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Singing Specters: Phenomenology in the Performance of Music

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Abstract

In this article, I write along with key 20th century thinkers—Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida—to understand how a phenomenological examination of the performance of music can contribute to a meaningful exploration of the roles of consciousness and presence in the process of rhetorical invention. I begin by looking at Plato's *Phaedrus* and assess the notion of “fit” as it relates to rhetoric and performance as well as the mythical trope of the cicadas. I will then explore how Plato's rendering of madness in this piece might help us understand Derrida's almost paradoxical construction of the voice in *Voice and Phenomenon*. From here, I move to analyze the figure of the ghost as presented by Derrida and relate this to the *non-presence of presence* while asking: how might this notion better help us understand how rhetorical decisions are made by performing artists? The argument I put forth is that there is a subtle difference between the aleatoric moments of invention that occur in the process of solitary composition and those that occur on the stage. My conclusion points toward further research that would analyze these elements in recorded music and digital recording technologies which further problematizes the notion of non-presence: what would it really mean to have a ghost in the machine? Do we perform a séance each time we press “play”?

Phaedrus as venue: an ensounded text

I'll begin with a rough etymological inquiry. The notion of the Platonic Idea stems from the Greek “to see,” from *iden*. Audience has an interesting relationship, here, from the Greek root *au* which is “to perceive,” to feel or grasp, even, *aisthanesthai*, and through time audience has come to mean both an assembly of listeners and then later, through French it seems, to mean the reader of a text. This notion of the audience as those who encounter the text directly correlates most with our contemporary understanding in rhetoric and composition studies, but might we expand this notion? Plato distinguished that the work of the mind is separate—we abandon the senses to think theoretically, as in the Pythagorean theorem, where we think of the law behind the triangle and not the triangle itself—and it is from Plato that we have this understanding of the idea. This idea is the distinct knowledge of something, *the mind's eye*, and is distinct from what was perceived as an empirical reality.

What of audience, then? G.R.F. Ferrari, in his “Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's *Phaedrus*,” provides an interesting analysis of the notion of being “fit” that I would like to incorporate here. *Phaedrus* is unique among the Platonic

dialogues in its descriptions of environment and for setting up a narrative which corresponds to the themes of the dialogue itself. Socrates was known for having seldom left the city—so it is significant that we find Phaedrus and Socrates outside of Athens in this dialogue. Ferrari explains:

He [Socrates] takes pains to select a suitable place for reading. A tall plane-tree nearby marks a zone of shelter from the sun, he judges, ‘just the right breeze’ (*pneuma metrion*), and soft grass to accommodate whichever posture they prefer, whether sitting or lying down (229a8-b2). On the way to this bower he speculates that they are passing the very spot where according to story Boreas the wind-god snatched off the princess Oreithyia. What fuels his conjecture is, again, the recognition of fit: that the alluring purity of the water at this point makes it suitable (*epitedeia*) for girls to play in (229b4-9). Furthermore, had Phaedrus not been struck at the outset of the dialogue by how especially ‘appropriate’ (*prosekousa*) Lysias’ speech on love would be for the notoriously ‘erotic’ Socrates to hear (227c3-5) he would not now be applying to the environment this ability to recognise fit. (Ferrari 8)

How can we understand this characterization of nature and environment? Do we simply impose, anachronistically, the nature/culture divide or the divide between nature and city? No, for it seems that, while Socrates is not accustomed to the land outside the walls of Athens, he seeks to use his environment in his speech. He finds himself in the country and so incorporates it. This is now his venue. Similarly, Plato has Socrates speak throughout *Phaedrus* about the relationship between the body and rhetorical composition: “Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both one another and to the whole work” (541). Despite this concentration on the physical body, it is still Socrates’ assertion that “the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul” (548). So, too, in other works, do we see both Plato and Aristotle characterize music as that which directs the soul.

Mary B. Schoen-Nazarro writes in “Plato and Aristotle on the Ends of Music” that Plato understood music to be an essential part of the education of young Athenian boys because of its ability to shape “proper order in man’s nature”: gymnastics worked toward the ordering of the body, while music worked “principally toward his soul” (Schoen-Nazzaro 261). Further, Nazzaro reads Plato to tell us that musical education should not just give “dexterity to the fingers or strength to the voice”—that is, a sort of technical training that is most common in today’s Western musical pedagogy—but rather that “musical education should measure and order the movements of the soul” so that the child can learn to “feel pleasure and pain the right way” (262).

