

# “A View from Nowhere”: Performance Analysis and the Listening Subject

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Empirical work on recorded music over the last three decades has shed considerable light on the intricacies of sounded music, enabling our understanding of, to use Eric Clarke’s phrase, “what happens in performance.” But what is it that actually happens in performance? The answer implied by data-driven scholarship like microtiming seems hardly contestable: performers make sounds, those sounds have measurable features like onsets and intensities. Tonight I’d like to argue that the apparent neutrality and self-evidence of such a formulation potentially evinces a certain epistemological naïveté. To wit, undergirding the microtiming project, if tacitly, is a theory of perception that the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty identified as the “empiricist prejudice.” Originating with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, empiricism of this sort takes, or mistakes, discrete bits of sense-data for the building blocks of perception, thus conflating its causes and contents. I will return to Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms presently.

To be sure, others, including its leading practitioners, have voiced concerns about this methodology. Clarke warns of the dangers of reifying the tempo graph, thereby repeating the sins of textualism. Desain and Honing similarly caution against attributing psychological reality to the tempo curve itself. Cook speaks of the importance of combining close listening with data-based technologies. Robert Philip, distinguishing tempo from speed, emphasizes the different qualities the same quantities can possess. All recognize that timing is one among several interacting acoustic parameters, and acoustic parameters generally just one feature of performance among many, including culture, history, and embodiment. Thus Sloboda recommends continually checking the data against the richness of

everyday experience and Dogantan-Dack the supplementing of quantitative with qualitative methods. These points are all important, but they all basically admit the validity of microtiming on its own, stressing only the need to understand and contextualize the data responsibly. I want to go a step further and call into question the data itself, not so much the numbers, but the underlying values. I will argue that, either as cause or effect of this empiricist bias, is a neglect of that essential ingredient of performance, the listening experience. More specifically, in the typical translation of timing data into musical structure, perception tends to be implicitly conflated with the data, in accordance with what Merleau-Ponty calls the “constancy hypothesis,” that is, the false assumption of a direct and isomorphic correspondence between stimulus and percept.

Merleau-Ponty’s critique of empiricism rests on two charges: descriptive inaccuracy and theoretical incoherence. First, the notion of a pure, determinate sensation, he writes, “corresponds to nothing in our experience.” I do not ordinarily perceive atomistic, context-free qualia (say, “red here now”) but things, people, events, and their affordances, what Merleau-Ponty calls an entire “horizon of significance.” What I perceive is neither reducible, nor stands in causal relation, to the bare physical input that impinges on my retina, as any optical illusion makes abundantly clear. But even mundane perception proves the point. I do not see the tree in front of me now as bigger than it was 50 feet away despite the fact that the light reflecting off it takes up more space on my retina. Acknowledging this, the empiricist postulates the principles of association and memory by which the mind groups raw sensations into meaningful perceptions. But such accounts only beg the question for, as Merleau-Ponty points out, “the unity of the thing in perception is not constructed by association, but is a condition of association.” And the same is true for memory. The empiricist cannot, in the end, reconstruct the “intentionality” of perception – that is, as Husserl had it, the *aboutness* of consciousness—from the non-intentional, context-less atoms of sense-data. Which is also to say, more radically, that we do not even technically perceive the atoms of sense-data. It is only in the

analytical, reflective mode that we can even conceive of context-less atoms of sense-data. But, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the analytical, reflective mode is derivative, secondary, made possible only by the sense our primary and primal being-in-the-world gives us. To then build an account of perception based on that analysis, to assume the perception is essentially a reverse analysis, is unjustified and precisely backwards. And yet that move is as common as it is ostensibly commonsensical. Merleau-Ponty again [\*]:

“The alleged self-evidence of sensation is not based on any testimony of consciousness, but on widely held prejudice. We think we know perfectly well what ‘seeing’, ‘hearing’, ‘sensing’ are, because perception has long provided us with objects which are coloured or which emit sounds. When we try to analyse it, we transpose these objects into consciousness. We commit what psychologists call ‘the experience error’, which means that what we know to be in things themselves we immediately take as being in our consciousness of them. We make perception out of things perceived.”

