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# Cultural Psychology of Musical Experience

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## CONTENTS

*Series Editor's Preface: The Voice of Music in Cultural Psychology* .....ix  
Introduction.....xiii

### PART I

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#### CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF MUSIC

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1 Psychological Aesthetics, Cultural Psychology, and Music ..... 3  
*Christian G. Allesch*

2 The Sound of Music ..... 21  
*Tania Zittoun*

3 Religion, Culture, and Music: A Psychological Exploration ..... 41  
*Jacob A. Belzen*

### PART II

---

#### MUSICAL SENSATIONS

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4 The "Unattainable Vibration": Julia Kristeva, the Opera,  
and Psychic Life in a Mexican City ..... 71  
*Karen Rodríguez*

5 The Musicalization of "Reality": Reality, Rap, and Rap Reality  
on Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*..... 89  
*Anne Danielsen*

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## CHAPTER 2

## THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Tania Zittoun

*What holds for play also holds for the St. Matthew passion.*

—Donald W. Winnicott, 1968, p. 206

*ouitchi-tchatchitchaouitchitchatchitchaNIAAAAAAAAH...**ouitchi-tchatchitcha.*

—Simonds, 1988, p. 45

As people live and move through their physical, urban, material, geographical environment, they are constantly exposed to an endless variety of shapes, volumes, colors and sounds (Kharlamov, 2012; Maslov, 2012; Valsiner, 2007, 2008). These geographical environments thus guide our physical movements, and also, because we keep being exposed to shapes, colors and sounds at the periphery of our consciousness, they actually guide our thinking (Valsiner, 2011). First, in the here and now, street signs and colors suggest us to some places, inform us about the status of others, induce us to spend money, or to keep our way. Second, in a deeper sense, our long-term experience of the places in which we live is also the situated process by which we learn to move and to see; we therefore internalize and generalize these relationships to space, colors of the landscape, and textures of the buildings. Our spaces become the texture of our minds, in a very essential sense. Hence, the nostalgia of migrants for their homeland landscapes

or for the shape of the houses of their village speaks for such deep connections between our material environments and our identities and sense of what feels homely (Märtsin & Mahmoud, 2012). Third, we actually also participate to the transformation of the material space—we transform our gardens and houses, we paint walls and draw urbanistic plans.

Beyond the visual and the tactile, the space of music and sounds also calls for a special investigation. As spaces and colors, sounds are present in our physical environment. As much as physical spaces, they are perceived by humans through their senses and their physical, embodied experience; and as their experience of space, experiences of sounds needs to be treated, analyzed, these become signs for humans. Like physical spaces, sound is pervasive; first, it is always on the process of being experienced, catching our attention or disturbing us; second, it is also and always exposing us to endless social meanings; and third, we participate to sounds.

The notion of *semiosphere* has been proposed by Lotman to designate the world of culture in which we live, made out of semiotic units—the minimal conditions of carrying meaning through time and space among humans (if not other species)—and as “the result and the condition for the development of culture” (Lotman, 1990, p. 125). The notion was built in analogy to that of biosphere, used to designate “the totality and the organic whole of living matter and also the condition for the continuation of life” (Lotman, 1990, p. 125). If sounds are relevant to humans, whatever their cause is, it is because they become one of the modalities by which culture functions. Sounds constitute one of the modalities of the semiosphere in which we live; they constitute the soundscape of our lives (Müller, 2012; Schafer, 1993).

### BOUNDARIES: NOISE, SOUNDS, MUSIC, MEANING

To contribute to a reflection of a possible cultural psychology of sounds and music, I will explore a few attempts made to reflect on people’s experience of sound in specific spheres of experience. Using an old technique, I will approach sounds through contradistinctions: when the idea of sounds becomes blurred and meets a limit—noises, words, or music. This exploration is in no way exhaustive.

“Sound” designates “(what is heard because of) quick changes of pressure in air, water, etc.” (Procter, 1995, p. 1378)—a sound is a vibration interpreted by an ear, and here, a human ear (with no major dysfunction). Something that is heard can also be interpreted in different ways.