Debra Hawhee might help us further understand the role of rhetoric, here, by linking oratory, the body, and music in educational environments in her “Bodily Pedagogies: Rhetoric, Athletics, and the Sophists’ Three Rs”:

Given the proximity of athletic and rhetorical training, as well as the noisiness of *auloi*—their shrill sounds approximate those produced by modern-day bagpipes—it is also likely that music flowed into recitations and sophistic lectures, producing an awareness of—indeed, facilitating—the rhythmic, tonic quality of speeches. As Kenneth J. Freeman points out, the *aulos* did not merely provide background noise, but rather played an integral role in training, as the instrument was used “in order that good time might be preserved in the various movements” (128). Music’s role in the gymnasium, then, was to introduce a rhythm, to provide a tempo for the practice and production of bodily movements. In short, music established a rhythm through the cyclical repetition of patterns, and this rhythm was replicated in the bodily movements of those in training. (Hawhee 146)

It seems that the practical use of music in Athenian society may have differed from Plato’s hopes, then. Here, music is being used to keep time for gymnastic exercises, and is leaking out into the study halls, into the classrooms. Of course, we have many types of music, now, and certainly so did our ancient friends. Yet, this trope of repetition remains in contemporary rhetorical composition practices in both musical composition and in the writing classroom. But here, we see the significance of the sounds of an environment. Might we better think about how we design the acoustic spaces of our classrooms and our universities? Not in architecture, as an end, but in thinking of how sound works rhetorically on us. Yet here too we must be reminded as to why we should pay attention to the sounds around us and to listen: the rhythms at play effect our experience, or even constitute our experience. We are the sound, and in the sound, as much as it has an effect on us. As in the example of the Athenian orators above, we find a rhythm to our oratory from sounds that come from our environment. Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy* describes how, while vision “dissects,” sound is a means of centering (72). Through our hearing, we are the experiential centers of not the world of sound but *our* world of sound. But can we say so easily that the experience of hearing is not one of dissection? The very biological reality of binaural hearing—of having two ears—we locate sound sources, a sort of automatic calculation that is conducted through the difference between our ears: this is why we see a dog tilt its head in “confusion”: it is trying to listen “better,” to get a sense of the source of the sound. We are thus always looking for origins, for causes to the experiences which we come by, whether sound or sight. We should be careful with Ong, who argues that “The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word” (75). For, our written texts are ephemeral, too, and only seem to have permanence.

We can transition back, then, and bring forth the cicadas in *Phaedrus*. What role do they play for the dialogue? The backdrop of the pastoral countryside provides many discussion points for Socrates and Phaedrus, and the cicadas are noted throughout the text. Socrates spins a myth to explain their existence and their presence:

When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it. It is from them that the race of the cicadas came into being; and, as a gift from the Muses, they have no need of nourishment once they are born. Instead, they immediately burst into song, without food or drink, until it is time for them to die. After they die, they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her.

There is a close relationship here between the role of song and the role of madness. The people were “so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing” that they died without “even realizing it” and were given a gift from the Muses: they would no longer need to eat. Now, these creatures can “immediately burst into song” from birth, and continue singing until they die. There is a sort of strangeness, here, however. The mythological people who were converted to the race of cicadas died without knowing, so we can assume they felt no pain, so powerful was their love of song, so great was their pleasure. What need was there to change their form, if already present in the human is the capacity to be “so overwhelmed”? I’ll leave this point for another time. But we might take this rendering of the cicadas as an indication of the celebratory power of music for Plato. Or is this too far? There is, too, a more morose mythology here being crafted: that the allure of song, of sound can be so great that it leads to death, a complete loss of the self and a stripping of life to bare performance. But is this not experience itself, a coming together of desire and action? Perhaps in the myth of the cicadas we see a notion of the embodied rhetoric of music: the cicada is not-present and beyond its own “self-control”: it leads itself unwillingly to death. An early critique of phonocentrism? Most likely no, considering Plato’s distrust of the written word, but we’ll approach this notion of writing and the voice later in the paper. And of course it would be anachronistic to think of Freud in the venue of the *Phaedrus*, but the death drive here seems to call strongly through the song, through the cicadas.

