

Sound, Music, Affect

Theorizing Sonic Experience

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CHAPTER TWO

Felt as Thought (or, Musical Abstraction and the Semblance of Affect)

eldritch Priest

(Please note that this is a production proof.)

As Plato noted and Muzak exploited, music has a peculiar way of simulating and affecting expressions of vital activity. A number of recent studies (Gilbert 2004; Goodman 2009; Redner 2011; Henriques 2011) have tried to address this in terms of Spinoza's formulation of affect as extrapolated by Deleuze and Guattari. However, Susanne Langer's philosophy of feeling, deeply indebted to both Whitehead and Cassirer, offers another way of understanding affect as a symbolic and speculative event. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari's work, Langer's approach to the life of feeling, in its several and varied modes, takes its conceptual cues from musical processes and experience. In this essay I draw out some of the metaphysical implications of Langer's philosophy to recover from her theory of art the speculative potential that remains buried in its discussion of semblance and abstraction. While Langer's aesthetics is taken chiefly to revolve around art's semantic properties (a decidedly non-discursive semantic), her philosophy is grounded on the premise that human perception is characterized by a basic and fundamental process of abstraction that gives expression to the flux of experience in 'its immediate effect on our sensibility' (Langer 1967: 59). For Langer, the human organism not only possesses a capability to abstract a qualitative-relational value from sensory particulars but develops a capacity to live *in* and *through* these abstractions that are expressive of an 'import' which doubles sensation with a 'likeness' – semblance – 'entirely congruent with forms of mentality and vital experience' (ibid.). This is to

say that perception is fashioned of livable abstractions, or what in Langer's peculiar sense are symbols wherein 'the factor of significance [...] is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function' (1953: 32). Although the argument that human perception is composed of symbolic forms abstracted from patterns in the experiential field is not an entirely novel one (one need only cite Freud's or Wittgenstein's views on the symbolic nature of human psychical life), Langer's assertion that abstractions are *a mode of feeling* continuous with the vital activities that course across and through the organism is. Feeling, which Langer defines as 'whatever is felt in any way, as sensory stimulus or inward tension, pain, emotion or intent', is not separable from mentality, but in fact 'is the mark of mentality' (1967: 4). The abstractions in which we feel significance, quality, or value, are a *phase* of organic processes in which vital activities cross a threshold of complexity and intensity to be felt as thought, felt abstractly. On this view, feeling marks a continuity between material powers and conceptual force. And it is for this reason that art features so prominently in Langer's philosophy. Aesthetic experience is exemplary of how our organism perceives something decidedly nonsensuous in sensuous assemblies, and how in this it becomes liberated 'from the finitude of actuality' and open to 'the endless reaches of potentiality' (1930: 51).

The idea of abstraction as a mode of access to the domain of potentiality is intriguing in that it shows experience to be composed of a speculative dimension that is entered in its occasion of being felt, being felt as thought. The arts play a major role in exemplifying this dimension for, in their created semblance – their sheer appearing as forms of feeling dissociated 'from the physical and causal order' (Langer 1953: 47) – they show themselves as elaborate techniques of abstraction and vehicles *for* speculation. What the arts speculate on, however, is not the status of a truth or fact, but what it feels like to feel oneself affecting and being affected by and as an occasion of experience. While all artworks exemplify forms of feeling by virtue of the way their technique of abstraction figures forth a semblance particular to the relational manner in which certain factors become elements immanent to their signature way of appearing, Langer considers musical abstraction especially significant because its explicit patterns of tension and resolution are 'exemplified in all art, and also in all emotive responses' (1942: 227). She writes 'all art is but a projection of [these patterns] from one domain of sense to another' (*ibid.*). Music, in its characteristic appearance as soundly forms that enjoin a decidedly nonsensuous (abstract) perception of locomotion, shows itself to be exemplary of the way art forms make 'the sameness of logical structure in experientially different loci' apprehensible if not comprehensible (1967: 105). In other words, musical phenomena exemplify what Langer calls the 'logical expression' of feeling experienced as a qualitative-relational order *in its mode of being felt as thought*. For Langer, art's illusions (semblances)

are not excessive byproducts of perception's virtual depths so much as they are exaggerations of a fundamentally spontaneous activity for the human organism to generate from experiential data analogies of form that allow for the indirect perception of said form's past and future occasions. In short, art (but music especially) shows us that we 'symbol-mongering' (1942: 43) organisms live a double life composed of abstract likenesses and sensuous particulars.

Langer's sense of abstraction as elementary to organic processes can, I think, be taken to intervene in the now customary gesture for theorists who study music and the organization of feeling to invoke facile notions of 'embodiment'. Although I understand the impulse to invoke tropes of embodiment and to mobilize a rhetoric of carnality in order to wrest the *idea* of music from its cognitive purchase, I think it's spurious to insist that some music is more bodily and thereby more affectively sensitive than others by virtue of the overt activities associated with its reception. Whether dubstep, a piece by Morton Feldman, or even an advertising jingle, the perception of all music entails some form of somatic comportment. That some musical practices encourage dancing or toe tapping and implicate these activities into their field of (musical) relevance does not make them more embodied, it just makes that dimension of their experience manifest or actual. Musical cultures that conduct their engagement around less animated actions, such as sitting quietly and being motionless, are no less bodily. The still body is still a body doing. It is acting and being acted on just as the body moved to dance (to/with music) is acting and reacting. Its doings simply take place at another level of activity, a level of incipient or inchoate activity that is, as I'll discuss below, what is called thinking or ideation.¹ The point is that the experience of music, any and all music, entails a nervous response that implicates itself into the matrix of abstractions or symbolic assembly through which the organism experiences its vitality. Whether pulsed or meandering, danced to or 'stilled' to, music presents a fabric of tensions – a 'tensity' – that bear(s) an abstract isomorphy to the processes characteristic of vital activity. What matters is that in taking up this abstract similarity between musical forms and other forms of vitality (or feeling) one gains an understanding of one's capacity to feel the *possibility* of feelings, to imagine 'the plenum of potential tensities, with several [indeterminate] gradients developing at the same time in different directions' (Langer 1967: 162).

