

Aspect and Ascription in the Music of Mathias Spahlinger

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This paper employs a Wittgensteinian framework to describe the experience of listening to the music of Mathias Spahlinger. First, a ‘skeptical puzzle’ is introduced, based on a reading of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations. The puzzle problematizes the security of ascriptions of meaning to material practices. Then, Spahlinger’s éphémère is used as a test case: it is described from a first-person perspective, compared with an account of the work given by Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, and given as an example of an audible presentation of the ‘skeptical puzzle’. Such a presentation is marked by a phenomenon that Wittgenstein described as ‘the dawning of an aspect’. By focusing on the role of aspect perception and the problems of ascription in Spahlinger’s music, it is possible to argue against Mahnkopf’s criticism of Spahlinger’s work, as well as understand an underlying affinity between extreme forms of repetition and perpetual transition within Spahlinger’s compositional habitus.

The person who listens to sounds, and hears them as music, is not seeking in them for information about their cause, or for clues as to what is happening. On the contrary, he is hearing the sounds *apart* from the material world . . . What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object: the organization that can be heard in the experience. (Scruton, 1997, p. 221)

A sound does not view itself as thought, as ought, as needing another sound for its elucidation, as etc.; it has not time for any consideration—it is occupied with the performance of its characteristics: before it has died away it must have made perfectly exact its frequency, its loudness, its length, its overtone structure, the precise morphology of these and of itself. (Cage, 1961, p. 15)

new music asks the materialistic question: what is sounding independently of the cultural system of perception, tonality? and she brings to consciousness: the object (of perception) independent of consciousness is geared toward consciousness, the as-such is only for us. (Spahlinger, 2008, p. 581)

1.

Philosophers familiar with Wittgenstein's later works have long been aware of a 'skeptical puzzle'.¹ The puzzle concerns the relationship between overt behavior and its meaning. Although a piece of overt behavior may denote a conventional meaning (within the context of a shared gestural 'language'), there is no guarantee, test, fact, or reason that that piece of overt behavior may mean the same thing, or anything at all, to somebody else. To borrow an example from Wittgenstein:

It is, of course, imaginable that two people belonging to a tribe unacquainted with games should sit at a chess-board and go through the moves of a game of chess; and even with all the appropriate mental accompaniments. And if *we* were to see it we should say that they were playing chess. (Wittgenstein, 1953, §200)

But *are* they playing chess? From an observer's perspective, one might be inclined to say so, but the players involved may have a radically different sense of what they are doing. A potential discrepancy emerges between the practices (that they are moving figurines) and my ascriptions (that they are playing chess). Our familiarity with the behavior guides us overconfidently towards a false ascription.

In the continuation of the passage, Wittgenstein inverts the previous situation:

But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a *game*—say into yells and stamping of feet. And now suppose those two people yell and stamp instead of playing the form of chess that we are used to . . . Should we still be inclined to say that they were playing a game? (Wittgenstein, 1953, §200)

In the inversion, Wittgenstein preserves the potential discrepancy he previously uncovered—namely, between the practices (that they are playing chess) and one's ascriptions (that they are dancing or performing some odd ritual). The behavior is now so unrecognizable or unfamiliar as to make an observer unsure about putting forth any ascription. It is now a lack of acquaintance with the behavior that leads us, tentatively, to an incorrect ascription. Of the features Wittgenstein addresses, neither mental accompaniments, nor acquaintance, nor the gestures themselves can hold priority. None supplies a secure criterion by which ascriptions of meaning can be attached to practices.

One could easily invent extravagant examples where ascribed meanings and practices radically diverge. However, the skeptical puzzle is posed not to illuminate the extravagant cases, but to raise a point about even the most unproblematic and quotidian cases—namely, *that there is simply no fact, test, criterion or reason which guarantees the ascription of a certain meaning to a certain practice*. This may appear to be a dire conclusion, but it need not be taken as such. It may be frightening to have no guarantee about our ascriptions but only if we accept the sublime demand that our ascriptions must be grounded for them to hold. In most ordinary situations, even if there is not a guarantee, it is fairly easy to settle the question of whether the meaning has been properly ascribed to some practice, or whether that practice diverges: we can ask each other for clarification

or elaboration, or improvise criteria which will help us to clarify the social dimensions of our practices and their meanings. Ascriptions ordinarily work without a hitch, and this reveals our attunement with others and the shared practices of a 'form of life' (*Lebensform*) that helps to organize them.² Philosopher Stanley Cavell cogently describes the situation as follows:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'. (Cavell, 1969, p. 52)