How does this apply to empirical research like microtiming? We might begin by asking where the listener, or perception, is in this scholarship. Here I offer what I hope you’ll agree is a fair formulation of a mainstream claim of these studies: [\*]

### **Performers convey musical structure through tempo.**

This notion, most commonly seen in the phenomenon of phrase arching, has been the predominant finding and heuristic since Seashore. The first thing to notice [\*] is that this is about performers, not listeners—creation, not reception. The question is not “how do listeners glean musical structure from performance?,” which is, crucially, a different question. Most often, it concerns a performer’s intention, or interpretation. The ‘expressive’ in “expressive microtiming” is about the expresser. And yet, as “express” or “convey” imply [\*], some kind of listener, some receiver of what is

conveyed is insinuated. So who is this listener? Is it someone? anyone? real? ideal?

Moving on to “tempo” [\*] brings us to the heart of the matter. In microtiming studies, tempo is defined as the reciprocal of inter-onset-intervals, or IOIs. *I contend that reciprocal IOIs are to tempo as the retinal image is to visual perception.* That is to say that not only are IOIs or their inverse not directly perceived, they are not—counterintuitive as it may seem—the stuff musical perception is made of.

In other words, IOIs, being based on objective clock time are meaningless, contextless sense-data, possessing no more phenomenological reality than the let’s call it 500 Thz waves bouncing off this table and hitting my retina. They are literally not part of my experience. Because they therefore do not speak to perception, the picture they paint of perception is not just incomplete, but misleading—in a way the wrong place to be looking. As Merleau-Ponty, considering the carpet beneath him, observes, “this red would literally not be the same if it were not the ‘woolly red’ of a carpet.” We do not see abstract, objective properties and qualities attached to objects of certain dimensions, but always already the entire, holistic sense of a situation. One actually must *learn*, like Monet did [\*], to separate the objective properties discovered by analytical attention, [slide] like the actual color of the cathedral at Rouen at various times of day. The moon [\*], as you’ve perhaps witnessed, looks bigger on the horizon than high in the sky, even though it’s of course not. I’d show you a photograph of the “moon illusion,” but none exists, none can exist, because cameras register only a literal impression of the light hitting their lens. (the image you see was edited to make the moons bigger on the left). One can temporarily undo the illusion, say, by looking at the moon through a given tube when its high and when its on the horizon and notice they’re the same size, but such perception, like the artist’s, is secondary, unnatural. Remove the tube, and there the illusion is again.

And this distinction is why I find Cook's pronouncement on the virtues of Sonic Visualizer problematic. [\*] Writing of the pitfall of interpreting the tempo graph itself apart from the music, he states that Sonic Visualizer-aided listening, that is, the ability to have the data *and* the music in real time, "disposes of the problem once and for all." Perhaps it disposes of one problem, but only, I would argue, by creating a more serious one. For this kind of listening would be like walking around with that tube permanently affixed to one's face, or wearing contact lenses that had ruler measurements embedded in them, if you'll mind the tortured analogy. Such data-aided listening does not, as Cook has it, *correct* fallible, malleable human listening, but *corrupts* it. If perception, as I've been arguing, is about *phenomena*—literally, "what appears"—over and above *data*—literally, "what is given"—then data-guided perception doesn't *refine* but *perverts* natural perception. In merging the primal and critical modes I mentioned earlier, we get a bizarre hybrid that resembles neither. Cook writes, [\*] "the whole point of performance analysis is to work with music as experienced," which one hopes is true, but this is a strange notion of experience.