### The Cultural Construction of the Meaning of Sounds

In a foundational essay for cultural psychology, Boesch (2007) reflects on “the sound of the violin” and questions what makes its beauty. He examines

the epigenesis of the violin through history and in different places in the world, as well as the developmental trajectory of the young violinist who needs to discipline his movement and hearing so as to produce a beautiful sound. The essay brings him to reflect on the mutual adjustment of person and instruments, through a life course and history, and mediated by dynamics of recognition. More relevant for the current discussion, Boesch particularly reflects on the tension that justifies the search for a “pure” sound—a utopia of something not yet heard, but powerful enough to mobilize the effort of civilization and musicians:

Utopia is the imagination of a world entirely in harmony with our phantasms, of reality totally in tune with our inner experience. In other words, utopia abolishes the “I” “non-I” antagonism. The beautiful sound, an external phenomenon, yet produced by our mastery and corresponding to—or even surpassing—our ideal standards, thus becomes a proof of our potential to create a phenomenon which, by its appeal, symbolizes utopia. (Boesch, 2007, p. 186)

Eventually, Boesch suggests, the beautiful sound is a mythem, linked to a cultural ideal of purity, in opposition to noise—or “sound dirt” (p. 188). He goes as far as suggesting that rock music is looking for this “dirt”—through its noisy music, dirty clothes, and greasy hair.

But what is then noise? In such a view, noise is sound that has not been cultivated, either because it has not been produced by humans, or because humans have not yet developed a system to identify and name it. But noise is also very often simply the sound of others, as Gonseth, Knodel, Laville, & Mayor (2011) observe through the history of anthropological musicology.

If we now examine the perspective of individuals, the boundaries between sounds and noise appears slightly differently. In an intriguing case study of a Thui village in Northern Thailand, Chuengsatiansup (1999) describes the illness of women that is foremost manifested by a hyper-sensibility, or even a feeling, of being attacked by daily noises, “blasting motorcycles, drunkards, quarrelling neighbors, machines eating up the forest” (p. 297). These “noises” are perceived as highly unpleasant and participate to the ill state of these women, manifested by deep tiredness, numbness, insomnia, without having a physiological explanation. To account for this, the author proposes a complete analysis of the village’s mode life, which has been questioned by regional and world legislative and economical changes, and was forced to undergo through deep transformation. Hence, for reason of animal protection, the traditional elephant trade became forbidden, which demanded to find new occupations for elephants and new trades for villagers; forest were being sold to large foreign groups that started to use extensively its woods, preventing traditional uses; the media brought new leisure to young men, such as motorbikes and alcohol. In that perspective, the “noises” that make women sick are actually the sounds of all the

aspects that impose a rupture on the previous way of life of villagers and women: the sound of woodcutting is interpreted as the noise of machines destroying the physical environment, the sound of young men having fun with their motorbike becomes the noise of young men risking death through dangerous mechanical objects. In that sense, a noise is a sound that is perceived as rupture—whether it designates a real source of danger, or because it questions who one is, the relationships between the person and her social and material environment, or one's vision of the future and the meaning of existence. Chuengsatiansup's (1999) coup de force consists in her analysis of the complete semiosphere: why specific sounds are interpreted as noises having the power to somatically aggress people can only be understood when these are put in relationship to other meanings, diffracted through other material means and modes. In that sense, even in this very basic sense, for what they designate and what they are not, sounds are part of a semiotic system.

### Artists' Explorations: From Nonsound to Sound

What is a sound, and how sounds touch us or disturb us, has been systematically explored by musicians and composers. Since the beginning of modernity in the arts, mainly after industrialization and the First World War, the pursuit of beauty became secondary in painting and in music; artists engaged in making sense of, admired or denounced the new conditions of existence. In his 1913 futurist manifesto, Russolo enthusiastically asked his readers to learn to listen and discriminate the sounds of modernity, which could become a new material for creative invention. Over the last 100 years, and especially after WWII, musicians and composers have developed complex ways to create a wide diversity of sound experiences, using for this natural sounds, instruments, synthesizers, and new technologies. Since the 1950s, through stereophonic effects, multiple tracks, uses of samples and drones, and thanks to the quality of sound systems, headphones, and physical places, they manage to create sounds that have a deep spatial structure—it is now possible to literally hear sounds that move through space and have complex layered architectures—and a strong materiality: vibration, drums, palpitations, create deliberate physical experiences of pressure, tensions, etc. as in the sound showers of electronic music.<sup>1</sup> In such work, different sounds are transformed for new composition; whether they are natural or industrial, pleasant or not, noise-like or music, they thus become material for creation of new soundscapes. Musical research has thus questioned the limits between noise and sound, sound and music, sound and space; it definitely displays a deep understanding of what sound does to people, and how active listeners engage with sounds.