Actions and forms of socially attuned behavior generally work together despite the lack of 'insurance' that our projections (or ascriptions) will be successful or understood by others. Unsuccessful projection or ascription reveals the overwhelmingly social character of practices and actions. Words don't ground themselves. But, at the same time, I want to underscore that the structure of this ordinary action entails the possibility of practices slowly changing and altering over time, even without any explicit awareness of such changes. I may suddenly encounter new practices to which I have to become attuned. As Wittgenstein's chess-player example revealed, two actions that look remarkably similar (even to the point of indiscernibility) may actually reveal divergent practices, and some of these new practices may or may not be reconcilable with my current *Lebensformen*. Whitney Davis clearly articulates the stakes of Wittgenstein's claim: '... no possible test we could ever make would ever settle the question whether our practices—our intersubjective application and individual understanding of shared meanings—diverge or, more profoundly, whether one of us actually lacks "practice" altogether' (Davis, 1996, p. 36).

The skeptical puzzle reminds us of the risks always embedded in ascriptions of meaning to material practices. This puzzle has great implications for New Music because, unlike ordinary language or quotidian practice, New Music is a domain that lacks a 'common practice'. This means that New Music has liquidated the practices that historically led to its creation, while it has yet to replace this set of widely embraced practices with another.³ (As shorthand, let us collect these practices under the name *tonality*, with all of its concomitant formal paradigms, instrumental groupings and oppositions, symmetries in phrase and construction, 'tonal rhythms', *Ursätze*, cadences and closures, etc.) New Music does not possess clearly recognizable or widely acknowledged 'routes of interest', 'modes of response' or senses of 'significance' or 'fulfillment'. Given this situation, perhaps it is no surprise that New Music is intensely involved with questions about the relationship between practice and meaning. Naturally, this demands rethinking these questions in terms of the ascriptions made between sonic materiality and the intentionality of meaning, challenged by the lack of a common practice.

I read the opening epigrams as responses to precisely this skeptical puzzle, however varied in their strategies.

One way of negotiating the puzzle is to diffuse its force by abandoning the problem of ascription entirely, placing the stakes of musical meaning on the primacy of either materiality or intentionality. Thus Cage and Scruton. On the one hand, you can assert the independence of the materiality of sounds from any possible ascription, and claim that the realm of exteriority is music's proper domain. ('A sound does not view itself as a thought, an ought...') On the other hand, you can assert the primacy of the ascription over the materiality of sounds, retreating music to an interior perspective where ascriptions cannot be challenged. ('What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object.') Both these options foreclose upon the implications of the skeptical puzzle. However, a third option remains open: *to treat the skeptical puzzle as a puzzle, rather than an opportunity for deciding over metaphysical primacy of materiality or intentionality*. In this article, I want to explore Mathias Spahlinger's way of *not* foreclosing on this skeptical puzzle. I hope to bring out the manner in which this puzzle is musically invoked in his compositions, by expanding on his dialectical claim that 'the as-such is only for us' (Spahlinger, 2008, p. 590).

In the passage cited from Wittgenstein, the ascriptions being tested come from a position that is exterior to that of participants. The reader is positioned (perhaps in a caricatured way) as an ethnographer or anthropologist, a viewer or listener in an unfamiliar situation and context. In this essay, I will be taking an external position in order to investigate the ways in which Spahlinger's compositional practice challenges my projections and ascriptions of musical meaning. Naturally, I will be basing it on my own listenings. But, not wanting to assume that my listening can be representative of others', it should be noted that divergences in practice hold not only for the composer (who imagines the sounds and contexts to be auditioned) but for the listener as well (who comports him- or herself towards these sounds and contexts). We cannot be certain where our listening diverges from the listening of others, for there is no direct material presentation of listening, only its bodily gestures, attitudes or first-hand accounts. Seeing others listen reveals nothing about the essentials of what we want to know: how are others listening? How can I share my listening with others? How can I hear how others are listening?

In order to talk about the ways in which I am listening to Mathias Spahlinger, I will compare my listening to another: Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf.⁴ I will state forthright that I do not hear what Mahnkopf hears in Spahlinger's music, but I think I can understand why he is hearing what he is hearing. By talking about the ways in which Mahnkopf is listening to Spahlinger, I will try to demonstrate how I hear things differently.

2.

