

## MUSIC AS SILENCE: SCHÖNBERG, NONO, AND THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE

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**SUMMARY.** Arnold Schönberg and Luigi Nono stand as emblems for a certain sort of difficulty in music, a difficulty charted by Schönberg himself in his essay, “How One Becomes Lonely.”<sup>2</sup> But this “difficulty” may have a purpose for us, at this time, either intended or unintended. Here I approach the “difficult” music of these two composers through the concept of *experience*, as described and discussed by Giorgio Agamben. Agamben’s thesis concerning the formation of human subjects through a process of *infancy* is outlined, and related to the work of these two specific composers, in order to think about the place and function of music in a noisy world: what possibilities does this particular, “difficult” music hold for us, now, in the middle of multiple and ongoing, existential and planetary crises?

**Keywords:** Schönberg, Nono, Agamben, Anthropocene, experience, silence

The title of this paper, *Music as Silence*, is a sort of inversion of the formulation made by John Cage in the 1940s, when he pointed out that—perceptually speaking—“there is no such thing as silence,”<sup>3</sup> as he tried to demonstrate with his work *4’33”* in which “silence” turns out to be *music*. How could music turn out to be silence? Particularly the music of Arnold Schönberg, whose work is most often discussed under the banner of “expressionism”, even when Theodor Adorno describes his works as “case studies”.<sup>4</sup> Luigi Nono has a more considered approach to silence as a component

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<sup>2</sup> Schönberg, Arnold. “How One Becomes Lonely (1937).” In *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein, trans. by Leo Black, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, pp. 30-52.

<sup>3</sup> Cage, John. “45’ For a Speaker.” In *Silence*. Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH, 1961, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. “Expressionism as Objectivity.” In *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. by Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster, Sheed and Ward, London, 1973, p. 49.



of a musical work, for example in the structure of *Prometeo* (1984), and in the string quartet *Fragmente–Stille, An Diotima* (1980), in which silence, or near silence—in the colloquial sense of breaks in the flow of the musical sound—plays a considerable ethical and poetic role. My inversion of Cage certainly takes a cue from Nono’s use of silence as a sort of ethical frame; a way of making musical sound speak more authentically by disrupting its normative flow and questioning its threshold of audibility. However, what I want to think about here is the place and function of music—particularly certain musics: in this case the works of Arnold Schönberg and Luigi Nono—in a noisy world. What possibilities does music hold for us, now, in the middle of multiple and ongoing, noisy, existential crises in the history of the planet?

The phrase, “the history of the planet” might seem a little grandiose, but our era—the era of the Anthropocene,<sup>5</sup> in which the impact of human life on earth has resulted in changes to its constitution equivalent to the geological transformations of previous eras—our era is one in which the “history of the planet” has become our single most pressing concern.<sup>6</sup> As Claude Levi-Strauss points out, “history is ... never history, but history-for ...”<sup>7</sup> and it is the “for” that I want to think about here. What could a historical consideration of the figures and the music of Arnold Schönberg and Luigi Nono be *for* in the era of the Anthropocene?

I do not think that this is a question that would seem strange to either Schönberg or Nono. So far as we can see in their own writings, they both had a strong sense of historical situation, and of the consequence of the mutual impact of historical circumstance and sound, figured as music. For Schönberg, in his notes for a treatise on what he termed *The Musical Idea*, the result is a notion of “unrest”: in a note from June 13, 1934, he writes:

The explanation of the musical idea as unrest also illuminates why the development of music has taken the route of always inventing new kinds of “unrest” ...<sup>8</sup>

And later, on September 26, 1936, he contextualises this with a further, more historicised thought:

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<sup>5</sup> See Lewis, Simon L., Maslin, Mark A. “Defining the Anthropocene.” *Nature* 519 (2015), pp. 171–180. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tsing, Anna, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou. *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene: The New Nature*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2024

<sup>7</sup> Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1966. p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Schoenberg, Arnold. *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of its Presentation*. Ed. and trans. by Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2006, p. 98.