Some artists have thus explored the boundary between sound and its absence. In his musical piece "Composition 1960 # 5," the American composer La Monte Young demands the performer free butterflies in the performance area, with open windows and doors, the performance being finished when the butterflies are gone (Young, 1960). In such a case, the actual "vibration" caused by the wings of the butterflies is infinitesimal, yet why should it not be music?

Other artists have also developed reflections on our experience of conferring meaning to physical spaces and soundscapes, but this time exploring the boundaries between different semiotic modes. For example, in his partition *Circus On, Means for Translating Any Book Into a Performance Without Actors, a Performance Which is Both Literary and Musical or One or the Other*, John Cage (1979) asked performers to choose a literary text, and through some algorithm, to progressively replace words by their corresponding sound. In their "urban circus" performance directed by Volker Straebel,<sup>2</sup> artists thus played a scene of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (2003), going through a reading of the description of the place, with words being progressively replaced by the corresponding sounds produced by artists, working with objects, electro-acoustic instruments as well as historical archives. With time, a word-based description of an urban location became a soundscape meant to recreate the experience of Berlin in the 1930s. Such a piece can be seen as exploring the boundaries between two semiotic systems, that of verbal language, and that of a sound system, for it plays with the listener's experience of spaces. Can it be understood or interpreted in the same way if it is represented through sounds or through words?

### Sounds Between Perception and Imagination

These contrasted examples highlight the importance of the active role of the listener in the construction of a soundscape: if words and sounds can be equivalent for the construction of an experience, if noise can be used for music, it is because "sounds" are simply perception, they are active constructions. To hear sounds, people draw on their experiences of past sounds, and use their imagination of things and spaces. Typically, one can make the hypothesis that the poetic power of La Monte Young's piece is partly due to the public's added meanings and imagination—drawing on personal experience and the cultural meanings of butterflies.

The role of people's imagination in hearing sounds is also demonstrated by our gullibility when it comes to identifying the physical causes of a sound. Sound effects engineers or designers precisely play with this fact when they prepare radio shows or soundtracks for theater or cinema: all kinds of tricks are used to create specific sounds,<sup>3</sup> which listeners happily attribute to their

imaginary source. Hence, the flapping of a helicopter is better created with an undulating sheet of metal than by the recording of an actual helicopter, where the only clear noise becomes that of the motor. Consequently, people actually know many sounds through their fictional reconstitutions in the first place. Most of us can close our eyes and imagine the bomb whistling and blasting of WWI, or the deep pounding of galloping horses of hunting North American Indians, while never having approached such situations and having heard only their studio creations. Hence, we have an imaginary of sounds, which is fed by fictions: we read novels, see documentaries and movies, in which these sounds were precisely crafted. This imagination of sounds becomes our experience of such sounds, and there is little doubt that these fictional sounds shape our experience of daily sounds.

Altogether, such an exploration suggests that our ability to experience soundscapes is an active construction, for which we draw on our personal experiences of sounds and places, as well as on semiotic resources and cultural conventions available in our environment.

### GENESIS OF SOUNDS

As any other sociocultural phenomena, sounds have also to be understood in time. In an ontogenetic perspective, audition can be considered as one of the first senses of the young infant already before birth. Sound plays a fundamental role in early interactions, as touch and smell—so that sound can be said to participate to the constitution of “sonor psychic envelop” (Anzieu, 1995)—one of the constituent of our thinking capacities. Boesch (2007) also describes the genesis of beautiful sound from such ontogenetic perspective; in his description, the child’s exposure to sounds, perhaps through parents who play the violin, the exposure to teachers and audiences who react to their sounds as “good” or “bad,” participate to the development of a sense of a “beautiful sound.”

In terms of cultural history, how specific sounds became identified, admired, reproduced, or created, becomes one question—which Boesch addresses in his sociogenetic analysis of the sound of violin (2007), or that is at the heart of Müller’s (2012) project of a history of sounds.

Sounds should be studied in their microgenesis. Studies like Chuengsatiansup’s (1999) suggest the daily interactions and small scale processes by which sounds become noise. Cage’s performance retraces the process of sense-making of sounds and places. As daily experience as well as literature reveals, in any new sphere of experience—an urban center or the jungle, a theater or a cafeteria—people have to differentiate harmless from dangerous sounds, or relevant from irrelevant ones. This is typically the case for young soldiers finding themselves on the front (Remarque, 1928/1989) or

civilians learning to survive in a town under siege (Daiute, 2010): in both cases, recognizing the sound from different types of ammunition, shot in various conditions, becomes a condition for survival. It is also the case of refugees and migrants, who have to “learn” the soundscape from a new place to feel at home (Märtsin & Mahmoud, 2012).