Instead of these unsure pursuits, let us think again about what role the cicadas have in the framing of the dialogue we read in *Phaedrus*. The always present sound of the cicadas makes for an *ensounded* environment. The dialogue occurs *in* the sound, *with* the cicadas. Ferrari can perhaps help us again with his notion of the “impresario”: “Phaedrus’ careful matching of audience to performance and performance to environment shows him turning from the mere consumption of others’ art to the exercise of the art to which he is peculiarly devoted.” (Ferrari 8-9) Here I have come back to my original etymological inquiry. What is the significance of audience in the *Phaedrus*, and for the rhetor? This is

part of Socrates' critique of writing, that with oratory, one can know the souls of his audience: the rhetor can see to whom he is speaking. But with writing, it is not known. The performing musician, similarly, can see and hear his audience, be in a sort of dialogic responsive atmosphere with them, but with recorded music, there is the possibility of being heard through tinny speakers or being remixed, edited, spliced up through a digital audio workstation.

Ferrari sees that Phaedrus is acting as a sort of impresario, here, as Ferrari argues—traditionally and interestingly, an impresario is a manager of a concert hall or venue—that Phaedrus is trying to manage the conversation through “fussing” over “fit” in assessing the “landscape” and the “environment” (4). Yet, Plato seems to engage with wherever they find themselves, though he does deliberately choose a shaded area. Perhaps this is why Ferrari is critical of the role of Phaedrus as impresario, deeming it something less than philosophy. Ferrari interprets that Phaedrus attempts to pass off his “art” of acting as an “impresario” as the “good” where really it is just the “fitting” (12-14). And, as aforementioned, Phaedrus attempts to pass this off as “philosophy” (14). Yet, Phaedrus, in his oratory, knows that “If the physical arrangements for the performance become the focus of audience attention, those arrangements have failed their purpose” and that “Phaedrus understands that his arrangements will give pleasure to the extent that they are appropriate, but must not be declared appropriate merely because they give pleasure. In this he has a fair grasp of his art as impresario” (Ferrari 12). The impresario cannot quell the fervor of the audience, though. The environment becomes part of the performance. And the cicadas are a key contributor to this soundscape that surrounds Phaedrus and Socrates in their dialogue.

For, we know, all along, that there is the incessant singing of the cicadas. Can we call it singing? The cicada produces what some call a deafening noise—the loudest insect, over 100 decibels—yet it is a hallmark of a bucolic sun-lit summer afternoon. Should we assume the cicada songs are distant, and thus non-interruptive of the speech that occurs between Phaedrus and Socrates? How does this sort of feedback from the environment influence their conversation? We can only speculate—and it is a fictional account, most likely, of the two speakers, anyway—but perhaps the exploration of the concept of madness in *Phaedrus* can further direct this exploration.

Socrates describes four types of divine madness. The third describes the very sort of state of being “overwhelmed” which gave rise to the death and birth of the race of cicadas:

Third comes the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations. If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will

be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds.
(523)

I find here a fascinating relationship between this state of divine madness and its contribution to the creation of art, to “poetry.” Is this not also the transcendent state of the musician in times of creation, of inspiration, of aleatoric moments? It seems that these cicada people were indeed mad, that is, they were lost in the “frenzy of songs” that overtook them and thus, in a sense, non-present. Yet, it is also in these extraordinary moments of divine madness that the artist is *most* present. Can we relate this to the Derridean notion of the voice and the non-presence of presence? Is the mad artist not also a ghost, both here and not here, both alive and dead?

Madness and the ghost: the non-presence of the self in the performance of music

*The unlike is joined together,
and from differences result the most beautiful harmony.*

-Heraclitus, *Fragments*

Madness is a recurring topic in the *Phaedrus*, and its characterization differs greatly from notions of mental disease or disability. Madness is a sort of gift. A source of inspiration, a reaching out of the fingers of the divine into the mind of the mortal. Socrates tells us that: “The people who designed our language in the old days never thought of madness as something to be ashamed of or worthy of blame; otherwise they would not have used the word ‘manic’ for the finest experts of all... thereby weaving insanity into prophecy” (522-523). The academic and the philosopher often carry the stigma of madness: of working against expectations and norms. So, too, we think of today’s musician as the Bohemian. The ancient Greeks, however, found solace in the madness of Homer: the figure of the blind prophet. The bard, the eccentric, the performer acted as a cultural touchstone to unite pre-Socratic Grecian culture and thought. We can of course criticize this unity—perhaps this is the first heralding of nationalism in the lines of epic poetry inscribed, so long ago, then. But the trust in the blind and the mad as a prophet, as he who has access to another realm—a metaphysical realm, the realm of Ideas, of gods—might first be located here. The mad man is both of this world and of another. He is a living ghost, a spectral figure.