If there is, to borrow a phrase from Langer, a 'commanding form', a matrix of envisaged sense to be made and expressed here, it is that musical abstraction is not merely a discursive construct, or a cognitive byproduct,

¹I am getting ahead of myself here, but this is simply to say that thinking is a doing in its nascency. In this respect, the activity of stilling can be considered a choreography of non-acts or counter-movements to the host of budding impulses that develop into drives and ultimately forms of action.

but the experience of sound being felt as thought. Here thought is the activity of nascent acts or suspended impulses initiated by vibratory impressions that one feels as ‘thinking’. In Langer’s terms, thinking is a phase in physiological processes that terminate not in overt behaviour but in the sheer expression of ideas, an event relieved of the necessity to ground itself in the sensuous side of experience. In other words, musical abstraction here concerns the virtual, or as I prefer, the imaginary experience of music.²

Activities and feeling

Langer’s universe is a universe of activities. Like her teacher, Alfred Whitehead, Langer sees processes and not substances composing things, and these processes describe regions in which the activity of ‘feeling’ develops. Feelings are, for Langer, neither epiphenomena arising mysteriously from physical events as an enigmatic additive, nor a psychical term for the same empirical fact that another equivalent logical language would denote as ‘physical’ (Langer 1967: 6–7). Instead, feelings denote a phase in physiological processes wherein they obtain to an awareness of their own occurring. Like the red glow that appears in a bar of iron when it is heated to a critical degree, feelings are emergent phenomenon. But ‘redness’ is not added to the iron; it is a phase in the activity of its heating. Similarly, feelings are not added to vital processes, they are a phase in ‘vital activities of great complexity and high intensity’ (ibid.: 21). This psychical phase is ‘a mode of appearance, and not an added factor’ (ibid.). It can be said then that feelings are the appearance of vital activities in their occasion of being felt, and this occasion, Langer argues, includes ‘whatever is felt in any way, as sensory stimulus or inward tension, pain, emotion or intent’ (1962: 4). As a phase rather than a product of organic rhythms, the activity of feeling divests itself of the metaphysical ambiguity responsible for the problem of the ghost in the machine, and it becomes the foundation for understanding the entire field of psychological experience as ‘a vast and branching development of

²Many of the ideas presented in this writing stem from conversations I had with Brian Massumi while I was living in Ithaca, New York, and he was resident scholar at Cornell University’s Society for the Humanities. At the time Massumi was developing material for what would become *Semblance and Event* (2011), a work in which Langer’s notion of semblance and her figures of virtuality play a significant role in Massumi’s own activist philosophy. Although I had studied Langer’s work years earlier and found her ideas compelling in the way one can find a spider’s web compelling, it was my encounter with Massumi’s reading of Langer, as inflected by Alfred Whitehead’s philosophy of organism and William James’s doctrine of radical empiricism, that catalyzed many of the concepts taken up in this text. In a way, this writing can and ought to be regarded as something of a continuation of that conversation, and like all conversations, it comprises a set of serial digressions and exploratory detours rather than a methodical canvassing of the matter at hand.

feeling' (Langer 1967: 23). This does not mean, however, that all forms of sentience are at root irrational or fundamentally 'emotional.' It means that the centre of activity that an organism is comprises 'aspects of, modifications and transformations of, the normal substrate of a universal feeling tone or tonus that marks organic life' (Innis 2009: 151).

How a feeling is felt, how an activity is taken account of, depends on where and how it occurs in the organism's activities. Taking from Whitehead the idea that organisms are 'centres of activity', Langer makes a distinction between exogenous and autogenous feelings. How one activity acquires either profile is a matter of how the organism manages 'the exigencies of contact with the plenum of external events' (Langer 1967: 27), and how these contacts transition into acts that terminate in either a rapid reaction or a gradual change. In other words, activities phase one way or the other depending on whether they 'carry, however vaguely, some indication of an impingement' – sensation – or whether they arise from 'a background of general body feeling and a texture of emotive tensions' (ibid.: 28) – mentation. If an activity occurs at the periphery of the organism, where responses are managed quickly and improvisationally, it will carry an exogenous indication. And if it rises to 'the level of being felt' it will be 'felt as impact' (ibid. 27). But if an activity that obtains a psychical phase without a specific origin or stimulus, its indication is autogenous and will be felt as a 'mental state'.

Apart from these two distinctions, feeling tone is another important aspect of this model, for it points to the way vital activities felt as thought are continuously modulated by an entire field of unfelt, 'unconscious', processes. As Langer notes, many processes go unfelt: 'The whole dynamic rounds of metabolism, digestions, circulation, and endocrine actions' (ibid.: 22) are labile elements composing a fabric of unfelt nervous tensions. However, these processes are not irrelevant as they 'interact with others which have strong and specialized psychical character' (Langer 1962: 21). In this context the dimension of the unfelt parallels Freud's 'unconscious'; yet Langer's unconscious differs from Freud's in that its activities compose no systematic field of psychic interactions. The unfelt makes an appearance in the life of the organism not as slips or jokes, but as a feeling tone. More precisely, the unfelt is given to feeling as a potentiality, an unspecified and continuously shifting background intensity that both donates and acquires a potential semiotic and emotional vector to/from the activity (felt as thought) in which it is implicitly taken up. Basically, this background of feeling tone is what we call 'mood' and it plays a role in modulating the intensity and conceptual valence of activities that are felt as thought.

