

Hegel on Time in Music

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(1) Hegel notes that when we listen to music sometimes we, “...desire to beat time...”¹ How is it possible to *beat time* when listening to music? What is it about ourselves, and/or about time, that allows for us to clap our hands, stomp our feet, and to move, sing and dance along with a musical beat? How is it that we are able to *keep* time? Or, what is it that explains or accounts for the sense of *timing* that we naturally possess?

(2) There is an important difference between the *spatial* art forms of architecture, sculpture and painting, and the *temporal* art form of music. Hegel writes, “...if the inner life... is in fact to be manifested... the genuinely correspondent material cannot be of such a kind that it *persists* on its own account... we need a material which for our apprehension is without stability and even as it arises and exists vanishes once more.”² In other words, with respect to works of art that exist in space, the works endure. They continue to exist after they are shaped. But this is not the case with music. Music is temporal, not spatial. And as temporal music is fleeting. It vanishes almost as soon as it appears and must be continuously replenished. How is it that this appearing, vanishing and replenishing is a manifestation of the *inner life* of the listener?

(3) Our own inner lives are permanently changing. We ourselves are never still. Music possesses this same characteristic. It is thus a mode of

1 Hegel, G.W.F., *Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume II. Oxford University Press, 1975. Translation by T.M. Knox. Page 906.

2 *Ibid.* Page 889.

expression capable of reflecting our internal life, our world of thoughts. Architecture, sculpture and painting all fall short due to the permanence of their matter. But sound, the matter of music, vanishes almost as quickly as it appears and is thereby distinct in form from the matter of the visual arts which subsists external to ourselves. Works of architecture and sculpture endure in three-dimensional space. Paintings continue in two-dimensional space. But music is distinct, it is one-dimensional. Music is offered in time. And as such it vanishes almost as quickly as it appears. Music exists fleetingly but it does not persist.

(4) Hegel states that music, "...is the art of the soul and is directly addressed to the soul."³ Thus music is the best suited of all of the art forms to express our inner life. For music *moves* just as our inner lives move. Music does not portray the external objective world. It expresses our internal subjective world. And it does so to the fullest depths of our individual personality. Hegel further explains that music, "...does not produce an object *persisting* in space but shows through its free unstable soaring that it... is carried by the inner subjective life..."⁴ Unlike architecture, sculpture and painting, the objects of which continue to exist without a viewer, music cannot exist in the absence of the person who listens. Music lives *within* its audience rather than external to it. The two become one.

(5) Time for Hegel, "...is the universal element in music."⁵ Time is also the universal element in ourselves. As Hegel states, "The self is in time and

3 *Ibid.* Page 891.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.* Page 907.

time is the being of the subject himself.”⁶ Music then, as distinct from the art forms of architecture, sculpture and painting, expresses what we are precisely because it functions *as* we are. We are temporal in our own being just as music is in its. And this is why music has the capacity to affect us so deeply. It offers us the purest, highest possible expressions of our own true nature. Unlike buildings, statues and paintings, musical sounds have no permanent subsistence. They are fleeting. Our lives are very much like music.

(6) Hegel also writes, “...the point of time proves at once to be its own negation, since, as soon as *this* “now” is, it supersedes itself by passing into another “now”...”⁷ Let us consider this passage carefully. Hegel suggests that each point of (in) time, or each now, passes into another as soon as it exists. How are we to understand this, what is Hegel's intent? When we state that each point in time passes into another as soon as it exists, do we mean to suggest that each itself exists without duration? Our answer must be *no*. For if a point in time is defined as existing without duration, then no number of points in time in succession will add up to any elapsed time. Thus if philosophers wish to posit the existence of time, then each point in time shall have to be understood and defined as containing duration, or as enduring. We are speaking only metaphorically when we refer to a “point in time” as if it contains no actual duration. Otherwise time will never amount to anything. Nor will we. Whatever Hegel is suggesting, he is not suggesting that each point in time is itself without duration. Does our experience of time corroborate this reasoning? If we listen carefully, we shall discover that it

6 *Ibid.* Page 908.