I have not seen the score for Spahlinger's *éphémère*, so I am obliged to simply describe the recorded artifact 'phenomenologically'.⁵ Towards the middle of the work, an

entropic mélange of percussive sounds organizes into a cyclic pattern that repeats again and again, without allowing me to form a clear *gestalt*. I can't quite grasp its beginning or its ending, I don't know how to parse it into a unity. I can hear that the pattern is accruing new sounds with each cycle. Some of the new accruals fit into a regular rhythmic grid while others disturb the sense of metrical organization. There is a constant oscillation between articulation and veiling of the metrical grid: a tremolo on the cowbell obscures the pulse; an accented figure played on a low drum (short, short, long, long) re-articulates it; then a sizzle cymbal erases it again, replacing its own internal pulsing with that of the grid. Attacks on the drum clarify the pulse, an *accelerando* on the woodblock and the irritating tremolo of the cowbell efface it. Each cycle gathers new material, and as the *gestalt* constantly grows I find it harder to remember its parts. At the same time as the *gestalt* grows larger, the content perpetually obscures *and* articulates the *ictus*.

Soon, after Spahlinger introduces a piano and a whistle into the pattern, a silent gap opens up within the *gestalt*. No clearly pulsed material appears in the gap: silence disturbs the apprehension of unity in the pattern as more and more material disappears—a process of dissolution. Occasionally a stroke on the drum seems to reassert the presence of the beat, which we know must be holding this wild mélange together. Finally the silent gap overtakes the cycle, and the only remnant left is an occasional, loud rim shot asserting the beat, although its assertions are not supported by other events.

Suddenly, the music bursts into a cloud of vibraphone tremolandi, buzzers, bells, and telephone ringers. But this too is only temporary; the rim shot comes back and disperses the cloud. It blasts out a slow repetitive pulse—always at the same dynamic level, always at the same slow pace. This repetition goes on for quite a while—fifty-six strokes in all, to be exact.⁶ At first, it is easy to understand the rim shot's function: it punctuates, snapping off and ending the previous material. But the as rim shots continue in their slow, repetitive manner, I begin to wonder how this material is functioning—what is its point? No longer signaling an end, the rim shots become perspicuous as their function becomes attenuated. Verging on mechanical repetition, the rim shot bangs out its message apparently oblivious to the piece's unfolding drama. It eliminates the memory of what came before by its sheer imposition. Demanding forgetting, the rim shots force me to focus intently on the present. Each shot reverberates through the space with some slight, subtle difference. But this difference has no direction, purpose or finality; it is a pure seriated comparison. What could possibly make this mechanical rim shot end? It lacks any internal motivation to stop. Machines need a *deus extra machina* to flip the switch off.

This seemingly endless series of rim shots is obviously the most provocative moment in *éphémère*—starkly in contrast to the novelty of the percussion writing or the inventive sonic constructions deployed by Spahlinger in the rest of the piece. It is a transgression; the musical form is ruptured by the sheer insubordination of the rim shots, in combination with the metaphysical violence entailed by replacing a human form of repetition with its mechanical counterpart. The beat, the disciplining

taskmaster of polyphonic coordination, stands forth in a moment devoid of musical figuration. This is pure mechanical repetition: formalization, against form.⁷

3.

No doubt, it is precisely this moment that Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf must be referring to when he argues that *éphémère*, ‘a work that proclaims its own critical attitude in the most garish fashion, is not self-critical’ (Mahnkopf, 2006, p. 83). And it is within the context of ‘critical composition’ that Mahnkopf, who has written extensively about the social, political and technical aspects of new music, addresses Spahlinger’s work.

Alongside Lachenmann and Nicolaus A. Huber, Spahlinger is identified with composers ‘known for their intellectual, socio-theoretically charged rhetoric’ (Mahnkopf, 2006, p. 80). Mahnkopf addresses critical composition via an argument that is reducible to three phases: (1) neutralization; (2) eliciting criteria for the application of the term ‘critical composition’; (3) evaluating which composers, and which pieces, fit the criteria.

First, Mahnkopf tries to neutralize the term ‘critical composition’⁸ in order to retrieve, or reconstruct, its meaning. Mahnkopf argues that ‘critical composition’ has become emptied of its original meaning through a slow process of usurpation and cooptation. He points out that the term *critical* ‘was not initially a popular term, for it contained a negational component; it was directed against something and thus created a disturbance. On the other hand, it was not long until no one any longer wished to be the opposite of critical, namely uncritical or non-critical . . .’ (Mahnkopf, 2006, p. 76). If everyone wants to be thought of as critical, then the term no longer functions as determinately negative. To put it bluntly, critical composition does not negate anything if everyone can claim it; rather, the term has become exhausted through overuse. As part of Mahnkopf’s project to rethink critical composition today, one has to thoroughly neutralize the term, in order to reassess or reconstruct further possible applications in light of the current historical and social situation of music.