At their various scales, such analyses suggest that the capacity to recognize sounds in a given place and time falls into the same dynamics as the socialization to, or enculturation, or progressive mastery of any other semiotic system. More generally, it is quite likely that mastering sounds as a semiotic system demands a progressive capacity to discriminate units in a sonor flow, to differentiate and name some of them, to take distance from their more physiognomic qualities, and to organize them (Werner & Kaplan, 1963).

When the groups in that environment have developed coding systems or other semiotic modes to codify these sounds, they might also have to use these secondary signs—music notation, names of ammunition type or of motors. And when these secondary systems are lacking, they can even be invented—such as the proposition to codify bird songs (Thompson, LeDoux, & Moody, 1994).

Like any semiotic mode, sounds are attached to other social modes of organization, specific group values and histories. People then learn what sounds are beautiful or ugly, authorized in public or to be kept private, such as a body noises. People also learn to identify some sounds as representing wider values, such as the trumpets as dedication to a country, or the church bell as reassuring homely. Sounds thus organize our relationship to self, others, and the world in a deep way; all the complexity of power, ideologies, and myths can be found in our relationship to sounds. For such reasons, studying soundscapes should be, as any other semiotic system, part of the project of a cultural psychology.

### EXPERIENCING SOUNDS AND MUSIC: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS

Developing in a given soundscape, or having learned to master a new one after migration (from countryside to town, from one country to another), or a deep transformation of the environment (e.g., after a highway has been built, trees have been planted, etc.), or after having trained some specific skills and semiotic systems related to the production or the understanding of sounds (learning to read music, to edit sounds, to play an instrument), people have specific sound and musical experiences. Sounds, perhaps more than other semiotic modes, are deeply embodied and awake proprioceptive experiences; the vibrations of a car or a drum on the street communicate specific vibration to our bodies—internal organs as well as skin and ears:

our bodies amplify vibrations or various wavelengths, and perceive modification of the air pressure on surfaces. Because of the early genetic nature of our soundscapes, or this very organic nature of our perception, our experiences of soundscapes have physiognomic qualities—they are associated to states of the body and specific emotions. Perhaps more than with others semiotic modalities, this emotional and embodied anchorage remains in the background of our experiences of sounds (as shown by Werner & Kaplan, 1963). This anchorage might also explain the power of music—a universal, powerful phenomenon. Hence, experiences of sound and music demand to account for these embodied as well as interpretative aspects—sounds are both felt and meant. These aspects have been well observed by others.

The strong imaginative interpretative components of sounds can be deduced from auditory experiences, which are not triggered by actual real sounds. We can imagine a continuum, with extreme sounds purely produced by external, physical causes, and on the other side, totally internal, psychological sounds, with no human-independent causes (Bullo & Égré, 2009). If sounds have mixed components, we should be able to find occurrences at all points of such a continuum.

At one extreme of the continuum (left from Figure 2.1) the question is whether we can “hear” sounds without related air or surface vibrations. The simple clinical case of tinnitus—uncontrollable auditory illusions (Møller, 2011)—is enough to assert this fact. Another type of phenomena is interesting here: dreams, which are in principle disconnected from external, physical stimuli. Dreams, which are mainly using traces of daily mnemonic experiences as well as earlier memories to compose the dream work, can also include sounds as material, and so dreams are often reported as sonor (Moorcroft, 2013). Even more, dreams might be musical and research suggests that, even if musicians dream more of musical dreams than other people, everyone does; they can thus contain new, unheard melodies (Uga, Lemut, Zampi, Zolli, & Salzarulo, 2006). Tinnitus has partly physiological causes, but what about musical dreams? Music and sounds in dreams raise a question: if our reaction to music is partly physical, if not visceral, how can music in dreams be moving or “realistic”? Can the body generate internal vibration with their emotional correlate from within? Given what we know from the mind capacity to generate states of the body (e.g., fear, stress, excitement about an event to come, as well psychosomatic illnesses,



Figure 2.1 Continuum of sounds.

etc.), then this is quite likely. But then, this interrogates the very definition of sounds, as they seem to be hearable without “quick change of pressure.”

Further toward the middle of the continuum, it has been long shown that dreams might include various environmental noises—typically, one’s morning alarm clock becomes a siren in a dream (also Freud, 1900/2001). Some hallucinatory experiences are likely to have the same properties than dreams: they might be producing purely imaginary sounds, but also, they might be developed around environmental sounds whose meaning is changed.