7 *Ibid.* Page 907.

does.

(7) Hegel notices that, “...the purpose of the bar is to establish a specific temporal unit... and to bring about the continual renewal of this time-measure...”⁸ A bar is composed of a certain number of beats. A beat is a point in musical time. Music may be represented symbolically by a composer in written form. And the transition from the visual/spatial representation to a temporal manifestation takes place as a performance. But how is it that when musicians perform they are able to order each beat the prescribed temporal distances apart from those next to it? Visual cues of equal or proportional distances on paper do not serve this function, they serve only to convey to the musician what the composer wishes for them to play. But how is it that the musician is able to execute the music in the temporal successions that are prescribed by the composer? Hegel begins to answer this question when he explains that, “...the beat proceeds from the spirit alone...”⁹ What is Hegel contending?

(8) Let us consider a technique used by drummers that is known as a *flam*. Two strokes are made in rapid succession, one with each hand. In between the strokes there is silence. In a properly executed flam neither stroke misses the beat. Yet there exists an audible gap of time between the individual strokes. A recent “southern rock” band had two drummers who were of very distinct musical personalities. One played an aggressive rock style, the other a relaxed jazz style.¹⁰ It is not uncommon when listening to

8 *Ibid.* Page 915.

9 *Ibid.* Page 916.

10 The Allman Brothers Band (1969-2013), Macon, Georgia, U.S.A. Butch Trucks (1947-2017) and Jai Johanny Johanson (1944-).

observe the two drummers playing a flam in combination. This takes place on any given beat when the aggressive drummer audibly strokes his snare drum *before* the relaxed drummer does the same. Yet neither drummer has missed the beat. Both are on time. This experience demonstrates that a beat requires an amount of time during which to take place. Thus to define the term *beat* as something possessing no endurance would be inconsistent with our conscious experience of music, of time and of ourselves. The common metaphorical use of the phrase “point in time” as referring to an isolated instant that is theoretically without movement must not be confused with any tenable philosophical definition of what a point in time or a beat in music might actually be. When Hegel states that the beat proceeds from the spirit, he is defining spirit as possessing the possibility of experiencing a beat as existing for an audible duration.

(9) Hegel has contended that the beat proceeds from the spirit. And the question has been asked, how are we able to sense and order time so precisely? Hegel offers a solution when he writes that time is the being of the subject. For Hegel there is a sense in which we *are* time. Time is in some manner of speaking a *pure intuition*. It is the pure intuition of ourselves. And we are able to move to a beat and keep time precisely because we exist *as* time. The anticipation of a beat in music involves nothing more than directing our attention toward our own essential nature as a temporal being permanently experiencing the intuition of consistently measurable endurance as our essential characteristic.

(10) Is there a primordial inner time that is devoid of beat? A kind of

temporal source? Is there a beat-less music, one of *pure* temporality? Our answer is *yes*. This must be presupposed, or we would not be able to keep time. There exists a uniform pace, a consistently measurable endurance to time. There is a flow to time that we naturally sense, or purely intuit. Music as we know it would not be possible unless this were the case. Our sense of time, our timing cannot exist as a result of our experience of change, such as Berkeley and others contend. For if this were true and we were to play a recording at different speeds, we would not sense any difference in the amount of elapsed time since the amount of change would be identical in each case. Change is not the *measure* of time. Change is the *product* of time. Time therefore can be nothing other than a pure intuition. Time is the pure intuition of itself as substance.

(11) We are now in a position to conclude. The reason that music is played with a consistent beat is that it is more effective, more aesthetically pleasing than would be random sequences of musical sounds played without a time pattern. Music requires a beat that the listener can feel, anticipate and move with. No coordination between musicians, or between musicians and audience, would be possible unless all possessed the same sense of time and conformed to it. Time is of the essence. And the beat goes on...