To describe the unfelt as 'feeling tone' obviously strains the very definition of feeling that Langer establishes. To say that the unfelt is experienced at all, even as a background tonus, seems to contradict the premise that only vital processes of a certain complexity and intensity

become felt. But to identify the unfelt with feeling tone is not to say that the former is felt. While only certain processes attaining a psychological phase are felt, how the intensity of these activities is felt is a matter of how they are informed by the wider 'dynamic pattern[s] of nervous activities playing freely across the limen of sentience' (1967: 22). The tone of these dynamic patterns, which mark organic life, can be characterized as a commotion of preconscious acts. And while they do not exactly describe a mode of being felt, they nevertheless communicate something of the organism's current force of existing to perception. This is to say that the unfelt conveys what Brian Massumi describes as 'changes in the body's degree and mode of enablement in and toward its total situation or life environment (Massumi 2010). The organism not only feels the dynamism of its own activities, but the feeling of those acts reaching a psychological phase are characterized by the way a more general rise and fall in 'enablement' adjusts the organism's abstractive powers, its capacity to formulate relations and potential paths of action in and beyond actual experience. Feelings are, in a sense, 'inspired' by the unfelt; they are *given (in) a mood*. As such, 'the transformation of experience into concepts' (Langer 1942: 127) is mediated by feeling tone.

This means that there is something about how unfelt activities affect the power of envisagement. If the form of unfelt activities, what could be called the matrix of 'advancing acts that have already arisen from previous situations' (Langer 1967: 281), constitutes the mood of a feeling, and this mood shapes the kind of conceptual moves that can be made in an occasion of feeling, then this dimension of organic activity should be regarded as a structured and structuring ground that determines the kind of abstractions or abstractive tendencies that can take place within it without, however, determining the characteristics of these abstractions. To put it another way, every feeling has a conceptual or imaginative valence, and in this respect its mood functions like a medium, a medium of abstraction. Thus the envisagement of forms of feeling are influenced by the way a feeling tone, and not just the selectivity of the sense organs, restricts the kind of abstractions that an organism may formulate in its current 'ambient', its current phase of vital goings-on.³ When one is hungry, for example, the unfelt but continually ongoing acts of digestion and metabolism generate a mood that imperceptibly modulates the conceptual valence of the imagination so that expressive forms more conducive to acts terminating in eating will have more chance of being articulated. (Try concentrating on the more arcane points of David Foster Wallace's argument against Richard Taylor's proof of fatalism after having missed a meal.)⁴ More punctual acts, such as being

³This is Langer's translation for Jakob von Uexküll's 'Umwelt' – a monadic surround or vital territory defined by the way an organism's activities filter out deleterious or irrelevant influences.

⁴See David Foster Wallace's *Fate, Time and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2011) in which Taylor's essay, along with the most significant responses to its conclusions, are reprinted.

cut, that, owing to their intensity, rapidly ascend to being felt, also have a mood that determines the organism's imaginary valence. However, the mood in these situations is not felt as such. The flow of feelings and vital activity coincide in an immediate alteration of the organism's situation such that the mood, the feeling tone, *is* the activity. In being cut, what Langer calls the 'act form', a form marked by incipience, acceleration, consummation, and finally cadence (1967: 288–9), becomes the shape of the organism's actional matrix. In this respect, act and what is felt as thought – felt-thought – are one. (If the feeling tone of hunger was a mere nuisance to the sheer expression of ideas, the flow of thinking, consider how 'unimaginative' a newly lacerated fingertip is.)

Abstraction

We talk about music affecting us emotionally, but Langer's theory of semblance suggests that having an emotion is only a part of the significance of musical experience and, in some ways, it is not even the most significant part. What is significant about music, says Langer, is its symbolism; the way its semblance of a lived or living time gives logical expression to forms of feeling. But the semantic potential is not the only significant feature of music's semblance. The semblance as an abstraction of what it is *like* to feel feelings in a certain way carries a manner of feeling-thinking into the imagination. This is to say that music's feeling-semblance gives thinking a sense of connectivity that it does not otherwise have, a conceptual connectivity flush with the sense of vital import.

The reason for this is that the perception of a semblance permits the imagination to indulge in its own sheer appearancing. Citing Schiller's notion of *Schein*, Langer argues that a semblance allows for 'the contemplation of sensory qualities without their usual meanings' (ibid.: 49). It is something dissociated from its surroundings that empowers conceptualization by virtue of being 'an illusory or quasi-illusory medium' (ibid.: 51). Although art's significance lies in making semblances evident and putting them to symbolic use, a semblance is not exclusive to art. Langer's reason for focusing on aesthetic experience is that she sees it as exemplary (or an exaggeration) of a basic organic impulse to draw out relational-qualitative implications from an experiential flow of sense impressions. A semblance is, in some sense, this act of abstraction, and while an artwork exhibits a much more sophisticated and overt form of semblance-abstraction, all perceptions, all feelings, be they of an itch or an artwork, are suffused with abstractions whose articulation and expression are not 'bound to an objectivistically conceived sensory order' (Innis 2009: 64). It is Massumi whose draws out the implications of a permanent realm of semblances

to suggest that the abstraction of 'form' that a semblance is is 'the way a whole set of active, embodied potentials appears in present experience' (Massumi 2011: 42). A 'likeness' to past and future occasions of its singular impression appears in every present experience. The difference between art's semblances and everyday appearances is, says Massumi, 'a question of emphasis' (ibid.: 45). He writes that each moment of perception 'is always passing through its own potential' (ibid.). This is true for mundane impressions as much as aesthetic appearances. What sets each off from the other is their participation in 'an economy of foregrounding and backgrounding of dimensions of experience that always occur together' (ibid.). 'Art', says Massumi, 'foregrounds the dynamic, ongoingly relational pole. Everyday experience foregrounds the object-oriented, action-reaction, instrumental pole' (ibid.). The point here is not that art is more abstract than ordinary perception, but that perception itself always has a virtual dimension to it, a nonsensuous dimension whose qualitative autonomy gives thought its characteristic flow.