In the same zone of that continuum, it is quite common that a sound currently heard recreates a whole experiential Gestalt: as Proust’s Madeleine, the sound of a morning bird can trigger the memory of being in one’s childhood room, or a church bell can remind us of a known street. Hence a physical sound can trigger an imaginary loop oriented toward the past, and that allows such re-experiencing, which might also be multimodal—one might hear a sound, “see” the colors of that room or street, “smell” the morning coffee or the wet pavement associated to that sound, and so on.

In the middle of the continuum are sounds that we usually hear and instantaneously or rapidly interpret as sounds from our environment—the regular noise in the back is the ticking of a clock, the noises far down are people talking in the street, etc. This is the zone where sounds are physically caused by transformation of the air pressure and also semiotic units for which we master various interpretative repertoires.

On the other extreme of that continuum (right in Figure 2.1), there are obviously physical sounds that we do not hear, depending on the physiological limitations of the human ear, but also, on individual differences and losses due to exposures to noise or aging (such as high sounds frequencies). There are then the sounds which we ignore or do not hear because they are not relevant (such as the clicking of a keyboard as we work or the buses in the street), or for issues related to repression (such as when we “ignore” an alarm clock).

Hence, this short exploration suggests that the imaginary component of sounds is at least as important as the physiological one. Drawing on Winnicott (2001), we can distinguish three zones of sonic experiences along this continuum of sounds (Figure 2.2): the zone of inner life (dreams, and

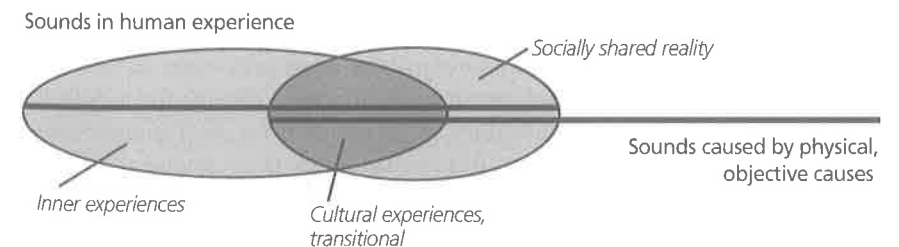


Figure 2.2 Zones of sonic experience on the continuum of sounds.

phantasy) in which sounds are purely generated from within, without actual physical sounds; the zone of our experience with the socially shared reality, in which sounds can be related to their physical origin (something has generated a vibration or air pressure) and that we interpret as due to "real" causes; and the middle zone of so-called transitional phenomena, for which sounds are the departure and playground from imaginary loops, playing, and all cultural experiences, including these to which we now come back, poetic and musical experiences.

### Music as Cultural Experiences

Most of what has been said so far applies for sound in general and the particular case of music, as the examples given previously suggest. However, there are important differences in listening to music, however abstract, or to sounds. Sounds and soundscapes are always there, they are in the background of our experience. We normally hardly "hear" the discussion in the street, the far away buzzing of the cars, or even the radio singing next door. Yet there are situations in which we start to pay attention to sounds, or in which sounds forces our attention. Sounds can become noise, and are heard when their volume or nature changes to such a way that they disrupt our other activities. Yet also, sounds become music, or more specifically, musical experiences, when we deliberately engage in listening to them. (Of course there are liminal cases: typically, "elevator music" is meant to belong to the soundscape, often to induce a certain emotional state, without requiring the attention of listening to music.)

The experience of music falls back to the case of cultural experiences. This has various implications. First, listening to music implies the entrance into a specific type of experiences, and for this, thresholds. To enter in a music piece, there needs to be a sort of disjunction of our current flow of experiences, and through an effect of threshold, the acceptance of the specific quality of that experience. The threshold is, in the most ritualized experiences, the entry in a colossal building, the abandonment of one's coat to cloakroom attendants, the pleasure or pain of finding a spot from where to see or hear the coming performance, the perception of the changes of light, they temporary renouncement of judgment so as to enter in whatever experience a musician, a band, or an orchestra will offer us for a definite period of time. There is also usually a closing threshold, for instance when the public loudly manifests his or her gratitude for that experience (hand clapping, whistling, etc.). Such ritual threshold effects are usually so powerful and usually nonreflexive that John Cage—him again—could create a piece of music where only these thresholds were performed, the piece itself consisting of 4 min 33 sec of silence (Cage, 1952). The threshold in and

out of the cultural experience of listening music can also be more modest, as when one has a preferred place or position to listen to a record, or the placement of earphones, or any other act that performs the entry into a musical experience. Minimally, it might simply be to decide to turn our attention into an aesthetic experience and decide to listen to all the surroundings sounds *as if* they were music (and so we become absorbed in the *symphony of the city* streets, or the gurgling of a heating system, or the folly of spring birds chirping).

