

Heinrich Bessler on Musical Listening

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Heinrich Bessler (1900-1969)

Born in 1900 in Dortmund

Studies in Freiburg (Philosophy (Heidegger), German Literature, Mathematics and Natural Sciences) and Music in Vienna (Hans Gal), musicology with Gurlitt, also Adler

1923 doctoral dissertation (Freiburg) (*German Suite in the 17th century*)

1925 Professorial Thesis (Habilitation) on medieval music (Petrus de Cruce, Philipp von Vitry) (Friedrich Ludwig, Goettingen)

The Case of Heinrich Bessler

- 1928 Professor in Heidelberg, membership of SA, 1937 NSDAP
- 1935 Secretariat of the Committee for German Monuments of Music - conflicts with Gerigk and subsequent dismissal (1939) from this post. Barred from the position of Ordinarius in Heidelberg
- 1945 forbidden to teach and de-nazification -> result: Opportunist ("Mitläufer"). Appeals reduce this verdict. (Eggebrecht, Mueller-Blattau, Friedrich Blume (Music & Race))
- 1949 ordinary Professor, University of Jena (later GDR)
- 1956 Professor in Leipzig
- 1960 Festschrift and National Prize of GDR
- 1965 Professor Emeritus,
- 1967 Honorary Doctor, University of Chicago

Works (selective)

Grundfragen des Musikalischen Hörens (1925)

Grundfragen der Musikästhetik (1927)

Die Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance (1931)

Zum Problem der Tenorgeige(1949)

Bourdon und Fauxbourdon- Studien zum Ursprung der niederlaendischen Musik (1950)

Das Musikalische Hoeren der Neuzeit (1959)

Musikgeschichte in Bildern (with Schneider, 1968 and Guelke, 1973)

Essays on Bach, (Bach und das Mittelalter, On the Chronology of the Brandenburg Concerti, etc.)

Political context and activity

Ideological and Personal Reasons for joining SA and NSDAP (ideological background, circumstances in Heidelberg in 1934) (Schipperges)

Overseeing moderate anti-semitic initiatives in Heidelberg → contrasts with protection and advice to Jewish students and minor but nevertheless distinct examples of confronting practices of the regime; Opportunism but conflict with Nazi regime evident at times. (conflict with Gerigk, resigns from Committee for musical monuments)

B. suffers from genetically determined Huntington's Disease (*Veitstanz*) → Nazi policy of compulsory sterilisation in such cases; illness leaves Bessler vulnerable.

The Heidegger Connection

Studies and doctoral/ professorial dissertations in Freiburg (Heidegger, 1919-1923/1925)

Heidegger's Early Freiburg Lectures: Basic problems of Phenomenology, Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle.

The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl -> description and analysis of consciousness and objects of consciousness as they are given to consciousness

To the "things themselves": The role of intentionality

Phenomenological reduction, epoché – to expose the phenomena in their given-ness



Heidegger's Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle/ Introduction to phenomenology (WS 1921/22)

H. problematises philosophy itself and in particular academic approach to Aristotle and the entire realm of philosophy: approaches, modes of understanding...

Within the University..., objects of philosophy, -> absence of radical questions, How does philosophy concern us, the passion for philosophy, etc.

Erlebnis- experience of philosophy, understanding, grasping, determining

Mode of "Vollzug" (performance?) of philosophy.. Philosophy as mode of being .

"Philosophy is in principle insightful approach (Verhalten) towards being in its being (Seiendem als Sein (Seinssinn)), in such a way, that in this approach (Verhalten) and for it- the possession of this approach (Verhalten) is decisively included" (PIA, 60)

Modes of Approach – The University vs. "Facticity of Life": The University pretends philosophy is "timeless" and deals with "timeless" problems.

Polarisation of a theoretical stance and life (Lebensphilosophie). Dilthey, Simmel, Scheler, etc -> Youth movement.

Life a phenomenological, foundational phenomenon

- life and world, concern, etc.

Bessler's "Habitationsvortrag" (1925): Foundational questions of musical listening (Grundfragen des musikalischen Hoerens)

Originates from critique of culture

"The idea of a timeless musically-beautiful should in the meantime have become not only for historians an absurdity. To proclaim today eternal laws of music would mean to confront an intellectual situation in a way as to turn a blind eye to it....If in this context the central problem of listening is identified, it must not be taken to investigate certain artificially isolated processes psychologically. The question is rather in *what ways music is- and can be accessible to us.*" (GMH, 30)

Central concern: The Concert

The notion of a community of listeners has been thinned to a general amorphous conception of a general “public” which attends “the concert as an entirely atomistic, unconnected mass.. Such a public lets the music approach entirely passively. It expects to be variously stimulated, entertained or moved and shows the degree in which this state has been reached through its applause.” (GMH, 31)

Schoenberg’s pseudo solution of a private society of musical performance responds to similar critique of the concert - Besseler’s objection: the increase of exclusivity and objectivation does little to restore the original community