Second, Mahnkopf discusses the current need to establish criteria for evaluating whether a work can be called critical:

If one is to reach a provisional definition of critical composition . . . [First,] the critical activity must be characterized by more than reflection and awareness; it must rather constitute a form of examination with clear yes/no options. Secondly, it must redefine the criteria for such options, the aspects under investigation and the examination’s degree of intensity with every new historical location. (Mahnkopf, 2006, p. 82)

For Mahnkopf, Spahlinger’s work fails to be critical composition despite—or rather, because of—its historical pedigree. The historical restlessness of the criteria of critical composition, the fact that they must remain ruthlessly critical in relation to the present moment, dooms Spahlinger’s work to fall short of the bar. Spahlinger clings

to old forms of negation rather than adapt his critique to the present-day conditions of musical material and compositional life. Mahnkopf writes, 'In my view, the main problem with Spahlinger is that he does not adapt his negativity principle to historical changes, instead freezing its historical origins in time, so to speak' (Mahnkopf, 2006, p. 81). Spahlinger's music, no matter how critical it may once have been, is no longer critical when the processes of negation lose their relevance to the current historical circumstances.

Spahlinger's 'negativity principle', which has become historically obsolete, links his composing to outmoded forms of dialectics and denies him the possibility of writing a critical New Music. According to Mahnkopf, musical deconstruction changes the terms of New Music, away from 'progress, negation, dialectic, [and] parameter' towards a new descriptive vocabulary: 'Deconstruction in place of dialectic, radical difference in place of antagonism, non-linearity in place of linearity, paradox in place of synthesis...' (Mahnkopf, 2004, p. 9).

Mahnkopf hears Spahlinger's music as dialectical but not deconstructive. It is important to underscore that Mahnkopf closely aligns the shift from musical dialectics to musical deconstruction with the concept of polyphony. Polyphony organizes differences in a deconstructive way; unlike homophony, where voices blend into perceptual unities, polyphony poses the question, 'does difference function *as* difference?' (Mahnkopf, 2002, p. 39). The functioning of difference as difference affects not only the musical material itself but also the manner in which the listener perceives the material. According to Mahnkopf, polyphony forces the listener towards two phenomenological states: positively, the listener enters a state of *diagonal listening* as a form of 'mental compromise', because the ear cannot simultaneously grasp a synchronic layering and diachronic unfolding of such detail and complexity. Negatively, the listener experiences an *apperceptive overload* where the ear discovers a quality of 'too-muchness', an excess of musical relationships that reach sublime proportions. And like the classical sublime, apperceptive overload reveals the limits of the subject's capacities, a limit which both reasserts the power and domain of both the interiority of subject and the externality of nature, its other. Mahnkopf describes the apperceptive overload of polyphony as producing 'an oscillation (in Derrida's sense) between auto- and hetero-observation' where the listener 'regards the musical object, but simultaneously also his own inability to absorb all that he hears' (Mahnkopf, 2002, p. 43).

Third, Spahlinger's music lacks the proper polyphonic construction and correlative modes of listening that are characteristic of musical deconstruction. What Mahnkopf hears in Spahlinger is primarily a diachronic (i.e. sequential) arrangement of musical material that is intended to produce contradictory phenomena—a project essentially dialectical in nature. In fact, he goes so far as to identify the 'negational combination of consciously irreconcilable elements' as a 'counter-polyphonic stance' (Mahnkopf, 2004, 45–46). Thus, no matter how close Spahlinger's music may come to a kind of musical deconstruction, it will always be applied from the exterior: dialectical negation but not critical composition.

If we recall *éphémère* and its notorious rim shots, we may be able to understand why Mahnkopf hears this piece as garish and uncritical. There is nothing polyphonic about this moment. Formally, its arrival and prolongation succeed in negating the formal design of the piece in the listener's imagination. When (nearly) mechanical repetition reaches this degree of saturation, the attentiveness of the listener becomes focused only the smallest resulting differences in resonance. The arrangement is diachronic—the present object negates the previous. Moreover, there is nothing even resembling 'apperceptive overload'. The material is so ridiculously simple, so ridiculously reduced that there is no problem for the listener to absorb all that he hears. In fact the paucity of material, the stupid regularity of it, the utter dismissal of 'too-muchness' produces a type of apperception that is the opposite of overloaded. Apperception becomes the central focus; the lack of any musical figuration encourages a marked emphasis on apperception over perception, where the listener is forced to pose questions about his or her grasp of the practices in play, including his or her own practices and habits of listening. My ascriptions become uncertain. How is this material functioning? What I am supposed to be hearing/listening for? When will it end? How will it end? What could motivate an ending?