We experience something similar today in our society and political life. Through mechanisation many relationships have been uprooted from their former order and shifted into unrest.<sup>9</sup>

For Nono, the question was addressed much more directly by his invocation, in the essay *Text-Music-Song* of 1960, of the work by Jean-Paul Sartre entitled, “Why write?” which begins:

And if I am given this world with its injustices, it is not that I might contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation ...<sup>10</sup>

In the terms of my opening remarks, the notions of “unrest” and “indignation” might stand as emblems of the era of the Anthropocene, even if this era raises matters of concern that were unknown to either Schönberg or Nono: the one experiencing the collapse and disintegration of a single empire, that of Austria-Hungary, that marked the end of an era of empires; the other experiencing the divisions and political tensions of the Cold War that characterised the aftermath of 1945. The historical focus of this discussion moves outwards, from the city of Vienna in the early years of the twentieth century, through the international clash of political forces that characterised the end of that century, to our own, millennial awareness of the fragility of the planet itself upon which these political dramas have unfolded. How can this account of the music of these two composers figure as a “history-for”, and who and what would it be for?

In his essay, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* Giorgio Agamben considers the possibility and political nature of “experience”, particularly in relation to a contemporary world in which, Agamben claims, experience has been expropriated by the conditions of late-Capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Echoing Walter Benjamin’s account of those returning home after experiencing the 1914-18 war, Agamben writes, “modern man’s average day contains nothing that can still be translated into experience.”<sup>12</sup> Against this existential chasm, brought on by the domination of power and property relations, Agamben proposes a possibility for an authentic experience which he presents as a specific moment of subject formation: in particular, he associates experience with infancy, that period in the existence of a living being before and during the acquisition of language. He writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Nono, Luigi. *Nostalgia for the Future: Luigi Nono’s Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi, University of California Press, Oakland, CA, 2018, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. by Liz Heron, Verso: Radical Thinkers, London, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

... from the point where there is experience, where there is infancy, whose expropriation is the subject of language, when language appears as the place where experience must become truth.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, experience is the history of a coming to awareness; a history that is actually materialised in the living practice of language. This seems to me to be an interesting image around which we might start to gather a sense of what the music of Schönberg and Nono could be, for us in the twenty-first century, the era of the Anthropocene. A time when we ourselves have to come to a new awareness—when we must experience, if you like, a new childhood in a radically changing environment. Agamben associates the formation of the human subject with the acquisition of language, but there is no language without music. Indeed, as the developmental psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen has shown so convincingly, human infancy—and the linguistic formation that accompanies it—is constituted not simply as the formation of a subject, but as the development of inter-subjectivity in the presence of a singing other, a *mother*, a pre-linguistic voice.<sup>14</sup> And so “experience” must constitute us not just through emergent language, as both potential and actual discourse, but upon a foundation and practice of musicality, where that musicality figures as a sonic intra-action between the infant—and let us suppose for the purposes of this discussion that we are all infants—and their living, buzzing, material, animal, and social surroundings. Intra-action is the term coined by Karen Barad to indicate that in any encounter between entities, *both* entities are mutually instantiated and affected by the encounter.<sup>15</sup> This proposes musicality as a shaping and a being shaped by sound in time. In Agamben’s account of linguistic acquisition in infancy, this would mean that, just as the child is changed by language, so too language is changed by the child; Gilles Deleuze discusses this in *The Logic of Sense*, and we know from our common experience that it is indeed the case.<sup>16</sup>

So, now I want to think a little more about what we could understand by the term “experience”, then I will try to account for what I take to be the experiential possibilities, for us, of the music of Schönberg and Nono, using a couple of examples. Lastly, I will briefly consider the political implications of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Trevarthen, Colwyn. “Communication and cooperation in early infancy: a description of primary intersubjectivity.” In *Before Speech: The beginning of interpersonal communication*, ed. Margaret Bullowa, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, pp. 321-395.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2007, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Deleuze, Gilles. “Seventh Series of Esoteric Words.” In *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas, Continuum, London, 2004, pp. 51-57.

this discussion, where I take politics to be the rearrangement or consolidation of regimes of dominance within a particular situation that is articulated rather than holistic, in this case music understood as a cultural phenomenon in the era of the Anthropocene. Finally, perhaps a little ironically, I will attempt to revise John Cage's characterisation of *Silence* as music, by proposing *Music* as a sort of silence.