Abstractions are by nature nonsensuous, and insofar as they are perceived, they are felt as thought. As Massumi states, 'What is felt abstractly is *thought*' (ibid.: 109). An actual itch is not felt as thought, for its feeling is dominated by the action-reaction pole of perception. But the idea of 'itching' is an abstraction that can be felt as thought apart from any actual occasion. That the infinitive 'itching' may be immediately linked to a nose or an ear, or to allergic reactions and even inopportunities, shows thinking to be an intensive activity, meaning that the articulation of abstractions like 'itching' are not, as William James puts it, slowed by the 'tardy consecution of things in themselves' (James 1996: 64). In a very real sense, thinking is life lived abstractly. 'When we pause to think,' writes Massumi, 'this is what we're doing: continuing life abstractly' (Massumi 2011: 118). When 'nonsensuous perception is exonerated from having to move with the actual displacements of the ongoing event matrix that is the body,' when it is taken up by language, for instance, then an 'infinitely rapidly permutating flow of words removes all limits' on the articulation of things (ibid.: 117–18). Thinking is life being felt abstractly, life being felt in and through the abstractions that in their detachment from the 'integuments of sensation' (Langer 1942: 71) produce patterns of conceptual activity whose experience is characterized by logical, associative, and affective articulations 'accumulating in a qualitative universe all [its] own' (Massumi 2011: 110).

Massumi's example of language as a vehicle for the experience of abstraction – 'open-range abstraction' – is helpful in that it clarifies how it is that we live abstractions to their edge, their virtual edge. Thought in its form of language 'takes up the thought-felt abstraction of nonsensuous experience into its own movement' in a way that 'intensifies the autonomy of nonsensuous perception by incalculably increasing the range of its potential yoking between extremely diverse events' (ibid.: 116). Interestingly, all

abstractions and symbolic forms, not just language, do exactly this. Art can be regarded as a technique for intensifying ‘the autonomy of nonsensuous perception’ (ibid.). Although silencing rituals, architectural arrangements, and more immanent forms of spectacle, artworks dampen the exigencies of the moment to open perception to a virtual dimension wherein its forms ‘can enter into many more relations with one another than there are actual relations in the world’ (Innis 2009: 15). Language is an exceedingly good technique for stripping symbols of their sensible demonstration, and it is for this reason that it can easily become lost in its own field of differences and charmed by its speculative stroll. Music, too, participates in this ‘open-range abstraction’, yet differently than language does. Music’s abstractions, its semblances, *show* forms of vitality rather than *say* them, and in this regard music is able to articulate and set forth relations that language cannot – namely, relations that are revelatory rather than explanatory. This is a consequence of a difference in abstraction. But I don’t want to pit language and music against each other. Dwelling on their difference in abstraction will lead the discussion astray from the more pressing point I want to make about the intensity of abstraction. In this respect, I think it’s more instructive to compare music’s abstraction with that exemplified by abstract painting.

Massumi cites abstract art (painting specifically) as exemplary of a work in which the virtual dynamics of seeing appears to itself in itself (Massumi 2011: 69). For instance, about looking at a colour-field painting he writes, ‘It’s not an animation of anything. It’s a pure animateness, a vitality affect that comes from nothing and nowhere in particular’ (ibid.). What is being perceived in the absence of a figure that would otherwise assume the movement-effects and animateness are the relational dynamics productive of the act of seeing itself. But the objectless dynamism that Massumi ascribes to abstract painting is just as evident, maybe more so, in music. However, it is not so-called ‘abstract’ or ‘absolute’ music as represented by certain canonical works of the nineteenth-century Western concert tradition that exemplifies this kind of abstraction. The works of Beethoven or Brahms are (as I’ll explain below) not abstract enough. To the extent that abstraction is a process of extracting potential and relaying it (the potential) from one occasion to another, Organum, the fantasias of seventeenth-century English consort music, and the ambient works of Brian Eno, as well as those works indebted to the lyrical meanderings of Erik Satie and the chance-derived principles of John Cage, are more representative of abstract music. In many respects the characteristically un-thematic and a-syntactical forms of these musical styles that express only their own occurrence do nothing but relay potential.⁵

⁵Background music may be, however, the most abstract of all music in that its realization entails emptying any given work of all content or fixed meaning in order to make its occurrence (what ideally amounts to a palpation of the acoustic environment), a cipher through which the vital potential *any* aspect of experience may pass into aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic relevance.

As something whose very being may be said to define and express the idea that change has a shape or a quality, it should be axiomatic that music is rife with what Daniel Stern calls ‘vitality affects’. Stern, whose concept of vitality affects figure prominently in Massumi’s work, and who draws elements of his own theory of perception from Langer’s work, actually goes so far as to suggest that musical phenomena epitomize ‘the expressiveness of vitality affects’ (Stern 1985: 56). While all music displays vitality affects in that its various genres exhibit dynamic forms of “surging,” “fading away,” “fleeting,” “explosive,” “crescendo,” “decrescendo,” “bursting,” “drawing out” (ibid.: 54), these are arguably more pronounced in music that draws its ‘experiential power from suppressing its figurative element[s] as much as possible’ (Massumi 2011: 69). Music that inhibits the articulation of its sensuous elements into sensible wholes, i.e. themes and variations, in effect raises its abstraction to a higher power. It is in this way that the music of Beethoven and Brahms are not sufficiently abstract: their music works hard to ensure that its sensible wholes become figures or discernable semiotic units in their own right, much the way Kandinsky’s contrasting colours and floating geometric shapes become figures in a *semblance of abstraction*. A music of themes, variations, developments, modulations, counterpoint and cadences, while self-referential, is not, ironically, as abstract as it could be. A focus on the extensional implications afforded by treating dynamic events as simple, musical atoms upon which to build complex forms, generates a rhetorical force that manipulates the listener’s affectivity to effect a range of responses that ‘are not spontaneous emotional [expressive] outlets but prescribed modes of participation and assent’ (Langer 1942: 162). This management and organization of feeling eclipses the felt significance of music as an ‘instrument of envisagement’ (Innis 2009: 168), a technology for imagining something that, strictly speaking, it is not. A more radical form of abstraction would be achieved by a work whose expressions are made to return listening not to the extensional but intensional implications of variation. This, in effect, is to return listening ‘to its movement-potential [vitality affect] while refusing to give that potential an actual outlet feeding it into other existing formations’ (Massumi 2011: 70). Listening listening to itself listen as it is ‘intensely going nowhere’ (ibid.) becomes the moment when an interest in the purely expressive value of sounds in their ‘suchness’, their quality, which Peirce describes as a ‘mere maybe’ (Peirce 1955: 81), trumps an interest in their use.