4.

This kind of listening invokes the skeptical puzzle because it *involves* listening (in the sense that one gets 'involved' in a caper or fiasco) in questioning the possible divergences between an objective and detached understanding of the world and the internal experience of such objectivities. Philosopher Barry Stroud writes, 'What is seen to be true from a detached "external" standpoint might not correspond to what we take to be the truth about our position when we consider it "internally", from within the practical contexts which give our worlds their social point. Philosophical skepticism says the two do not correspond...' (Stroud, 1984, p. 81). Stroud's statement helps to illuminate what is at stake in the skeptical puzzle: we cannot find a secure place from which to attach the truth of our internal situated positions to the external standpoint. The two positions, inside and outside, do not correspond. The skeptical puzzle brings this lack of correspondence into recognition, showing the difference between the way the world is externally (as-such) and the way it is from a situated, internal position (for-us). The episode of the rim shot in *éphémère* is precisely such a moment where the listener is forced to recognize this difference as a moment of divergence.

But perhaps one could object that it is precisely at this moment, where the rim shot mechanically repeats itself and the exigencies of musical form are ruptured, that the listener encounters a state where the external material (the rim shot as such) suddenly becomes *identical* to its internal apprehension; that it is precisely *this* moment where my listening position corresponds with the external position, because I can no longer hear the rim shots *as* functional, no longer *as* encouraging any kind of metaphorical musical figuration. By reducing away the listener's intentional contribution, the for-us meets the as-such. Acoustic and acousmatic experience become identical.

However, this objection misses an important distinction. Granted, when the musical dramaturgy halts, I may become aware of the acoustical properties being activated, or sounded, by the rim shots. I can hear the room resonating again and again, my surrounding acoustic space being transformed into a *corps sonore* excited by a rim shot. I can also hear the small physical variations in each attack, and compare the subtle differences. I can revel in the discrepancy between the eidetic norm of exact repetition and the norm's acquiescence to the variability of physical systems. Yes, I hear all of this ephemeral reality. But this does not mean that my listening corresponds with the external position. There is always a sliver of difference between the stretch of sound and the apprehension of it, a thin sliver that differentiates the as-such from the for-us.

The 'for-us' is social in nature, as opposed to the autonomy of the 'as-such', whether understood as a phenomenologically reduced *eidos* or simply pure materiality. The 'as-such' is incommensurable with the other as-structures that characterize the experience of worldly things 'for-us': structures of hearing-as, seeing-as, regarding-as, functioning-as, etc. The heteronomy of these kinds of characterizations disclose the embedded and sedimented social formations that ground aesthetic experience. Musical objects are aspectual objects to which listeners comport themselves in special ways, different from other kinds of objects outside of aesthetic contexts. Naturally, this comportment depends on various degrees of familiarity, training, perceptual capacity and cultivation, interests and disinterests. It also depends upon responses to cultural norms and concomitant introjected claims of discrimination, distinction or taste. The lack of a common practice does not entail a lack of possible comportments; in fact, it exacerbates the divergent possibilities of multiple comportments such that they cannot be suppressed under the aesthetic judgments of 'common sense'. At the same time, the autonomous 'as-such' is not superseded by its absorption under hearing-as. Comportments negotiate the affordances of the material properties of the musical object, or its aspects. The dialectics of the 'as-such' and the 'for-us' reside in this mutual interdetermination, which is guided by the foundationless foundation of a *Lebensform*.

In listening, the lack of correspondence between interior and exterior positions is experienced in terms of the comportment towards a musical object. It is problematic to characterize this perceived lack of correspondence as skeptical without further qualification, because the notion of skepticism appears overly epistemological, diminishing the demand that the dialectic of the 'as-such' and the 'for-us' must be experienced or felt. Perhaps it is better to say that Spahlinger composes with a skeptical method to produce musical objects that solicit or provoke a listener into a conflict of projections or ascriptions about the musical object. A skeptical method of composition is deployed to provoke an audible experience of the skeptical puzzle. I borrow this description of 'skeptical method' from Kant, who described it in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as 'a method of watching, or rather provoking, a conflict of assertions, not for the purpose of deciding in favor of one or other side, but of investigating whether the object of controversy is not perhaps a deceptive appearance which each vainly strives to grasp, and in regard to which . . . neither can arrive at any

result' (Kant, 1965 [1787], A424/B451 ff.). This is in strict distinction from *skepticism*, a technique that 'undermines the foundations of all knowledge, and strives in all possible ways to destroy its reliability and steadfastness'. To gloss, Kant sees the utility of the skeptical method as a way of engaging in dialectical conflicts (like those displayed in the *Transcendental Dialectic* and the antinomies) to ascertain evidence about what is and is not knowable; this is in distinction to *skepticism*, which he characterizes as the brute negation of all claims to knowledge.