### What is Experience?

Experience seems to be a term that pulls together different elements of what it is to live in the world as a subject: elements such as self-consciousness, sense perception, understanding, emotion, empathy, and so on. An idea of a specifically *aesthetic experience* has been present in philosophical discussion since the eighteenth century, and the term is the ground of the pragmatist philosophy of the American John Dewey, who, in his book *Art as Experience* attempts to wrest aesthetics away from its transcendental preoccupations, rooted in Kant's assertion of the essentially disinterested nature of aesthetic perception, and to ground that perception instead in the everyday, situated and material realities of human existence.<sup>17</sup> And yet, Agamben begins his essay "Infancy and History" with this definite and characteristically pessimistic statement:

The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgment that it is no longer accessible to us. ... This does not mean that today there are no more experiences, but they are enacted outside the individual. And it is interesting that the individual merely observes them ...<sup>18</sup>

Agamben is concerned here to account for those ruptures in the fabric of life that are consequent on the developments of late capitalism; developments which have led us deeper into the Anthropocene. He is concerned with the impact on human consciousness of the "humdrum daily life in any city;"<sup>19</sup> of the addictions of an era who's digitally enabled social connections are dedicated to click-bait disinformation and data theft. Agamben, however, is interested in changing things, through a reconnection with experience as the engine, the defining creative energy that allows us to grow up. As he writes, "The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant - this is experience."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dewey, John. *Art As Experience*. Minton, New York, NY, 1934.

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, op. cit. p. 15/17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

If the Anthropocene is the moment when we have to acknowledge a new infancy—when we have to learn to grow up again, to open ourselves once more to an experience that will force from us a new understanding couched in a new language, a language appropriate to the continued existence of a living planet—then we need some mother tongue: some exemplar of how this new language might go. And if music is the protolinguistic phenomenon, the spur to an activity of listening that seeks connections and correspondences, that finds in sound the clues to the development of an emotional, material, empathetic, productive relationship with our surroundings, then only certain musics will turn out to be equal to the task. This is when we notice what Adorno calls “the ancient fissure between people and their culture.”<sup>21</sup>

Both Arnold Schönberg and Luigi Nono were people who chose to encounter this fissure head-on. As a consequence, their music seems to me to provide—in an exemplary fashion—the mother tongue for a new sort of “infancy”: the infancy that Agamben explores as the radical and necessary formation of a subject. More than that, infancy as the “place where experience music become truth”<sup>22</sup> is always undergone in a specific time and at a specific place. This particularity makes it hard to theorise, particularly in the context of a practice of music history that still has imperial tendencies: always trying to find the overview, the conceptual thread, the theory that accounts for everything. But is the idea of the Anthropocene itself not a theory that accounts for the “everything” that is planet earth?

In her recent book, *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene*, Anna Tsing, with her colleagues, asks us to treat the Anthropocene as “patchy”: that is, not as some sort of unified whole but as a pile of particularities that focus our attention at the same time as they add up.<sup>23</sup> To experience the productive opportunities of Agamben’s notion of infancy is to engage with specificities of time and place that resonate in what Agamben calls “the transcendental experience of the difference between language and speech, which first opens up the space of history.”<sup>24</sup> That is, our located experience of here and now resonates with already existing material productions that themselves bear their own “here and now”. Thus, Schönberg’s music, in his *String Trio* op. 45 from 1946 for example, pursues for us, now, the possibilities of tonal, structural, instrumental, and sonic *ideas* with a rigour that abandons the need for repetition, and which is indelibly connected to the cultural history of Vienna. It is staged as a unique encounter between tradition and modernity,

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<sup>21</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Verso, London, 2020, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, op. cit. p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Tsing et al, op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, op. cit. p. 60.

carried out with a pragmatism and an irony that reference the particularities of a culture to which we, each of us, bears a specific relation. Just as Luigi Nono, in his work for piano from 1976, ...*Sofferte onde serene*... abandons all the strategies of musical material *except* for the repetition of individual sounds, a sonic concept perhaps only possible in Venice, a city whose campaniles and open waterways provide a unique ecology of bells. This is not an attempt in any way to account for the meaning or purpose of these works, but simply to identify location as a sort of patch that can be marked out; a patch that locates the possibility of experience that these works offer to us.

The characterisation of the music of these two composers as *patches* in our cultural history is an attempt to remove them from the generalising concepts of *new music*, *serialism*, *avant garde-ism* or any of the other attempts to fit them into a narrative that already somehow accounts for experience—and which thus allows the music no longer to be experienced. The resistance that the work of both of these composers has encountered—a resistance registered painfully in Schönberg's essay "How One Becomes Lonely"<sup>25</sup>—seems to me to stem from our unwillingness to—in a sense—regress into the sort of innocence that would allow us to *experience*, in Agamben's terms, the new, productive, and necessary energies for subject formation that this music offers.