To anticipate a potential objection, one could agree with every point so far but maintain that my critique is misplaced, that microtiming scholarship never claimed to be about perception or the listener but rather performance and the performer. The listener is a separate question, perhaps even the next question, but first we can measure what actually goes on, what the performer actually does. I would reply to such an argument first by recalling the Cook statement I just quoted, which strikes me as a mainstream sentiment. I would stress again that we must be careful about the seemingly neutral but usually empiricist "actually" in "what actually goes on." But more to the point, the performer is a perceiver, her perception and action inextricably bound in intimate feedback. No more does she play in terms of objectively measurable parameters than the listener hears in them. As Leech-Wilkinson and Prior put it [\*]: "[musicians'] intentions concern not so much the sounding means that must be used, but rather the expressive effect that the sounds must achieve. In other words,

performers are seeing the end product as the listener experience.” I would submit, then, that IOIs and the like evidence neither the performer’s intention nor the listener’s intentionality, but are the *empirical residue* of a human, which is to say phenomenological, act.

To return to an earlier question, the perspective of the tempo graph—microtiming’s listener, as it were—is akin to what Thomas Nagel, referring to the scientific perspective, called “a view from nowhere.” Though an immensely powerful intellectual contrivance—a view from nowhere is, of course, technically not a view at all. The performer and the listener, on the other hand, are emphatically views from somewhere. So while microtiming may not claim to be about perception or the listener, may think it is prudently, pragmatically sidestepping the supposed quagmire of subjectivity, if it is to shed light on the phenomenon of music performance, it *has* to be about perception. For what is music if it is not perceived? or perceived from nowhere? well...it is sounds that have particular onsets and intensities.

What would a “view from somewhere” look like in the realm of performance analysis? In the time I have left I can only sketch

In terms of empirical experimentation, we might consider not only ecological validity, but phenomenological validity. Hubert Dreyfus, the preeminent interpreter of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, captured well the aim and role of phenomenology when he wrote that the [\*] “job of the phenomenologist is to get clear concerning the phenomena that need to be explained.” When we lack an explicit, well-articulated object of study, a proper phenomenon, we almost always revert to empiricism – proceeding to gather data somewhat blindly, and then tacitly concoct a putative phenomenon therefrom. This is backwards. First we must describe, then we’ll have something to explain.

A performance analysis from somewhere, then, would entail a somewhat radical embrace of first-person experience and first-person accounts. It would entail taking experience, whether the author’s, the performer’s or the subjects’ in a study, as the facts worthy of empirical

investigation. I believe this can be done rigorously, that it need not devolve into adjectival vagaries and solipsism, but will have to save that for a later date. As a simple example, consider Fabian and Schubert's finding that perceptions of dottedness corresponded not to IOIs but a combination of tempo and articulation. Cook points to this as an example of listeners' penchant for misattribution and the fallibility of close listening. But if we take the experience seriously, begin with the phenomenological rather than the empirical fact, and *then* investigate empirically, we might end up understanding something deep and central about music perception and performance. For these misalignments between data and phenomenon, between subjective impression and objective reality, are not exceptional, they're not illusions – they are what we call perception.

Second, and relatedly, we might consider shifting the emphasis from performer to listener, from performer's intention to listener intentionality. As I've argued, the performer's intention, if it is even recoverable, is not a set of IOIs, but the musical *effect* they produce. Only a listener has access to that. We might exploit our own expertise as close listeners, *really* close listeners, and take seriously the fine-grained, sensitive descriptions of musical sound we sometimes engage in informally but tend not to think worthy of rigorous scholarship. Such accounts abound in rich phenomenological facts waiting to be investigated. Such an account, as I have attempted elsewhere, perhaps cannot speak to universals of music perception or performance, but at least it is not an abstraction, an average, an empirical phantom, a view from nowhere. At least it actually happened.

If we want to understand “what happens in performance,” then, we would do well to focus on, even start with, the perception of humans that experience it, which, however idiosyncratic, changing, and even ineffable, are at least views from somewhere.