Kant's description of skeptical method places an emphasis on the experience of conflict being provoked. A skeptical method is not an epistemology but rather a manner of presentation. Similarly, moments of extreme reduction in Spahlinger's compositions should be conceived of as aligned with a *skeptical method*, in Kant's sense: they strive to provoke the listener into a dialectical conflict of assertions between the fields of materiality and intentionality, externality and internality, the as-such and the for-us. The purpose of these conflicts has nothing to do with brute *skepticism*; Spahlinger is not simply looking for ways to undermine the listener's intentionality or destroy its functioning; he is not simply performing a compositional act of *abstract negation*. The point is presentational: Spahlinger's compositions are designed to provide situations where *determinate negation* can be displayed, where he can demonstrate the dialectical intertwining of musical material and the practices of listening.⁹ Mahnkopf misses the *skeptical method* in Spahlinger's music and treats him simply as a *skeptic* when he claims that 'Spahlinger is increasingly becoming less the composer of his works than the representative of a neurotically exaggerated negativity principle' (Mahnkopf, 2006, p. 81).

I can only assume that Mahnkopf is taking the view that such a flagrant act of determinate negation is a vestige of some outdated avant-garde posture, and thus garish. If we are thinking of garish as loud or as demanding attention, then Mahnkopf is surely correct. The repeated rim shots of *éphémère* are certainly both loud and demanding of the listener's attention. Better yet, one could say that its qualities do not simply demand, but rather compel the listener, for the rim shot cannot be blotted out in favor of listening to other polyphonic strands. It opens no path for diagonal listening. But 'garish' has other definitions too, and if read as flashy and ostentatious, or saturated with ornamentation, then the rim shots in *éphémère* are surely the antithesis of garish. In fact, it is the utter reduction and economy of means that is so striking. The reduction is not simply in terms of musical material or figuration (it is not simply a reduction to a rim shot) but is a reduction that brings into light the problematic and incongruous relation of the as-such and the for-us, what is sounding independently of consciousness and how that object is oriented toward consciousness.

There are moments like these scattered across Spahlinger's compositions: the repeated chords in harmonics in *apo do*, the Bartòk pizzicato ending of *passage/paysage*, the microtonal inflections in *nah, getrennt*. In its most extreme form, it becomes the principle which organizes *verfluchung*. Moments of repetition, with or without subtle variations, are used to articulate that thin sliver of difference between the as-such and the for-us. The presence of this difference is often marked for a

listener by the phenomenon of aspect-perception (Wittgenstein, 1953, part 2, §11). As creatures endowed with intentionality, creatures for whom the notion of the world appearing for-us is an intelligible notion, we are continuously understanding parts of the world (or, for that matter, parts of musical compositions) as under the guise of this or that aspect. Wittgenstein provides various examples to illustrate the phenomenon of aspect-perception: schematic faces, Necker cubes, Jastrow's 'duck-rabbit' and other well-known figures. Aspect-shifting figures, like the duck-rabbit, afford the possibility of being seen in multiple ways (see Figure 1).

Underneath any shift or dawning of an aspect, there is the phenomenon of continuous-aspect perception, where features are being continuously regarded in some distinctive manner. If we see Jastrow's figure as a duck only (without seeing the rabbit or realizing its possibility) we could say that we are comporting ourselves in an appropriate way towards the image, treating it as an image of a duck and seeing those features in it. Comporting ourselves toward the object in this way implies a whole group of other social practices, like the possibility of comparing its likeness or resemblance to other pictures of ducks, being able to fill in or anticipate other changes that could be made to alter or refine its likeness, etc. (Mulhall, 1990, pp. 24 ff.). At the same time we could see the figure as a rabbit. This aspect may dawn on us at some moment in time; it may come as a surprise. It is always possible that we may notice aspects which we had heretofore missed, and this produces an unusual situation. Wittgenstein writes, 'I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it had not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect"' (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 193c).

