# LOSING ONESELF IN THE MUSIC: PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If you read about, or speak with artists in general, and musicians in particular, you will inevitably hear about an unusual kind of experience of something like: "I lost myself in the music, I don't know what happened, I cannot remember, I lost sense of time and place". Many professional musicians claim that this kind of experience is of existential importance to them and that a great deal of purpose of their work derives from having and striving for this kind of experience. *Prima facie*, all this might sound rather innocuous. We all know the experience of being carried away in our work, when we are writing or reading or in our thoughts during something as simple taking a walk. The hours vanish and we cannot recollect what happened while carried away.

But now, consider this description from former world-famous ballet dancer, Erik Bruhn of a performance that was characterized as a once in a lifetime experience of exceptional beauty by important dance critics:

> «When I left the scene, I went to my wardrobe, quite dazed. I was suddenly afraid. I had been so engaged in the performance that I, when trying to recall what I had done, was blank. I was terrified that I had done terrible things and that everything had gone wrong.»[1]

Isn't there something striking in the opposition between the perspective of the performer of terror-inducing oblivion and the perspective of the spectator of exceptional beauty? Something is going on here that does not reduce to our ordinary experiences of being carried away. We might think that the most extraordinary events in our lives, be it our first experience of falling in love, our wedding, the birth of our children, or experiences of unusual beauty, such as the view of the Grand Canyon or the canals and *palazzi* of Venice, or of being submerged in Bach's Giaconna or Dvorak's Cello Concerto also would be the events and experiences that left the strongest imprint on our memory. Instead, at least in the case of the performer, we are seemingly left with some form of amnesia, as also expressed by the cellist Fredrik Sjölin from the "Danish String Quartet" (DSQ):

> «The deeper you are in, the less you observe the world around you…and I had this especially powerful experience…where I completely disappeared. I remember that it was an incredibly pleasant feeling in the body. And it was incredibly strange to come back and at

that point I spent a few seconds to realize where I had been. I had been completely gone and with no possibility of observing…It was this intense euphoric joy:

*Ok, but if you are certain of having played, you cannot have been completely gone, so you must have known that you were playing, or..?*

Weeell…in this case I cannot completely answer you.»

Let us call the experience expressed here, an experience of "losing oneself in the music". This essay will explore what this might mean and suggest ways of thinking about it. First, however, a few considerations on how to conduct such an exploration.

Phenomenology is traditionally considered a strict science for understanding experience and its structures. The founders of the phenomenological tradition, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty all considered it naïve to think that you could obtain a complete description of the world without first establishing the ways in which the mind and the world are always already involved in and co-imply one another.[2] In each their way they began investigations to uncover these co-implications, and they usually did so by examining experience from their own, first-person perspective, under the famous slogan "to the things themselves".

Phenomenology is then an excellent contender to examine the experience of losing oneself in the music. There is, however, a very immediate obstacle. To remain faithful to the phenomenological slogan, one ought to examine this particular experience from the first-person perspective, which in turn implies that one in addition to being a phenomenologist should be a skilled musician with first-personal access to the experience in question. Few, if any, can fulfill such an obligation. A solution to this predicament, maintaining that we must get as close as possible to the things themselves, is to retain one's first-person methodology while adding a second-person methodology, namely that found in the qualitative interviews of ethnography. We find precursors to such a methodology already at the outset of the phenomenological movement in the form of psychopathological work of Jaspers, Bleuler and Minkowski and in recent wave of "Neurophenomenology" initiated in the 80's by Varela.

To put it squarely, if we want to understand experiences, to which we do not have first-personal access, the best thing is to thoroughly interview and learn from the people with such access, while maintaining a critical attitude to the reports obtained. Under the label of a "phenomenological interview"[3] I have focused on understanding the experience of losing oneself in the music and interviewed professional musicians, primarily from the Danish String Quartet[4], which is considered one of the world's leading chamber ensembles.

From these interviews as well as from observations of numerous performances and rehearsals, I've learned a thing or two about losing oneself in the music.

Firstly, you cannot see to what extent a musician is absorbed in his performance. Although seemingly very concentrated, he can in fact be distracted and thinking of what he had for breakfast or where he is going to go out for beers after the concert. This form of daydreaming does not detract noticeably from the quality of the music. As spectators, then, we have to be skeptical of any romanticism suggesting that the musicians were as if in one mind or that a zone of concentrated absorption extended to include the audience.

Secondly, all four musicians in the DSQ can clearly distinguish the aforementioned form of distracted performance, which we might label day-dreaming, from forms of deep absorption. I believe this distinction is significant when applied to our everyday lives. Some might think that artistic absorption is kind of like long-distance driving down the highway, doing the dishes or some other kind of monotonous work during which times seems to pass by at a different pace. But although daydreaming and absorption share the feature of an altered sense of time, they ought to be distinguished, not least because the latter induces emotions and sensations of "euphoric joy" and "an incredibly pleasant feeling in the body" as mentioned by Fredrik Sjölin above, while long distance-driving and dishwashing emotionally are rather flat.

Thirdly, if we turn to the deep absorption of losing oneself in the music, all DSQ-members agree that it is a very rare experience. It comes in degrees, but its deepest form marked by a kind of amnesia, yet accompanied by euphoric joy, is rare, according to the DSQ, experienced only a handful of times in their lives.