Abstraction of this sort returns perception to its fundamental dynamic ground. This is the point of transition where organic processes enter a psychical phase to adumbrate a realm of *articulable* expressions that, for Langer, is ‘the starting point of all intellection’ (Langer 1942: 42) and the mark of human mentality. Although the expression of these abstractions compose a constant stream of ideation – i.e. ‘mind’ – it does not mean that they always develop into or terminate in some overt form of behaviour.

Indeed, as William James writes, the greater part of our expressive life is lived virtually as a continuous expression of our abstractions that are ‘unterminated perceptually’ (James 1996: 69). In a sense, to live abstractly, virtually, is to live in the ‘*sheer expression of ideas*’ (Langer 1942: 43). Here the expression itself, or rather, *expressing* as such, is an auto-affective event that ‘is always passing through its own potential’ (Massumi 2011: 45) and thereby constantly modulating its own capacities.

For Langer, the life-abstract of mind belongs as much to the range of ordinary activities that found human mentality as to those exceptional events we call art: Mind is ‘the constant stream of cerebral [nervous] activities which are essentially subjective [intraorganic], having no perceptible overt phases [behaviour], but terminate as images, thoughts, recollections, often elaborate figments, entirely within the organism in which they take rise’ (1967: 229). What Langer means is that mind is a phase in nervous activity that is felt as thought, vital abstractions felt as a flow of images: imagination. And insofar as ‘all vital action, whether of the organism as a whole in its surroundings or of an organ internal to it, is interaction and transaction’ (1967: 26), the imagination is an expression of one’s affectivity. The flow of abstractions and feeling tone one experiences as mind expresses how one’s force of existing modulates with the welter of actions and activities, both endogenous and exogenous, that constitute one’s moment to moment situation. But the imagination is not only expressive of an organism’s habits of abstraction. The expressions of the imagination, although exempt from sensuous obligations, are taken up as nonsensuous elements of one’s evolving ambient. This means that while ideas do not directly influence how one meets and responds to the world, because they enter into the coming experience as one of its constitutive elements they affect the composition and selection of the impulses that function as potential acts. In a sense, the organism advances through its expressions.

How, then, do musical events participate in this creative advance? As noted, Langer’s position is that, like all art forms, musical experience entails the apprehension of an illusion (semblance) whose complexly layered fabric of tensions and rhythms is expressive of ‘the pattern of life itself, as it is felt and directly known’ (1953: 31). Music is therefore ‘revelatory’, and it is revelatory of the *sense* of feelings. It neither causes nor evokes any specific affect or emotion, but presents dynamic forms whose ‘resulting gestalt “is and is not” its avowed object’ (1967: 170). ‘The imagination that responds to music,’ writes Langer, ‘is personal and associative and logical, tinged with affect, tinged with bodily rhythm, tinged with dream, but *concerned* with a wealth of formulations for its wealth of wordless knowledge, its whole knowledge of emotional and organic experience, of vital impulse, balance, conflict, the *ways* of living and dying and feeling’ (1942: 244). In presenting forms of feeling music is not articulating any particular affective state so much that it is an event by which one may get a sense of how

the world could be felt in its qualitative-relational order. In other words, music gives ‘knowledge of ‘how feelings [may] go’ (ibid.). That music has effects on us that are strongly allied to the emotional life of a person is indisputable; however, what music offers to and for the speculative organ of the imagination is not a causal formula but an occasion to ‘*make things conceivable* rather than to store up propositions’ (ibid.), or to sensuously demonstrate abstractions and concepts.

What musical semblances make specifically conceivable, which is to say, imaginable, is our affectivity. A work’s patterns of activity, its vitality affects, do not invite reflection on how we feel but on how we may feel, how a world *may* be felt rather than how it is or how it must be experienced. Forms of feeling connote and reveal ideas about how an experience *may yet come to have been affected*. Additionally, because these virtual affections are suffused with a sensible intensity, musical semblances function as a ‘lure for feeling’ that draws each coming moment into the intensity of its next effect. ‘Its message’, writes Langer ‘is not an immutable abstraction, a bare, unambiguous, fixed concept, as a lesson in the higher mathematics of feeling should be. [The semblance] is always new, no matter how well or how long we have known it, or it loses its meaning; it is not transparent but iridescent. Its values crowd each other, its symbols are inexhaustible’ (1942: 239).

But how music makes our affectivity imaginable and us able to envisage it otherwise than it is, is not, as Langer insists, solely a matter of symbolization. There is something about music’s semblance of vitality that affects the way the imagination flows, the way its fluid abstractions move and articulate with one another.

All acts terminate either in the fulfilment of an organic function – scratching an itch – or in expression – having an idea about itching. As they are articulated with one another, acts of the imagination terminate in the emergence of a ‘concept’, and a concept, as Massumi describes, is the expression of ‘the rhythm of arrival and departure in the flow of thought’ (Massumi 2002: 20). This means that a concept ‘is defined less by its semantic content than by the regularities of connection that have been established between it and other concepts’ (ibid.). That a musical semblance is the illusion of ‘arrivals and departures’ in sound, its being taken up as an element of the imagination cannot help but affect the latter’s characteristic rhythms by creating interference and resonance patterns in the stream of thought.