Musical repetition, as Spahlinger deploys it, is designed to elicit the 'noticing of an aspect'. One reason why repetition is so effective for this end is that, in repetition, the processual side of musical material is diminished, reified into a static musical object. The object is repeated again and again, like the rim shots in *éphémère*, ostensibly without change. But something does change nevertheless—I hear it differently, and this difference concerns the function or purpose to which the musical object is being deployed. The rim shot no longer closes off, interrupts or punctuates. Its stubborn repetition then elicits a new ascription or projection of function. But these two aspects hold each other at bay; one aspect of the object is deployed at the expense of another. The

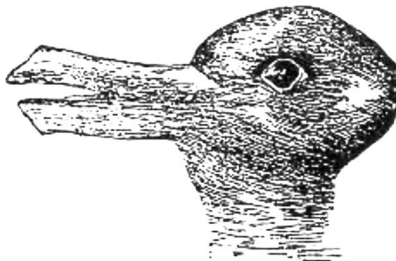


Figure 1 Jastrow's duck-rabbit.

object's aspect shifts and a new aspect replaces the previous continuously perceived aspect. We notice new aspects of the musical object that we had overlooked and we bid adieu to other aspects that we had believed to be essential.

5.

Not wishing to introduce more philosophical terminology than necessary, nor wishing to prolong a discussion of *éphémère*'s rim shots beyond the reader's patience, I have introduced the idea of aspect-perception because it is the most efficient way to account for the profound relationship between two extreme tendencies in Spahlinger's composition: a tendency towards incessant repetition and, contrastingly, a tendency towards continuous transition. These tendencies are in opposition only superficially. Repetition provides the listener with a stable musical object that affords a situation where the dawning of an aspect, and the possible conflict between various aspects, can be made audible. However, just as repetition is deployed to produce shifts in aspect-perception, so are transitions. The latter present the listener not with a single stable musical object, but rather with a constantly varying object or objects. This object slowly changes over time, affording a situation where the listener cannot hold onto any single aspect with anything more than temporary stability. As the entity changes, so do the potentially relevant aspects. What begins as one kind of musical material, associated or understood as embodying some given practice or function, transforms into some other kind of musical material that may have a radically different purpose or function.

Take, for instance, the stretch of music starting at about 7 minutes into *passage/paysage*. We hear a series of short, repetitive chords, broadly orchestrated to cover the orchestra's tessitura, as well as emphasizing no particular orchestral family. The passage solicits the listener to hear in it the aspect of rhythmic regularity. The voicing and orchestration does not change in any dramatic way, but occasional rhythmic deviations begin to alter the primary aspect: regularity. As the music develops, it becomes clear that the 'regularity' is not the correct ascription. The fluctuations between regularity and irregularity solicit the dawning of a new aspect: pulsation. But, again, this aspect is only temporarily established. As the passage continually transforms some of the durations are held *too long* to be graspable as pulsations, however regular or irregular they may be. These drawn-out chords, by sharing (for all intents or purposes) the same harmonic character and broadly orchestrated texture, do not afford the possibility of being grasped as pulses, but rather solicit another aspectual change: they become clouds, or sound masses. With the establishment of this new aspect, more transformations are made. The cloud dissolves down to almost a single pitch, orchestrated through doublings, then thickens into a dense cloud. In the music that follows, the most relevant aspect has little to do with sonic clouds or sound masses, but is about the alternation of properties like thickness or thinness of texture. Just after the 12-minute mark, the pulsing returns; at a moment where the listener's aspectual understanding of the passage no longer needed 'pulsing' to

organize the *gestalt*, or has simply forgotten its previous relevance, it returns. So somehow ‘pulsing’ is once again a relevant aspect of the musical material—or did it ever stop being so?

Describing a passage like this in aspectual terms may fall far below the kind of exegesis one expects of the music theorist, the expert listener, the composer or other idealized listening types. It is clearly too reductive and captures only one kind of listening at a certain level of detail and within a certain time span. But its simplicity helps underscore a profound affinity in Spahlinger’s return again and again to extreme repetition and continual transition. Both methods encourage, or to put it even more strongly, solicit the listener to experience aspectual shift. In this kind of musical ‘noticing an aspect’ we *hear* that the musical material has not changed, yet we *hear* the material differently. The moment of aspectual shift registers the strange dialectics between the internal and external position; it implies a new way in which I must comport myself towards the musical object. By encouraging such aspectual shifts, Spahlinger composes with a skeptical method, a method that elicits the experience or feeling of conflicting ascriptions.