A second implication of music being a cultural experience is that it occurs midway between the reality of the sounds provoked by instruments or technical objects, and a person's inner experience—precisely in this zone of transitional phenomena, where guided imagination or adult playfulness occurs (Winnicott, 1968, 1971). This brings Winnicott to the following account of enjoying a piece of music:

Put rather crudely: we go to a concert and I hear a late Beethoven string concert (you see I'm highbrow). This quartet is not just an external fact produced by Beethoven and played by the musicians; and it is not my dream, which as a matter of fact would not have been so good. The experience, coupled with my preparation of myself for it, enables me to create a glorious fact. I enjoy it because I say I created it, I hallucinated it, and it is real and would have been there even if I had been neither conceived of nor conceived. (Winnicott, 1959, pp. 57–58)

For Winnicott, the experience of the Beethoven concert occurs in the zone of transitional phenomena, there where cultural elements come from the sociocultural, shared reality, and are experienced thanks to the person's interiority or subjective experience—dreams, memories and fantasies, and actual skills—the "preparation" required for enjoying such performance.

A third implication of this idea is that a musical experience becomes a specific moment within the time flow; it is anticipated, as just seen; it has duration, and it has an aftermath. It is this very duration that allow elements and sounds to unfold, and thus, to become transformative of the psychological elements awoken by music. This duration and transformative power of music is described by Claude Levi-Strauss as part of his analysis of mythology:

Every melodic phrase or harmonic development proposes an adventure. The listener entrusts his mind and sensitivity to the composer initiatives. And if at the end tears of joy flow, it is because this adventure, lived from beginning to end in a time much shorter than if it were a real adventure, was successful and ends with a happiness that true adventures more rarely provide. The profile of a melodic phrase which is considered beautiful and moving is such that it appears as homologous with that of an existential phase (probably because

in the act of creation of the composer, the same projection was first reversely performed), easily solving in its own terms difficulties homologous with these others against which life would often stumble and fail.

But then we will be entitled to say that in its own way, music fulfills a role similar to that of mythology. Myth coded in sounds instead of words: the musical work provides a decryption grid, a matrix of relations that filters and organizes the lived experience, replaces it, and gives the comforting illusion that contradictions can be overcome and difficulties solved. . . . Mythology and music have this in common that they invite the listener to a concrete union, with this difference that rather than a pattern of encoded sounds, the myth proposes a scheme coded in images. In both cases, however, it is the listener who invests the scheme with one or more virtual meanings, in such a way that the real unity of myth or the musical work can only be achieved in two, through and with a kind of celebration.

Any attempt to understand music would however stop halfway if it does not account for the deep emotions one feels while listening pieces that bring tears to flow. It can be guessed that the phenomenon is similar to laughter in the sense that, in each case, a certain type of configuration external to the subject—words, actions or sounds—triggers a psycho-physiological mechanism that is in some sense predetermined; but what is it, and what exactly is crying with laughter or joy? This is not all, for as Proust has shown, musical pleasure last longer than a performance. It perhaps even reaches its fullness later; when the silence returns, the listener remains saturated with music, submerged with sense, victim of a kind of invasion that dispossessed of him of his individuality and his being; he had become the location of music, as Condillac's statue has become the smell of roses. (Levi-Strauss, 1971, pp. 585–590, author's translation; see also Levi-Strauss, 1990)

Levi-Strauss's analysis suggests the triple conjunctions of the person's embodied experience, his or her mastery of a semiotic mode, the actual structure and composition of the piece of music, its inscription in a sociocultural context, and the inscription of the experience of listening in a longer duration—not only the duration of the musical experience, but also its aftermath.

In that sense, musical experiences, as any other cultural experiences, are anticipated, have the power to awake personal memories, emotions and experiences, host them into the semiotic construct that is the cultural artifact, and as they unfold, transform these contents, so as to generate new emotional experiences, as documented by Vygotsky (1971) or more recently Tisseron (2000). Musical experiences, like film watching or novel reading, can finally become experiences to which we refer later, to which we come back, and that thus become symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2006). However, we should be careful to preserve, in such analysis, the specificity of music—the fact that it is a complex composition of sounds (and not colors, or words, or shapes).