In being taken up into the stream of thought, the occasion of music’s being heard – or ‘unheard’ as when musical semblances are backgrounded and only occasionally rise to the threshold of sentience – donates its life effects to the full movement of mind. Abstractions that are not strictly musical in origin are, we could say, ‘inspired’ by music’s vitality affects. In breathing spirit into thinking, the ‘aliveness’ of music becomes ‘fusionally ingredient’ (Massumi 2011: 146) to other symbolic processes

of articulation, generating speculative feelings-concepts that ‘ninety-nine times out of a hundred’ (James 1996: 69) never find their way into actual sensory conduct. As long as the music and its being heard lasts, the imagination will be animated in a way that promotes certain, let’s say, ‘musical’ types of linkage (i.e. melodic, rhythmic) between ideas, many of which are founded on what Langer describes as ‘the sameness of logical structure in experientially different loci’ (1967: 105), or again, what Massumi more simply calls a ‘nonsensuous similarity’, a similarity wherein ‘nothing actually given to our senses corresponds to what our bodies and the heavens have imitably in common’ (Massumi 2011: 105). What heavens, bodies, and ideas will have in common is symbolically conceived, abstractly felt. And by virtue of a musically endowed onflow of envisagement, the constellation of abstractly felt symbolic forms are given the semblance of a viability that makes them seem real, makes them feel more true, or, pragmatically speaking, more effective, for a feelingful idea cannot help but give the impression of being more true (viable) owing to the fact that what registers directly in and as feeling is for the organism truly the ‘reality’ of the situation. Furnished with a set of virtual, nonsensuous affects as it is in its taking up of musical forms of feeling, the ‘musicalized’ imagination’s concepts become seductive forms that are alluring in their ‘staging of aesthetic events that speculate on life, emanating a lived quality that might resonate elsewhere [elsewhen], to unpredictable affect and effect’ (ibid.: 80).

It is this seduction of the vital elsewhere/elsewhen of nonsensuous affects that makes the ideas of a musically inflected imagination appear as a ‘good-enough substitute’ for actual life (ibid.: 120). Ideas charged with the semblance of an abstract aliveness cannot help but be felt-thought as meaningful, as filled with import, and their ‘truth’ somehow already – virtually – fulfilled or demonstrated. ‘Relieved of the immediate imperative to terminate in the world sensuously’ (ibid.: 121), the abstract vitality of the musicalized imagination risks taking its own activities, its own ‘rhythm of arrival and departure in the flow of thought’, as sufficient expressions of a life lived out when in fact it the case of a life lived in, all too in. The nonsensuous ‘charge’ that musical forms of feeling give to the flow of ideation inclines the imagination towards delusion, not only because its semblances reveal a life whose virtual feelings can be taken as ‘good-enough’, but because music, as Langer argues, is an ‘implicit symbolism’ (Langer 1942: 245). Unlike language whose arbitrarily assigned signs make its symbolic function explicit, music is not typically regarded in a way that distinguishes its meanings from its figures, its import from its ideas. As Langer writes, ‘Until symbolic forms are consciously abstracted, they are regularly confused with the things they symbolize’ (ibid.). But this ‘confusion’, while problematic for musical aesthetics, is, it turns out, part of music’s experiential charm.

Vegetative State

The confusion of the symbol for the symbolized that makes music's expressions 'a myth of the inner life', and why, for Langer, music's abstract dimension is 'still in its 'vegetative' growth' (Langer 1942: 245), is perhaps a little misleading. Langer wants to call music a 'myth' not to diminish its expressive sophistication but to suggest that its symbolic/abstract technologies are not typically recognized *as such*, and in this respect, where its effects 'are so much *like* feelings that we mistake them for the latter' (ibid.), music activates a mode of thinking that is structurally closer to mythical consciousness. Following Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, which posits that human perception, in its most basic occasion, finds sensation and meaning ('physiognomic' or 'affective' in kind) to be coincident aspects of the same unfolding existential context, Langer identifies in music's typical reception a mode of awareness that makes no 'I-It' or 'thing-attribute' distinction. Where thinking is characterized by a flow of felt significance there are no 'things', only subjects: 'I-Thou'. What Cassirer calls the 'expressive function' (*Ausdrucksfunktion*) of perception is the basis for mythic consciousness and is responsible for the perception that sees the world quite literally 'alive', 'animated', or, in the terms I've been circulating here, composed of fleeting semblances – vitality affects – bound together by their affective affiliations and physiognomic character rather than their participation in a structural differential.⁶ That music often spurs mythical consciousness is ultimately, for Langer, an underperformance of what music offers: the revelation and contemplation of forms of feeling that go *beyond* actual experience. In essence, mythical consciousness seems inconducive to the enhancement of the imagination's expressive and conceptual powers for it appears not to recognize the transcendental potency of abstraction.

Music, however, is inescapably mythical and cannot help but evoke a mythical attitude – to some degree. If the sensory particulars of sound are

⁶The conflation of feeling, which is a biological activity, with an *idea* of feeling, which is an abstraction of those biological activities, has been addressed by John Shepherd and Peter Wicke as an issue arising from the way music uses sound to generate elements of signification from somatic processes and affective states. In their murky semiology, Shepherd and Wicke argue that sound treated musically functions as a *medium* whose structural characteristics – the qualities of 'dimension' and/or 'extension' – are implicated in processes of meaning production. Sound in music functions as a 'technology of articulation' in that its being heard as 'musical', and *not* as noise or speech, is its being heard as a medium whose experiential moment 'cannot help but call forth a response that is affective' (Shepherd and Wicke 1997: 118). And because this response is 'affective to the degree and in a manner related to the characteristics of the sounds of the medium' (ibid.), it is incredibly difficult to differentiate the mental experience of a musical sound from 'the *same* experiential moment constituted through the calling forth of socially and culturally mediated subjective states of awareness as elements of signification' (ibid.: 121).