6.

The experience of conflicting ascriptions brings us back to our starting point—the skeptical puzzle, with its lack of insurance between practices and ascriptions. Originally the puzzle was posed in terms of the security of a single ascription, but it follows that where we have possible conflicting ascriptions the security of any single ascription is challenged. As I stated in the opening, I was interested in exploring Mathias Spahlinger’s way of *not* foreclosing on this skeptical puzzle and its musical implications. Spahlinger’s compositional method is a skeptical method, continually eliciting moments where, as a listener, I feel my ascriptions and comportment towards the musical object suddenly shift. Obviously, these kinds of divergences possess a temporality—that is, they take time to unfold—and this is one reason why music, this extraordinary temporal art, is so apt at exploiting the skeptical puzzle. But this aptitude pertains only to the extent that the skeptical puzzle is engaged; musical works can just as easily leave this potential unrealized, but perhaps this cannot be said for New Music.

As a listener to Spahlinger’s music, I often feel myself placed into a position where the skeptical puzzle is palpably presented, as the strange feeling of the sudden tenuousness of my auditory ascriptions or a sudden urgent revision of my comportment towards the musical object. As I write this phrase, ‘sudden tenuousness’, it seems wholly unsatisfactory. It must be put under erasure, crossed out at the moment it is written, because it seems to unloose the listener’s projection from the musical object too drastically. I am unsure which word or phrase to deploy to capture the sense of the foundationless foundation that binds me to the musical object, which word would evoke the proximity and spacing of the interior and exterior positions, the mutual inter-determination and distinctness of the as-such

and the for-us. Perhaps it is simply a problem of language—of finding a dialectical phrase that can posit itself in precisely the same manner as our auditory ascriptions: inexorable, until the next aspect dawns.

Notes

- [1] This phrase is Whitney Davis', to whom I am indebted for introducing me this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought. His consideration of this problem to the domain of image making can be found in *Replications* (Davis, 1996, pp. 35ff.).
- [2] In the entirety of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses the words 'Lebensform' and 'Lebensformen' only five times, at §19, §23, §241, p. 174 and p. 226. For a detailed study, see Garver (1994, pp. 237–269).
- [3] As Spahlinger writes, 'new music is the first and (as far as we know) the only music that suspends or disables the syntactical and language-like systems of its own tradition. in addition, unlike prior changes of paradigm, she has not put new conventions in place of the old' (Spahlinger, 2008, p. 580).
- [4] Mahnkopf's account will be reconstructed from a variety of sources, in particular Mahnkopf, 2002, 2004 and 2006.
- [5] I place the term 'phenomenology' in scare quotes to distinguish my usage of the term from its systematic philosophical application. I will not be addressing Spahlinger's music as a way of disclosing eidetic knowledge about his works, or music in general; nor will I be systematically applying an *epoché*, or using any time of transcendental-phenomenological reduction; I will simply be using a first-person, descriptive method, without use of a score, as the most efficient way of articulating what I see as relevant insights about Spahlinger's compositional practice.
- [6] *Editor's note*: In the score, Spahlinger gives the following instructions: 'eighth-note = 30–35. tempo must lie (within the given limits) subjectively between activity and passivity, between movement and stillness.' The rim shots are to be repeated 'at least 65 times', followed by a pause in which another player, in the given tempo, holds up the word 'Peng!' (tr. 'Pow!'); this is followed by another 'circa 20' repetitions and an 'expansive' (German: *ausgiebig*) silence.
- [7] 'mechanical repetition is non-figurative, it has no systematic attributes, no formal implication, is capable of endless continuation. in contrast, organic, figurative repetitions are limited in number, often they appear in groups of no more than two or three, they create punctuation and teleology. in both cases one can say: repetition engenders separation. figurative repetition is one of a partial figure which has a qualitative beginning and end. mechanical repetition, on the other hand, is practically endless: one cannot identify the beginning of a loop or of a wheel' (Spahlinger, 2008, p. 589).
- [8] *Editor's note*: Mahnkopf consciously borrows this term from Nicolaus A. Huber's essay, a translation of which appears in this volume.
- [9] Doubtless, Spahlinger would not describe his compositional method in these terms of a skeptical method. Skepticism is an ambivalent term in Spahlinger's writings, which embodies the rejection of pre-given concepts of progress by the petit bourgeois composer, but without providing the composer with an adequate consciousness for determining adequate forms of progress (Spahlinger, 2008). I am using the term otherwise, as demonstrated in the distinction between skepticism and the skeptical method.

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