## A SOCIOCULTURAL, EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO MUSIC

This theoretical exploration of course raises the question of the possible developments of a sociocultural psychology accounting for the dynamics explored. In what follows, I propose one of the possible directions of studies, illustrated by an example, before concluding.

### Studying Sound and Musical Experiences

Theorizing sounds and music belongs to the project of a sociocultural psychology: it is a deeply human, essentially cultural experience, which is part of the world in which we live. Moreover, as developmental science, psychology can especially be curious of music—an essentially temporal experience. This opens many avenues for the study of sound and music in the life of people and groups.

In my own work, I have found particularly interesting to consider musical experiences in people's life trajectories. When do people engage in them, what for, and what does it change? Beyond their daily uses, musical experiences might in effect have important roles to play in changing or transforming people's life path. Music is listened to by many in periods of transition, as solace, support or mirror, as mean to maintain people who are gone, or to imagine some other futures (Zittoun, 2006, 2007, 2012b). In addition, because musical experiences are complete human experiences, they might themselves trigger ruptures and transformations of people's lives. This is what I illustrate in what follows.

One problem is, however, to accede to people's sound and musical experiences: as all human experiences, they are internal, and can be shared only if one way or another externalized. In that particular case, it demands the translation of one semiotic language—vibrations, tonalities, melodies, rhythms and structures—in other one, dancing, drawing, and generally privileged by psychologists, verbal language. In addition, if some experiences can be documented in almost real time, sound and music can in principle not be. Hence, classically, access to musical experiences is made post-hoc, narrating in the past, or trying to re-experience them, orally or under a written form. An alternative to this has been proposed by Alexandre Diep (Diep, 2011). Inspired by the activity theorist Yves Clot (2002), he filmed musicians rehearsing their pieces; he then edited the films, collecting passages where obviously the musician experienced a rupture—they suspended their activity, or expressed physically some unexpected event. He finally showed these films to the musicians, asking them what they were then experiencing. Thanks to the recording of the music they played, as well as their view of their filmed nonverbal externalization, these musicians

were able to re-explore the past flow of their experience of playing, including, for some of them, the imaginary visions and experiences in which they were engaged. Note however that musical experiences are mostly studied in the case of people having strong connections to music—musicians, composers (Holtz, 2009), or fans. The sociocultural of lay people's experiences to music has still to become systematically explored.

### An Example of An Adolescent's Musical Experience

To indicate a possible direction for enquiry, a short empirical situation is presented to exemplify our theoretical propositions. The following text, written neither by a musician nor by a "high-brow" author, has been posted at online blog by an anonymous young man. Entitled "My First Staind Concert That Changed My Life," it seems to have been written a few weeks after having assisted to a rock concert:

My first Staind [a rock band] concert was at XYZ City in UK, I remember being so excited. Staind were really the first band I've felt so attached to. I listened to some really heavy music when I was little (...) but Staind had it all for me. I fell in love with the sound of honesty and Aaron's lyrics really helped me to ... *wind down and mellow out, for the 3/4 minutes however long the song was on for I felt like I was layed on a beach somewhere far far away from any commotion that was going on around me.*

There was something unbelievable about Staind that I couldn't quite get around, what have this band been through to get where they are. Where the hell does Mike's riffs come from? Why is Old Schools harmonized vocals giving me an orgasm? Why would I rather sit at home listening to Johns percussion fills than hang out with my friends and most of all why do Aarons lyrics seem so comforting. *I haven't been through nothing Aaron has so why do they help?* I know a lot of Staind fans say that Aaron's lyrics help, I never understood why until my first Staind concert.

It was after school one Wednesday and I guess my Mum had got me and my partner tickets to see them. My partner ... Sadie really enjoyed listening to them, she kinda had to ... seen as though she liked spending time with me. I came home and sat in the living room whilst my Mum got ready and I had butterflies in my stomach. I was so nervous. We got in the car ... I walked through the door and my Mum told me to text her let her know everything is okay, I text her the second I got in telling her all was all okay haha I was so nervous. ... I stood there waiting impatiently, I was right it was suffocate, I was stood there mesmerized. Aaron didn't play guitar back then so he was moving around the stage slowly. Song after song I stood there and I took some photos and some videos, I remember they played 'Open Your Eyes' my favorite song off of Break The Cycle and in the second verse when Aarons starts sing-

ing louder and the lyrics change to talking about overpopulation, he looked straight in my eyes ... I think. *Well it felt like it he did and it felt like he was talking to me, like he was staring at me and telling me to grow the fuck up and start doing things I had always felt never meant much to me. Really pursue my music, Care for my family, Stop drinking so much with friends that didn't no any better and try to introduce them to music. With that one line and stare I felt this rush of excitement and relief.* Who needs heroin or drugs when I have this feeling? They played loads of old songs at that concert which made my night, I mean I love 'Its Been A While,' 'Outside,' 'So Far Away,' 'Zoe Jane,' and the softer side but I loved it when they played 'Crawl,' that chorus is just well to catchy. I was humming it all the way home ... The concert ended and Aaron ended the concert by telling the fans how much they mean to the band and that they will see us soon. That's all I thought about for about 3 weeks.<sup>4</sup>