to have a *musical* effect, that is, a qualitative-relational feel, the organism must perpetuate the identity (confusion) of symbol and meaning to give sonorous forms their semblance of felt life. Until one applies a technique for isolating the abstractions that, as Langer argues, arise spontaneously as a natural dimension of perception (Langer 1953: 378), it's almost impossible to dissociate the semblance-abstraction from its sensory garment in a way that would realize music as an explicit symbolism. And this is perhaps not even something that is, for most listeners, particularly desirable. The confusion of symbol and symbolized in musical experience is what permits and sustains a mythology of feelings wherein there is no essential difference in efficacy between musical semblances (abstractions) and activities felt as thought. But quite apart from the argument that one's organic processes and somatic states are necessary conditions for experiencing sound as musical and charged with a semblance of vitality (see footnote 6), this mythology is not only ineluctable but attractive: mythic thinking, as a mode of thought completely unconcerned with the distinction between appearance and reality, is a highly effective way to organize and intensify, perhaps to the point of delusion, a qualitative-relational universe of lived abstraction. To live mythically is, in a sense, a way to live abstractly, but it is a form that suffers the intoxicating effects of its own enchantment, its own self-possession driven to assimilate more of the world to its affective imaginary.

Although enchantment by a world teaming with semblances of vitality is not exclusive to musical experience, it is particularly prompt and powerful. Certain architectural spaces, like cathedrals and museums, embrace and harmonize what dwells within them so that, as Langer writes, 'everything said or done in such places seems to be augmented by the vastness of the living space and dramatized by its atmosphere' (1953: 167). But this sense of exhilaration is reserved only for architecture's 'greatest effects, whereas music exerts this power at almost all times' (ibid.). Because 'aural impressions reach us without demanding our conscious attention' (ibid.), music is unparalleled in its power to 'absorb and utilize phenomena that do not belong to its normal material' (ibid.: 152). This act of 'swallowing' things that are not strictly part of the 'the aesthetic surface' of tones in their relational orders' (ibid.) Langer calls 'the principle of assimilation', and it accounts for how 'anything that gives the sounds a different appearance of motion, conflict, repose, emphasis, etc., is a musical element' (ibid.: 150). That is: whatever 'affects the illusion' (ibid.: 151) becomes a musical power. Enchantment is thereby redoubled under music's spell. First, because musical perception already entails a mode of awareness wherein the medium – the semblance and not the sensory matter – and the elements of signification that it creates from affective states of awareness – abstractions – necessarily coincide to confuse its symbolic forms with the things they symbolize. And, second, that anything 'assuring its dissociation from actual experience, or

stressing its vital import, or furnishing genuine structural factors [...] are virtual elements in a realm of purely musical imagination' (ibid.: 152), cuts music's illusion a wide swath. This is not to say that cigarettes or power plugs are transformed into tones and rhythms. They are not. But to the extent that they somehow lend their appearance to the 'illusion of a many-dimensional time in passage' (ibid.: 150), music's signature semblance, they *become* implicated in music's mythology of the inner life.

Swallowing reverie

Curiously, despite the magnitude of music's aesthetic valence, everything that may be taken up by and as music is itself 'swallowed' by the simple drift of reverie. This can be heard-felt in John Cage's infamous work 4'33" (1952) whose conceptual gesture assimilates, in abstraction, the most heterogeneous elements to music, but at the same time delivers their abstractions directly to daydream. How such a powerful abstraction as music is subsumed by something so insubstantial as daydream rests on the accomplishment of a tendency shared by all organic activity, but especially by aesthetic activity, to strive towards the limits of expression, 'to take a technique of existence to the expressive limit of what it can do' (Massumi 2011: 151).⁷ This is a tendency of self-enjoyment that inheres in the very activity of expression to do more of what it does. Activities aspire to become more expressive, not in the sense of multiplying the number of things expressed, but in their manner of intensifying the particular way of their own characteristic occurring.

Music is paradigmatic of this aspiration, for its semblances possess an unusual capacity to be apprehended apart from the circumstances from which they emerge and experientially detach. As Massumi observes, 'Music does not have to use the body as local sign. Its local signs are *incorporeal*: sound waves' (ibid.: 145). It is the peculiar capacity for sound that has been organized in some way, be it through elaborate internal pitch relations or

⁷'Technique of existence' is Massumi's expression for a way of doing something that, 'eventually effects a fusional mutual inclusion of a heterogeneity of factors in a signature species of semblance (Massumi 2011: 143). In other words, a 'ToE' refers to the manner in which gestural routines, sorting tactics, listening habits, assembling schemes, compositional gambits, etcetera, give rise to a form of abstraction through which one lives. A ToE is 'defined less by the catalog of its elements' (142) than the way it accomplishes the expression of a certain form of relationality. Strictly speaking, anything that exists possesses a technique of existence insofar as the latter is a necessary condition for the former, but the arts are exemplary ToEs to the extent that the performance or execution of their techniques bring about an 'enriched' abstraction (semblance) expressive of a qualitative-relational order that may be called 'music', 'dance', 'gardening', or whatever.

something like a mere conceptual conceit,⁸ to dissociate or pull away from the objects and events that condition its expression. The mediation of sound that, in a sense, music *is*, deprives sound to a significant degree of its characteristic tendency to immediately stir overt action. Musical semblances are in this regard in usufruct to the property of sound and, under the right conditions, can be taken account of solely in their expressivity. Although this manufactured autonomy is not exclusive to music, it is the way in which music's appearance readily effects a decoupling from its practical provenance and semantic relays to do more of what it does: express its abstractions of felt life.

