural specificity of the ‘work-concept’ and questions the tripartite scheme of listening proposed by John Butt. It offers an alternative set of listening categories, and makes reference to the issues of early-modern class structures and the role of music in religious devotions. The argument is supported by critiques of historical vignettes that include the story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s transcription of Gregorio Allegri’s *Miserere* and Jean Joseph Marie Amiot’s demonstration of French music to a Chinese audience in the mid-eighteenth century.