Who now is a ghost? Derrida appears in Ken McMullen’s improvisational film *Ghost Dance* (1983). He is asked, “Do you believe in ghosts?” and responds:

That’s a difficult question. Firstly, you’re asking a ghost where he believes in ghosts. Here, the ghost is me. Since I’ve been asked to play myself in a film which is more or less improvised, I feel as if I’m letting a ghost speak for me. Curiously, instead of playing myself, without knowing it...I let a ghost ventriloquize my words, or play my role, which is even more amusing...

We might think of this in terms of Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*. He writes: "When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I hear myself during the time that I speak" (Derrida 66). Time and the voice. The immediate past, the present, and the immediate future are strung together by the voice. The syntax of our Western conversation is comprised by a logos of repetition. We speak sentences, like melodies. Strings made of units. Further, "...the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its presence to itself. The soul of language does not risk death in the body of a signifier abandoned to the world and to the visibility of space" (Derrida 67). The voice presents itself to itself. In Derrida's critique—or response—to Husserl, we might find a better understanding; Derrida explains that Husserl imagined a pre-expressive element to "lived-experience" (13). It is through the difficulty in discerning between the "element of language" and the "element of consciousness" that a certain "indiscernibility" arises: this interdiscernability brings "non-presence and difference" forward, "right into the heart of self-presence" (13). Thus, through the voice, there is a sort of mediation that occurs. The non-presence arises through the dismissal of the Mind, of the Ideas, of "ideal objects," which are not ideal objects at all but "historical products" (Derrida 13). Derrida continues, from *Ghost Dance*:

Therefore, if I'm a ghost, but believe I'm speaking with my own voice, it's precisely because I believe it's my own voice, that I allow it to be taken over by another's voice. Not just any other voice but that of my own ghosts. So ghosts do exist... and it's the ghosts who will answer you. Perhaps they already have.

Are we ghosts? Can we merely say that Derrida thinks that language gives us life? Are we phantoms floating around in overt subjectivity, hosts to language? To the voice? No, but it is when one believes they are speaking with his or her "own voice" that it can be "taken over by another's voice." What is meant, here? Do we understand this to be a sort of Heideggerian sense of language—in a reduced or reductive sense, where there is ready-made content to our language that we inherit? How is it that the *voice* does not fall subject to the ideologies already present? Maurice Merleau-Ponty ensures us that language does more than simply *carry* ideas. He writes in his *Phenomenology of Perception* that "speech accomplishes thought" (Merleau-Ponty 183). That is, language works reflexively with the world around us. Or is it only language mediated by the voice? No. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the author who sits down to write a book not knowing what they plan on writing (183). Meaning is not directly transferred outward. Merleau-Ponty argues that words do *not* carry with them ready-made thoughts, that each word we utter is not some "inert envelope" carrying signification (181-83). We are always engaged in an active process of making meaning with these words, which have active meaning in themselves: words are alive. That is, Merleau-Ponty means to say that, almost in a memetic fashion, words "import" their "meaning [*sens*] into the listener's mind" (185).

Does not also the performing musician react and respond to the world around him via the “language of music”? Though I much dislike this term, “the language of music,” so often thought of as a universal language, a *lingua franca*, for the code of Western music seems to be a product of Western language itself and not its own language, though this is thought’s food for another day. Might we say that this responsivity erupts through the performer’s musicality, through the complex network of interactions that occur between audience, instrument, voice, technology, audience, and ghost? Let us return to Derrida’s explication in *Ghost Dance*. Perhaps he means that through the illusion of speaking with what might be our “own” voice we are inhabited by the meanings made by others, by ideologies, but these ready-made constructs pre-existing in language. But why is it only in the guise of self-ratified authenticity, of self-assured authentic identity that we are overtaken by the ghosts of ourselves? What, in fact, does it mean to be haunted by our own ghosts? Through the rote repetition and recitation of performance—that is, of playing from a scripted piece, for example, or even from memory—each performance has slight variation but it is in novel invention that we separate ourselves from our self-history. It is through the process of composition that we leave our ghosts behind and take up a voice, a voice that responds to these complex networks and surroundings and emerges as an aleatoric rupture:

The enigma of the voice is rich and profound because of all the things to which it seems to be responding. That the voice simulates the “keeping watch” over presence and that the history of spoken language is the archive of this simulation from now on prevents us from considering the “difficulty” to which the voice responds, in Husserl’s phenomenology, either as a systematic difficulty or as a contradiction that would be specific to his phenomenology. (Derrida 13)

This “keeping watch”—is it a sort of tie between non-presence and presence, or past and present? I am unsure—is the role of the voice. I have attempted here to bring about this figure of the ghost as a way to understand, perhaps as a metaphor, perhaps as more, the non-presence of presence, the “being lost in thought” of madness or more than this: that to be not quite here is indeed to be here. Derrida of course is non-phonocentric and the voice should not be here given our attention and priority, but the *paradox* of the voice. But for Derrida, meaning comes through the figure of the voice: for there to be meaning, there is a coming together of form and content—of the transcendental and the empirical—so every repetition is both the same and different. The voice cuts across the empirical and transcendental. Through Derrida we abandon the simple notion of the present, for it contains with it always our ghosts and of future ghosts to come, and perhaps the very condition of *being* is that of being ghosts, or of being a being-ghost. Within this notion of the ghost there is, too, the thought of not-being-at-all, of negative being, in the immediate present the ghost appears as the far-past—and perhaps the forever-to-come—but is in the present, if it appears to us, and appears in the

voice as both writing and sound. Thus it is for us not to see a ghost but to hear it. And to hear it always.

Conclusions and future research

Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

*Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call for them?*

Shakespeare, Henry IV (3.1.51-53)

I don't intend to here offer a denouement but rather a further string of complications on which to play, for future thoughts and future research. Ghosts mean something else to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, channeling Lacan:

The whole point of Lacan is that in order for social reality to establish itself- by social reality I mean social order, social symbolic reality- something must be primordially repressed. Something cannot be symbolized, and the spectral apparition emerges to fill up the gap of what cannot be symbolized. So, again, the specter conceals not social reality but what must be primordially repressed in order for social reality to emerge. (np)

We might be reminded of the Freudian construction of the ghost as a kernel of repressed truth, similar in some sense to the dream. But for Žižek's reading of Lacan, the apparition is not part of the symbolic order: "They are always here as the embodiment of what Lacan would have called a certain symbolic deadlock" (np).

Through these phenomenological explorations and what have been very free-wheeling interpretations of key thinkers of the 20th century, I have attempted to expand the notions of composing, to think less of the act of creating music as a deliberate and fully conscious structuring of intellectual content through the technology of an instrument, but to think more of the composition process as one of rapture, response, and tied up in a thousand hands, not just the hands of the performer. It is not that the rhetorical act is unintended or the product of the will of others, but it is in moments of novelty—in the composition of music—that the artist is least self-identifying and imbued with ghosts, that he is haunted. It is through this contribution to a rhetoric of music that we might move beyond the stereotype of the mad artist or the Bohemian if we are instead to understand the musician as he who sings with ghosts of his self rather than he who sings alone in a contained madness.

I have not here addressed the deep ideological content of music. Now, a rhetoric of music doesn't have to confront Deriding philosophy or even perform deconstruction. We should still be mindful, however, of the ready-made structures in music as well as the structures which come from pre-existing tropes in our language. But we might learn something here about the analysis of voices, of

recordings, and of digital waves. What does the ghost mean for our identities, our authenticity? How can we reconcile this Derridean paradox that it is when we believe we are most ourselves that we are most haunted, that we have been inhabited by past selves? How do we reconcile the reality of having to let the voice leave the body, and of letting it be recreated on our speakers: ghosts born from our household technology, and ghosts saved for later days?

I have in other works both criticized and applauded the recent American revival of “folk” music. The Swedish folk musician Kristian Mattson, popularized in the United States, said in an interview: “I don’t consider my work to be a part of any tradition. This is how I play. This is how I write songs,” despite stylistically similar songwriting to American folksters such as Bob Dylan, who drew heavily from Woody Guthrie, who channeled ghosts of Appalachian ballads strung from Old English ballads, and so on. To discredit history and suppose some sort of *ex nihilo* composition as potential for social change is to attempt to uproot a hundred-year oak with bare hands. Rupture must come from roots, and so the ghost is as new as it is old.

However, a phenomenological framework to assess the rhetoric of music should hope to welcome the ghost with open arms—though it will never quite touch it, we can watch and listen, still:

*Do so, and those musicians that shall play to you
Hang in the air a thousand leagues from hence,
And straight they shall be here. Sit and attend.*
(3.1.220-22)

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