Music and musical reality: Gebrauchsmusik

The concert brings a transformation of listening, of audience, musician, ideal of perfection

Music of Use: (*Gebrauchsmusik*) -> Ex. Dance music: “The attitude of the dancer ..makes immediately clear that music is for him not at the centre of attention. He only listens with half an ear. His central actions are to allow the body to swing to the perceived rhythm and to follow the mostly known melody internally. He does not listen, but relates to it with an outpouring of activity and without taking the music to be objectively present. Music is not present in any objective sense for him” (33)

Gebrauchsmusik is what concert music is not... Improvisatory, no ideal of technical perfection, etc

Forms of *Gebrauchsmusik*: Community Song (National Anthem); Work-Songs. Liturgical music -> the musical element is merely “ornamentation and intensification of an extra-musical fundamental approach”

Everyday-ness is the living element of Music of Use -> Concert music aspires to remove listening and music from the everyday.

Centrality of performance (*Vollzug*); Listening as an engaged practice of *Dasein*

Gebrauchsmusik and corresponding listening requires and establishes community, “*Vollzug*” – participation and performance....

“...thus the main emphasis lies with the active performance (*Vollzug*) of music; it is sustained by the entire physical and spiritual being. The mere inner participation already implies a fading, a diminished energy, which more originally drives towards evident and audible discharge. Musical performance (*Musikalisches Vollziehen*) is furthermore essentially connected with the engaged (*umgangsmässige*) approach of the human being (*Dasein*), to prayer, to confession, work and respite in dance and community, inclusion into a mythical and magical connection with the world; It always appears as a decoration or enhancement, as a specifically musical formation of this approach.” (44)

Lebens-philosophical features transformed towards a “fundamental ontology”

“The musical becomes originally accessible to us as a mode of human being (“Dasein”) and in particular as an engaged, actively projecting “Dasein” (GMH, 45)

Transformation of music from a “practical (*umgangsmässige*) immersion” towards music as object (ex: French Motets 13th, 14th century; conception of music as an object for “literati...qui subtilitates artium sunt querentes ...experts, who understand quality and technique... (Johannes de Grocheo)

Classical conception: Music as expression (*Ausdruck*). Listener hands herself over to the work... Music as “*lebendige Wirkung*” (vivid effect). Change and surprise in music sublates the independence of the listener and makes him a willing tool of the creator. -> receding consciousness of objectivity of music in favour of handing over to the stream of expression. (GMH, 51)

Fundamental questions of musical listening are then ontological questions. Historical phenomena are “symptomatic” for more decisive ontological or existential forces. Musical listening discloses modes of being (*Dasein*) and modes of being-in-the world

Stimmung (attunement) -> distinct from “emotional” attribute but a “fundamental factual context of human being (*Dasein*). (GMA, 66)

Heidegger's thinking in "Sein und Zeit" (1927)

Heidegger's identification of the ontological difference: The predominant interest in ontic being (science, philosophy) and the forgetting of the ontological question of Being.

The approach to Being in "*Sein und Zeit*" through human existence:
The existential analytic of *Dasein*

Ready-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and Presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*)
-> ontological/ ontic emergence of things.

The determination of modern thinking through Cartesianism -> *res extensa, res cogitans*. Subject/ object differentiations; Descartes determination of "world" as *res extensa* (Descartes misses the phenomenon of world)

The ontological understanding of world through being-in-the-world, Community (*das Man*), care (*Sorge*). Disclosure of Being as 'being-in-the-world' and modalities in which such being-in-the-world is achieved.

Musical Listening in/of modernity (*Das Musikalische Hören der Neuzeit*)

Besseler's appointment in Heidelberg (1928).

Heidegger's Marburg years (1923-1928), H's controversial address as rector/dean of Freiburg University (affirmation of student service to knowledge, military and labour; no mention of NAZI specifics or Hitler) -> subsequent resignation 1934. -> The origin of the work of art (1935-1937); works on Nietzsche

Besseler returns to the phenomenon of listening in 1959 in "*Das musikalische Hören der Neuzeit*" (Musical Listening in/of Modernity)

Riemann (1849-1919), Tonvorstellung, active listening

Receptivity of listening -> scientific explanations (Helmholtz, Stumpf). Quasi phenomenological approach -> Riemann. (Lotze: the distinction between reality and validity, Brentano: distinguishing content and intentionality of representation).

Riemann's "Tonvorstellung": "..not the concretely sounding music, but the newly created tonal relationships in the musical imagination of the listener are the Alpha and Omega of music." (MHN, 108)

"It is remarkable that Riemann underlines the activity of musical listening consistently. He refers here not to an accompanying activity of the imagination, which would interpret the work, but to listening itself: it was always the confirmation of "logical functions of human intellect". The example is initially harmony, but "sound-re-presentation" (*Tonvorstellung*) unquestionably extends to all of Riemann's categories of a rhythmic, melodic and harmonic kind." (MHN,109)

Riemann's logical activity is a feature of modernity -> focussed on autonomous music. Listening changes with "*Umgangsmusik*" or "*Gebrauchsmusik*". (yet activity does not?)

