
REVIEWS

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**REVIEW: Cobussen, Marcel, and
Nanette Nielsen, *Music and Ethics*,
Ashgate, 2012.**

Over the past few years there has been growing interest in music and philosophy. Indicative of this growth is the success of the RMA's 'Music and Philosophy Study Group' conferences in London (of which co-author Nielsen is an organizer). A topic of particular interest in this larger discussion of music and philosophy is ethics. Publications on music and philosophy have increased, but *Music and Ethics* is one of the first book-length studies to place music and ethics as its central topic. As the authors state from the outset, discussion on music and ethics is at the same time an an-

cient and current topic. This book provides lines of inquiry that could (and should) be used to orient future discussions, and as such is an important contribution. With growing interest in music and ethics, I suspect there will be more publications on this topic.¹

Music and ethics is a vast and complex topic, and despite the title, this book does not claim to cover the entire terrain but instead sets out to explore ethics as emerging from the interaction of listener and music. The authors aim to show how music participates in discourses on ethics as well as how ethics emerges from music. The authors treat ethics as immanent, situational, and irreducible to a universal theory. However, the authors develop their own argument for musical ethics founded upon an openness of listening. The text is bookended by an introduction and final chapter that are co-written. The other chapters are written by a single author and explore a specific topic that relates to the book's overall argument. An advantage of this structure is that each chapter is able to stand on its own and still provide a glimpse of the overall argument. Each author has a distinctive voice and writing style, and the

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¹ I know of at least one! Warren, Jeff R., *Music and Ethical Responsibility*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

co-authored chapters provide a good balance of their voices. However, each author is prone to reference only their own earlier chapters, so the balance and integration of authors is not as strong within individually authored chapters. Given the structure, it makes most sense to briefly summarize each chapter before concluding with a couple of comments.

The first chapter—‘Listening’—draws upon philosophers Alain Badiou, Zygmunt Bauman, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Jacques Derrida to ground discussion of ethics as hospitality. Hospitality is a welcoming of otherness, and as such ethics is contingent upon situational context. Cobussen argues that music might have a capability of opening a listener to an ethic found only through music, suggesting the ‘possibility of tracing an ethic that can only be summoned by/in/through music’.² Cobussen argues that it is through ‘attentive listening’ that this ethic can be summoned. This argument is foundational to the book, but might be questioned. I turn to this issue later in the review.

Nielsen’s Chapter 2 aims ‘to identify some ethically charged discourses on music’.³ Her main example is Peter Kivy’s argument in ‘Musical Morality’.⁴ The crux of Nielsen’s criticism of Kivy—paralleling criticisms by Andrew Bowie and Aaron Ridley—is that his commitment to certain ‘great’ music providing a ‘mystical’ experience limits what he actually might say about music’s relationship to morality. In

other words, Kivy’s own experiences of listening distract him from being able to do substantial analysis. The Introduction and Chapter 1 implicitly moved past the sort of arguments represented by the likes of Kivy, but this chapter might sway readers not already convinced. It clearly shows how this discussion of ethics, premised upon relationality and listening, corrects the starting point of much of the analytic philosophy of music.

Chapter 3—‘Interaction’ by Cobussen—engages ethically charged discourses surrounding improvisation. Using musical examples including Keith Rowe, Miles Davis, and John Zorn, Cobussen criticizes some of the ideals linked with group improvisation. He proposes that ‘another position is possible: namely another outlook on ethics, somewhere between individuality and collectivity’.⁵ In short, this chapter uses the central argument of the book to remedy the idealization of free improvisation.

‘Affect’ is the topic of Cobussen’s fourth chapter, and primarily explores the affect of music as sound upon the human body. It discusses ‘unethical’ music; that is, ways that music can create violence and division and close off otherness. There are two ways that music functions to create violence: 1) the use of music as sound through loudness or extremes of the frequency range to control people through biological response, and 2) deploying music that is socially marked, including football chants and ambient music for shopping. This chapter intersects with Cobussen’s research in sound studies, and contributes to the overall argument by showing—with the assistance of Jean-Luc Nancy—how even

² Cobussen and Nielsen, 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ Kivy, Peter, *Antithetical Arts: On the Ancient Quarrel Between Literature and Music*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁵ Cobussen and Nielsen, 80.

such ‘unethical’ examples reveal that music as sound is founded upon relationality.

Nielsen’s chapter on ‘Voice’ opens with a discussion of the many layers of voice in relation to ethics, followed by an exploration of Heidegger’s conception of *Stimmung* and its multivalent meanings including affect, mood, and attunement. These concepts ground discussion of her primary case study of Berg’s opera *Wozzeck*. She interacts with several musicologist’s interpretations of the final interlude, noting how too often narrative drama is the primary generator of discussions of ethics. In contrast, Nielsen emphasizes how the mood and voice of the music contributes to relationships of meaning and ethics. She then uses this approach to explore several other moments of the opera that include human voice. The emphasis on the contribution of musical sound to the experienced meaning of opera is important, and in this case yields some compelling interpretations.