### Music as Existential Experience

In an interview published with the title, "Music as Existential Experience" (*Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*), the composer Helmut Lachenmann, himself a pupil and an enthusiastic supporter of Nono, speaks about what he calls "music as a natural event".<sup>26</sup> In relation to the music of Nono, he says, "You have to change yourself. You can't just listen politely, you have to open yourself up inside ..."<sup>27</sup> And he is clear that this is not the cultured person's response to something "new": it is a real moment of infancy—a moment in which the subject experiences "a radically expanded sensorium and a conscious relationship to his history"<sup>28</sup>—that is, as I read it, a conscious relationship to a specific place

<sup>25</sup> Schoenberg, Arnold. "How One Becomes Lonely (1937)." In *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein, trans. by Leo Black, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, pp. 30-52.

<sup>26</sup> ... *man Musik begriffe als eine besondere Form von unberechenbarem Naturereignis*. Lachenmann, Helmut. "Musik als Existentielle Erfahrung (Gespräch mit Ulrich Mosch)." In *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1966-1995*, ed. by Josef Häusler. Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden, 1996, p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> *Man muß sich selbst ja ändern. Du kannst nicht nur höflich zuhören, sondern mußt dich innerlich öffnen ...* Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>28</sup> ... *ein radikal erweitertes Sensorium und ein bewußtes Verhältnis zu seiner Geschichte*. Ibid. p. 223.

and time with all of its connections, in a moment of productive, imaginative articulation. Articulation, in this context, is a recognition of the patchiness of experience: the fact that we come to awareness in the simultaneous presence of different things: self, sound, community, empathy, emotion, and so on in what the sociologist Stuart Hall calls “articulation structured in dominance.”<sup>29</sup>

This position introduces a political dimension, within which we recognise, situate and question the power that certain elements have over others. If, as Adorno suggests, “the individual is a mere reflection of property relations ... Not only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense”,<sup>30</sup> then the *infancy* described by Agamben as a radical coming into being is thwarted at the very outset. Hall’s analysis allows for a sort of noise in the system;<sup>31</sup> without denying the constituting power of capitalism—a power which Agamben himself presents at the start as a countering force to experience—Hall shows how different, “patchy” forces can operate even within the dominance of an overarching power structure. Thus, rather than art being “utopic ... as the other of this world, as exempt from the mechanism of the social process of production and reproduction”<sup>32</sup> as Adorno is forced to propose, the “natural event” of music can instead provide the material substance for the sort of intersubjective infancy propose by Agamben as the process by which experience—even within capitalism—produces contingent human selves.

Both Schönberg and Nono, either by design or by compulsion, produced work which refuses to conform with culturally preordained listening practices. In that sense, it remains mysterious; provokes in the listener “a conscious relationship to his history” as Lachenmann describes it. It is this sense of mystery—confusion even—that moves us outside of music, forces us to form ourselves as subjects in relation to its utterance. For Agamben, “the very name ‘mystery’ derives (from *\*mu*, which indicates the moaning sound when the mouth is closed)—in other words, silence”.<sup>33</sup> This is the boundary between speech and music, in a sense the indication of the impossibility of speaking about music which nevertheless gives us indispensable, psychic experience. In the terms of this discussion, only a music which refuses *fable*, something known and narrated, can plunge us into this mystery.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, Stuart. “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance.” In *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2018, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. “Gold Assay.” In *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, Verso, London, 2020, p. 164.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Malaspina, Cecile. *An Epistemology of Noise*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. “Paralipomena.” In *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London, 2004, p. 311.

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, op. cit. p. 69.



Agamben, in his consideration of subjectivity in terms of language, is concerned with what he calls “the world of the *open mouth*, of the Indo-European root *\*bha* (from which the word fable is derived),” and he contrasts this with “the world of the closed mouth, of the root *\*mu*.”<sup>34</sup> This is the world of infancy, of mystery, of the inarticulateness before language. And although this is probably the root of the word “mute”, I want to end by supposing that it is also possible to think of it as the root of the word “music”: a sort of silence before the babble of language and expropriated experience. This silence is what allows us a renewed access to *experience* as the infancy we need to undergo if we are truly to encounter our planet and ourselves in the era of the Anthropocene.

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<sup>34</sup> Agamben, op. cit. p. 70.

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