Fourthly, the already rare experience of absorption can be further divided into two distinct categories. The first is the aforementioned loss of some form of self-awareness – an analysis of which is yet another can of worms – accompanied by a form of amnesia. The second is an almost out-of-body like experience[5] of being at a great distance from one's own performance, as expressed by DSQ violist Asbjørn Nørgaard:

> «[I am] like disinterested, neutrally registering, I am not like inside, I am not kind of a part of the set-up, I am just looking at it, while I'm in the zone. But if I'm not in the zone, I become a co-player, I become a

part of the whole thing. And cannot look at it like a bird over the waters.»

Being in the zone, or being absorbed, can also be experienced as like a bird flying over the waters, neutrally registering the setup, or the performance, as if it was happening on its own apart from me. Here, the performer is not lost inside the music. He remembers minute details from the performance as if seen from the perspective of the spectator. This experience is also filled with great joy, pleasure and even a feeling of being omnipotent, according to Asbjørn, like an army general watching and commanding his troops from the top of the hill.

From these four points, we understand that losing oneself in the music has specific experiential traits that do not conform to our intuitions. It is not a form of concentrated thinking, nor an absentminded daydreaming. I cannot here account for all variations of the experience in question or for the various cognitive faculties that are enhanced or reduced. But I can try to outline its genesis. Again, losing oneself in the music is rare and in stark contrast to one of the most ordinary experiences in skilled musicianship, namely the feeling that the music is playing itself or coming by itself. Here is how Frederik Øland, DSQ violinist, expresses it:

«But you can perhaps say that what we're striving for at a technical level, that is to be…that it is coming by itself and that you are not too aware of it, that you do not spend any energy on it, that you just have this that it is coming by itself, but that you are aware of it maintaining itself.»

Any piece of classical music worth playing in a concert hall comes with so many nuances and complexities that you cannot consciously control them all. You need to practice in advance to remedy this situation. Musical experience and skill consists in incorporating the right habits such that you can play a beautiful concert, while only having to pay attention to some aspects of the music, such as the artistic interpretation. This entails that much of the music played is not under your conscious control, which in turn engenders the experience of the music playing itself. It is not "you" playing the music, it is not experienced as emerging from your control and agency. Rather, it is an anonymous subject, to a large part constituted by our bodily habits, or body schema[6], that performs. If we want to understand this in greater depth, we can turn to sources in phenomenology that expound how our subjectivity, in addition to being active and agential, is passive and receptive[7] and how our body is anonymous. Consider, for instance, Shaun Gallagher's example of eye-strain, in which one initially experiences a blurring of the letters or a lack of light of the room, and then realizes that one's tired eyes are giving rise to this experience:

> «The eyes that have been reading have been anonymous eyes, doing their work without my reflective awareness of them. Now, however, my attention is directed to my eyes. The eyes suddenly emerge out of anonymity and become owned. My pain now becomes the present concern, and my body in general gets in the way of my reading comprehension.»[8]

Much of our bodily activity takes place at this anonymous level. Perhaps we can say that musical expertise consists in getting your anonymous body – in this case primarily fingers, hands and arms – to work for you, in tandem with your conscious agency, with the purpose of unified expressivity. That the music plays itself means that one has worked for thousands of hours to curb one's anonymous body, it means that the present performance is allied with one's entire personal history of practice and performance. The possibility of the body's anonymity, which could also be termed the possibility of its automaticity, is then foundational to the experience of the music playing itself.

The experience of the music playing itself is what unifies the two seemingly opposite deep forms of absorption. In the first, one is lost in the music. In Fredrik Sjölin's case, the music has been performed, but he does not immediately identify himself as its agent. In a plain sense, the music has played itself. In the second, the music is neutrally registered as unfolding as if of itself. In other words, for Asbjørn, the music is playing itself while he enjoys the scenery from afar.

Let me conclude on these points. There exists an unusual and curious form of artistic absorption in which the musician loses himself in the music and cannot recollect anything from a just past performance. This essay has honed in on this phenomenon, described some of its traits and its genealogy deriving from the experience of the music playing itself. It remains to be explained how our subjectivity is transformed when the self is lost in the music, and to be shown exactly how the phenomenology of passivity, receptivity and anonymity renders this transformation possible. This much more comprehensive story is under way.[9]

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[1] A. Meinertz, *Erik Bruhn: billedet indeni*. København: Schønberg, 2008, p. 117. My translation

[2] S. Gallagher and D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*. London; New York: Routledge, 2008.

[3] S. Høffding and K. Martiny, "Framing a Phenomenological Interview: What, Why and How." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 2015, 1–26. DOI: 10.1007/s11097-015-9433-z

[4] www.danishquartet.dk

[5] See also E. Hytönen-Ng, *Experiencing "Flow" in Jazz Performance*. Farnham, UK and Burlington VT, USA: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013, p. 84-5.

[6] S. Gallagher, "Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification." *Journal of Mind and Behavior* 7 (4), 1986, p. 541-554.

[7] E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*. Vol. 9. Amsterdam: Springer, 2001.

A. Montavont, *De La Passivité Dans La Phénoménologie de Husserl*. Èpiméthée. Paris: presses universitaires de France.ì, 1999.

D. Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation*. Northwestern University Press, 1999.

[8] S. Gallagher, "Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification." *Journal of Mind and Behavior* 7 (4): 541-554, 1986, p. 549.

[9] S. Høffding, (under review), "Performative Passivity: Lessons on phenomenology and the extended musical mind with the Danish String Quartet" for (Eds. E. Clarke & R. Herbert) *Music and Consciousness II*. Oxford University Press.