The final co-authored chapter expands upon the culminating argument of the book, namely that listening to music provides ethical insights. One of those insights is that the subject is primarily relational. This is an important insight, but it seems to be based on a particular type of listening. The final sentence states that ‘only from this process of listening can the articulation of a musical ethics emerge’.⁶ This places listening in a crucial position. As an audible art, music obviously requires listening, but here the authors are after a listening that uncovers an ethic ‘that can only be summoned by/in/through music’.⁷ It seems that this ethic can be summoned only through

‘proper’ listening: ‘One should listen, listen carefully, attentively and repeatedly in order to be able to receive the otherness within the order of the same. Hospitable listening. Sensitive listening’.⁸ Attentive listening appears to fit within the sort of close listening that developed in the mid-nineteenth century. I agree that there is something important in this sort of listening, but perhaps it neglects wider implications. The use of music of music on controlling the body (sonic weapons, etc.) is discussed as an unethical example of ethics emerging from music. There are, however, no examples provided of music opening positive ethical situations outside of ‘attentive listening’. For example, in dealing with *Wozzeck*, the interpretations of the contribution of music to the ethical implications of the opera are claimed as ‘phenomenological’, despite using close analytical readings that draw musical connections between the first and final act or comparisons to Adorno’s interpretations. Neither of these close listenings would be experienced by a non-expert listener, meaning that what is considered ‘active listening’ assumes an idealized listener. The interpretation of *Wozzeck* is compelling, but it easily fits into other arguments that propose an ideal listener. The issue of an ‘active listener’ may have problems parallel to Lerdahl and Jackendoff’s ‘experienced listener’, an approach criticized by Eric Clarke and others.⁹ By narrowing ‘mu-

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ Lerdahl, Fred & Jackendoff, Ray, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1983, 3; Clarke, Eric F., *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, 161.

⁶ Cobussen and Nielsen, 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

sical ethics' to what can be accessed through a historically contingent conception of 'attentive listening', this book may—perhaps unintentionally—exclude a vast amount of experiences of music both today and historically. 'Attentive listening' might reveal ethical insights, but so might other sorts of listening.

Overall, I believe that this book provides an important orientation for the sorts of questions that need to be asked about music and ethics. In short, *Music and Ethics* provides a thoughtful exploration into the ways that music contributes to ethics and is an important addition to the growing discourse on music and ethics.

Music and Ethics-Introduction - Free download as PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online for free. Essay about music and ethics written by Nanette Nielsen and Marcel Cobussen. Essay about music and ethics written by Nanette Nielsen and Marcel Cobussen. Date uploaded. Mar 13, 2016. Popular Music and Violence (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 24. 23 Steve Goodman, Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). Introduction. 1 [Music and Letters, 94/2 (May 2013), 375-377] Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen, Music and Ethics. (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). ISBN 978 1 4094 3496 2. x+180 pp. £55. This book passes time between two bombs: the flying bombs of 9-11 described at the beginning of the first chapter, and the fictional bombs of Eva (offman s novel *Appassionata* analysed at the end of the last chapter. As such, it is built on the peace " on the silence " between two explosions, and returns again and again to emphasise the relation between listening (itself silent in principle) and sound. Cobussen, Marcel and Nielsen, Nanette (2012) *Music and Ethics* (Ashgate: Farnham, UK). Cook, Nicholas (1990) *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Clarendon Press: Oxford). Cook, Nicholas (1993) *Beethoven: Symphony No. 9* (Cambridge University Press). Hagberg, Garry (2008a) "Jazz Improvisation and Ethical Interaction: A Sketch of the Connections", in Garry L. Hagberg, ed., *Art and Ethical Criticism* (Blackwell: Oxford). Hagberg, Garry (2008b) "Wittgenstein's Aesthetics", in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University: plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/wittgenstein-aesthetics/last accessed 10 January, 2014). Nanette Nielsen is an Associate Professor at the University of Oslo, having previously held positions as Associate Professor and Lecturer at the University of Nottingham (2009-2015) and the University of East Anglia (2005-2009). Her publications include the co-authored book *Music and Ethics* (Ashgate, 2012), and the article 'Ernst Krenek's problem of freedom in *Jonny spielt auf*' (*Twentieth-Century Music*, March 2013), for which she was awarded the 2014 Jerome Roche Prize. She co-edited a special *Opera Quarterly* issue on 'Opera and Philosophy' (April 2014), and another special