Historical correlations between modes of listening and music: *Vernehmen* ->Active Listening/ Synthetic Listening -> Passive Listening

Vernehmen – Attention (Reformation and Anti-reformation) -> Melodic prose -> Stimmstrom (stream of voice)

-> close connection of music and language, “to attend (*Vernehmen*)” it (music) does not only mean a sensuous, but most importantly a mental cognition and absorption.” (MHN, 118) ->

Example: Palestrina. “Such melodic prose was the ideal of the 16th century. It is important to examine here the behaviour of the listener. A musical motif can be taken over by other voices, so that it imprints itself through repetition. Imitation of a motif, however, even the thorough imitation through all voices only applies to the relevant section of a text. The next section brings something new... And because there is no correspondence in the larger context...the listener must follow attentively how the musical work is constituted through the individual parts. He must certainly understand the text, since every motif belongs to certain words...the musical point is to grasp the meaning of the work section by section correctly. The term “listening” is in this context too neutral... *Vernehmen* (perceiving, attending).. Originally meaning to take into possession... It further means “grasp, experience, listen, ...and is related to reason (*Vernunft*)

17th century

Aspects of “*umgangsmässige Kunst*” -> Singing, dancing, playful festivities (courtly festivities)

Descartes (*Compendium Musicae*) -> listener is the starting point (not music...). Pleasure or *delectatio*.

Music -> *Korrespondenzmelodik*. Increased organisation and increased reference. Rhythmic organisation with reference to metric organisation

“This new state corresponds to an **active listening**, as it was hitherto unknown. Already in 1618 it is characterised by Descartes with striking clarity. For him the central focus is imagination: it can grasp the musical parts easily if it is confronted with a consistent dual or triple meter, marked by a regular and repetitive main accent.... Listening to music is thus for Descartes an intellectual activity. The imagination synthesizes in listening every part with the preceding, establishes furthermore a correspondence with earlier parts and thus grasps the musical work as a constituted unity of many parts (*concipit*). (MHN, 132/33)

Subjectum (listening and imagination) becomes the foundation (*hypokeimenon*) of being (->Heidegger)

Synthetic and active listening in the 18th century

The dualistic thematic construction (Bach) -> the listener is directed towards the future of the thematic material and completes in active, synthetic listening a unified view of the work.

“The presupposition for a “theme” in the classical sense is that a unified piece of music can be developed from it... Listening to the theme was already from the beginning of the 18th century a synthetic process, which had two directions. One should not neglect how long vocal music had an absolute dominance and instrumental music was itself controversial...the theme of the aria is thus privileged. Here one unified tones and motifs. One understood this unity, related to particular words in the text at the same time in its meaning that is describable in the theory of affects. Form and meaning of the heard thus was grasped in a dual synthesis.” (MHN, 143/44)

-> transformation of meaning from affect to expression of “personal being” (Originality, Genius (*harmonia, consensus* of reason and sensuality, the irrational). The concept of affect declines (piano fantasy) -> music and character (Christian Gottfried Koerner)

Synthetic constitution of form and meaning

“In the classical period active-synthetic listening of the 18th century reaches its climax. The listener now no longer subject, but individual and person, unifies through synthesis as a rule a period of eight bars and completes step by step a construction. At the same time he understands the main theme of the sonata form in its meaning, which can be described as its character. The unity of form and the unity of meaning, both characteristics of the classical, rest on a synthetic power of the listener. (MHN, 150/51)

Romanticism and Passive Listening

Wackenroder: "...only this form of enjoyment is the true: it is the attentive perception of the tones and their progression: it is the complete surrender of the soul to the teeming stream of feeling; it is the separation and removal of all interfering thoughts and of foreign sense-perception...."

The complete surrender of the soul -> mystical immersion into the work, romantic unity of nature and man

Stimmung: attunement (-> Heidegger, S&Z) "The word attunement refers to musical relationships in the soul" (Novalis) -> pre-theoretical and preceding subject-object differentiations -> Stimmung encompasses us (magic) -> mesmerisation, musical stream (Weber, Schubert, Wagner)

Bessler's Relevance & Critical Questions

1. The determination of music and musical listening in their philosophical importance -> transcends cultural, aesthetic, etc. dimensions?
2. Listening as performative -> in which sense and disclosing what? -> role of temporality, intentionality, ontology -> Convergence with contemporary views of Somatic Cognition, even Neuro-science. Transcendence of common mind-body dualism.
3. B.'s phenomenological reduction of music history to an ontology of listening is problematic. However, connection between musical listening and musical practice may be under-explored. The importance for education of a diversified approach to listening.
4. The forgetting of a history of ontological transformation of music runs the risk that analysis becomes anachronistic (authenticity debate). -> the thoroughgoing aestheticisation and commodification of music provides challenges here. -> Is technology (internet, i-tunes) the completion of B's "concert-paradigm"? Is B's "concert-paradigm" as anonymous as he suggests?

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