In a sense, music's semblances are not simply abstractions of vital activity being felt as thought, but 'universal attractor[s] of experience' (ibid.: 151). As Massumi writes, 'Every technique of existence has an expressive appetite for pushing nonsensuous similarity [logical expression] as far as it can go, carrying it to its highest degree of abstractive intensity, making it as absolutely felt as it can experienceably be' (ibid.). Where music can dispel, frustrate, or overwhelm the specificity of its abstraction to include the most disparate elements into its semblance of vitality, it effectively voids 'the event of expression of all content other than its own occurrence' (ibid.). Such music is, paradoxically, a music composed of impassive acts whose intense expressions are ultimately 'inexpressive'. As music begins to advance towards the horizon of its (in)expressive limit to do better what it does 'better than any other technique of existence', which is to give sound an immediate meaning in and of itself (ibid.: 139), it surprisingly begins to go silent. At its most pure, its most abstract, music appropriates to its semblance not only all sounds but all forms of dynamic alteration. As such, the conspicuous 'strangeness' of its appearance grows faint among the din of extra-musical elements that it virtually becomes.

Massumi hears Mahler's music behaving this way, saying that its musical semblances, in being so vivid, so seemingly full of vitality, so *affected*, 'de-limit' the imagistic tendencies vying for expression as content in the experience of the work's unfolding (ibid.: 156–8). This imagistic excess has the effect of de-specifying any and all image intimations, making the music an intensely (in)expressive event of nothing but its own tendency to de-limit its expressive force (ibid.: 151–2). Although Mahler's work may satisfy the expressive appetite of his particular musical genre for absolute expression, a more striking example of this expressive inexpressivity is Cage's 4'33" in which listening itself, the abstractive process directed by audition, is 'so excessively included' in the event of expression that it not only 'becomes-immanent to the expressive force of the event' (ibid.: 157)

⁸Think of Cage's 1962 follow up to 4'33", 0'00" (1962), which raises the conceptual ante of the former with a score consisting of this one sentence: 'In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action.'

but also becomes its own speculative content. Or, more accurately, the *idea* of listening becomes content. Unlike Mahler's hyper-imagistic music, 4'33" doesn't encourage 'a certain modality of content growth' (ibid.). Where there ought to be a singular modality of experience 'out-treating sources for the adventitious or parasitic growth of content affecting music' (ibid.), there is none, or rather, there is none in particular – multiple and many. As such, 4'33" is intensely expressive, but expressive of its own idea. While vision, in its nonsensuous or logical similarity to heard, seen, and proprioceived feelings, is overemphasized and overextended in Mahler's music to render its experience 'excessively non-specific' (ibid.), and thereby intensely impassive, the idea of 4'33" as an occasion of listening, or more accurately an occasion *to experience*, makes its idea excessively non-specific. 4'33" is an auditory cipher that makes anything felt abstractly as thought speculatively absolute music. And where music is felt so absolutely abstractly, its expression coincides with its thought, its imagining.

It is music's technique of making sounds sound more musical, more like music than not-music (whatever this 'music' may be) that leads it to the heights of abstraction: conceptualism. In accomplishing this limit of expression, music becomes not only 'the myth of inner life' but a veritable figment. But Langer notes that daydreaming – reverie – easily absorbs music into its remit (Langer 1953: 168). Although reverie is not a work of art it nevertheless obeys the same law of abstraction and principle of assimilation such that it, too, transfigures whatever affects its image of thought, its semblance, into elements of daydream. Anything that can enter into the patterns of conceptual activity is potentially an element of reverie's semblance, in a manner of speaking this could be anything and everything. Reverie's technique of existence swallows even more 'extra-oneiric' elements than a music emptied 'of any symbolic evocations or metaphorical associations' (Massumi 2011: 139) swallows 'extra-musical' elements. Musical semblances, from their most abstract to their most referential, are absorbed into reverie's conceptual flow as a feeling tone that alters and 'change[s] the 'set' or 'mood' of the responding organism' (Langer 1972: 264). Music, particularly in the quasi-passive act of listening distractedly, where its tonal perceptions are not so discernable from other background perceptions, becomes an element in the daydreamer's coming virtual experience. For the hyper-abstract work such as 4'33" whose technique of existence essentially extends the defining illusion of music as a semblance of vitality to anything and everything, there is even less distinction between its conceptual conceit and reverie's speculative wanders.

Both reverie and the kind of conceptual music that 4'33" represents approach the condition of pure expression. Daydream seems as close as we 'symbol-mongering' creatures can come to sheer expression, to expression sustained by an abstract inertia that keeps its speculative goings-on going on. Its stream of ideas, sometimes vague and sometimes vivid, is under

no obligation to terminate in or consummate its ideas in locally, sense perceived activities. At most, reverie's ideas are expressive of a 'vicarious completion of impulses' (ibid. 1972: 263) engendered by a constant onflow of sensory impressions and perceptions that instead of 'elicit[ing] overt reactions' (ibid.), modulate the mood or affectivity of the organism-individual. Background music, in which perception flits back and forth between the poles of semblance and sensation, gives to the reverie that absorbs it its own semblance, a meta-semblance, or in Langer's words, a secondary illusion that simulates, in its presentation of a 'lively' ambient, 'a semblance of the empirically real' (Massumi 2011: 128). But a hyper-music whose ideas (forms) of feeling are rendered 'as absolutely felt as [they] can experienceably be' (ibid.: 157) will be indistinguishable from the abstractions that compose reverie's imaginary ambient. Yet strangely, this does not make the hyper-abstract musical work any less musical. Its ideas are still about feeling, about an intensive time of alteration that is characteristic of music's peculiar technique of existence. However, these ideas find expression not in music's customary objective conditions – tonal and rhythmic relations – but in conceptualization, in a manner of thinking that abstracts forms of feeling from 'a heterogeneity of factors in a signature species of semblance' (ibid.: 143). In other words, 4'33" is music, but only in your (day)dreams.

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