How to read this text? Obviously, it is a post-hoc creation of an important experience, probably transformed by memory, previous recall, and narrations, and the very fact of being turned into a public text (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2012; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2012). This being said, this musical experience is something more than an average background radio buzzing, it has a quality of epiphany. As such, it amplifies the processes usually involved in music as cultural experiences, as described previously.

For the young man, the musical experience comes at a very specific period of his adolescent life. The event of listening to music here at a concert, is highly ritualized and framed. Driving to the concert, negotiating with the mum, etc., participate in the construction of the experience. The threshold is suggested by the young man who "stood there waiting impatiently, [he] was right it was suffocate, [he] was stood there mesmerized." This different temporality and quality of the experiences in the daily world and in the musical experiences is also marked in the verbal tense used in the text, which change from past to present when the young man is actually describing the immersion in the music (when Aaron is "talking" to him). The transitional nature of the musical experience itself appears very clearly, whether the young man describes listening to music at home and feels transported on a beach or having an orgasm, or when at the concert, he feels directly addressed by the singer. Interestingly, the imaginary experience is here fed by various semiotic modalities—the melodies and sounds (e.g., the riffs of the guitar, the melody of the chorus) as well as the lyrics (e.g., when it becomes about overpopulation). The transitional nature of the experience also appears in its sociocultural and personal nature: a concert, shared with the young man's partner, in the highly crowded place that is a concert, then discussed on an online public blog, has also an obviously very unique and personal resonance. Many other people might consider these sounds as "noise" more than music, and even so, would not be transported by them. Note again how the most intimate is already social: imagining "lying on

a beach” when listening to music at home is already a highly culturally saturated image. This experience is also interesting for highlighting the transformative effects of music. Not only does listening to music change bodily states—relaxation, intense pleasure, excitement and relief—but it also brings the young man to distance himself from his experience, and, through the imagined other that is the singer, question his life, his actions and his goals. Music becomes a symbolic resource, used here to define representations of the future as well as norms to guide one’s conduct (“really pursue my music, care for my family, stop drinking so much with friends that didn’t matter”) (Zittoun, 2006, 2007, 2012b). Finally, here music—and especially a concert—has duration and aftermath. The young man thinks about this concert for the three following weeks, and externalizes this internal vividness of the music by the writing of the blog itself.

This short example is not a proof of or theorization, but is chosen simply for its availability. It shows the heuristic power of considering sounds and music as cultural experience, physical yet imaginary, social and personal, historical and biographical. It also suggests that even “naïve” first person accounts of musical and sound experience can teach us a lot about the microgenesis of musical experiences.

### CONCLUDING WORDS

Sounds and music are part of our semiosphere, and with its general ambition, sociocultural psychology has to be able to theorize them. Here, it is via an exploration of sonor and musical experiences that I have tried to contribute to this theoretical adventure. Exploring the continuum and boundaries between noise, sound and music, perception of the world and imagination, culture and minds, I tried to characterize these experiences as temporal and semiotic, actively created. Finally, music itself appears as one of the many miracles of our lives in world of cultures. Even appreciating the most elementary lullaby is already the result of a complex cultivation, and a piece of music can drastically change the course of life.

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### NOTES

1. This has been at times explicitly addressed as a theoretical problem in music, as retraced in Meric (2012), and more informally as pragmatic issue by musicians, such as by the Young Gods (Walther, 2010).
2. [http://www.straebel.de/praxis/index.html?praxis/text/t-urban\\_circus.htm](http://www.straebel.de/praxis/index.html?praxis/text/t-urban_circus.htm)
3. For example, [http://voyard.free.fr/textes\\_audio/bruitage.htm](http://voyard.free.fr/textes_audio/bruitage.htm)
4. <http://www.staind.com/profiles/blogs/my-first-staind-concert-that>, retrieved 03.05.2009. See also Zittoun, Valsiner et al. 2013, p. 335, for another analysis.

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