

# MUSIC BETWEEN SOUND AND IDEA

## RECONCILING MERLEAU-PONTY'S LATE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MUSIC

by Catherine M. ROBB (Tilburg)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty seems to offer two contradictory claims about the phenomenology of music and its importance to his phenomenological project. In “Eye and Mind,” he is doubtful whether music can capture “brute meaning,” which he considers vital for the project of phenomenology and other forms of artistic expression, such as painting. Merleau-Ponty condemns music as inferior to painting, as only being able to depict “certain schemata of Being — its ebb and

Catherine M. ROBB is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Tilburg University. Recent publications include “Talent Dispositionalism,” *Synthese* 198 (2021): 8085-8102, and “Being a Celebrity: Alienation, Integrity, and the Uncanny,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2022): 1-19, doi:10.1017/apa.2022.28 (with Alfred Archer).

This paper has been in progress for almost ten years, and so there are many people to thank. I am indebted to Fiona Hughes for introducing me to the late phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty in her inspiring MA seminar at the University of Essex in 2013. Her help with my paper for that seminar, and then later my MA thesis, was invaluable. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Sussex Graduate Phenomenology Conference in 2013, the Society for Philosophy and Existential Philosophy annual conference in 2014, a Tilburg Philosophy work-in-progress seminar in 2018, and at the Royal Musical Association Music and Philosophy conference in 2019. I am grateful to audiences at those sessions for their encouraging questions and discussion. I am also grateful to Hanne Jacobs, Martine Prange, Roos Slegers, and Ruud Welten for reading and providing comments on previous drafts of the paper. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions.

flow, its growth, its upheavals, its turbulence.”<sup>1</sup> As such, music is considered to be unable to draw upon or express the meaning of our experience of the world; instead, it is only a representation of its schematic movement. By contrast, in “Two Unpublished Notes on Music,” Merleau-Ponty describes music as a “*modèle de la signification*,” as an exemplary model for how signification, meaning and sense can be generated from sensible perception.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty specifically uses the notion of a musical idea to explore the complex relation between sensible perception and the generation of ideas, a relation which he claims poses the most difficult challenge to the phenomenology of perception.<sup>3</sup> In these latter texts, Merleau-Ponty regards music as integral to an explanation of his phenomenological project, while in “Eye and Mind” he dismisses music as being unable to capture the meaning and experience of sensible objects.

Rather than concluding that Merleau-Ponty’s claims are inconsistent, as they initially seem, I propose that these apparently different positions can and should be reconciled. In fact, the very reason why Merleau-Ponty thinks that music is only able to represent the movement of experience can be shown as the justification for thinking that music is an exemplary model of how meaning arises from sensible perception. In what follows, I develop and reconstruct Merleau-Ponty’s later account of the perception of music, and I propose that music’s importance for Merleau-Ponty is in the way it acts as the intermediary moment of transition between the sensible perception of music as ‘sounds’ and the perception of music as ‘idea.’ Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly put forward this interpretation, I suggest that it can be reconstructed

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1993), 123. Hereafter referred to as EM.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Two Unpublished Notes on Music,” *Chiasmi International* 3 (2001): 17-18. Hereafter referred to as NM. Note that throughout this paper, I will use the words ‘signification,’ ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’ interchangeably. For my interpretation to hold, nothing rests on whether Merleau-Ponty refers to the generation of specifically either significations, meanings, or sense. This is because, as I take it, all three are kinds of ‘idea,’ and this is the overarching term on which the plausibility of Merleau-Ponty’s claims rest.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968), 149. Hereafter referred to as VI.

by examining his discussion of the musical idea in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and more generally, by exploring how the chiasmic structure of perception can be extended to the perception of music. From this interpretation, I conclude that the disparaging characteristics Merleau-Ponty bestows on music in “Eye and Mind” and his complimentary discussion of the musical idea in *The Visible and the Invisible* are not just compatible, but in fact mutually necessary.

It is important to bear in mind that these later texts in which Merleau-Ponty mentions music do not present a substantial or systematic theory of music. From what is written we cannot assume that this was Merleau-Ponty’s intention, and it is evident from the examples and topics of discussion in these texts that he was more interested in developing an account of the nature of painting and sculpture as exemplary for phenomenological analysis. To qualify, my claim in this paper is not that it is possible to present a well-developed or even convincing phenomenology of music as taken from these texts. Rather, given the claims that Merleau-Ponty makes about music, it is possible to interpret the passages in these texts as complimentary, offering insights into the place of music in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project. Far from offering a substantial account of the nature of music, my modest claim is that Merleau-Ponty’s later phenomenology can provide us with an understanding of how it is possible to perceive music as both sound and idea. Similarly, my aim is not to critique Merleau-Ponty’s late phenomenology but to find a place for music within it, in a way that does not give rise to internal inconsistency, as it initially seems to do.

Despite excellent work that situates music within Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language, expression and the body,<sup>4</sup> there is still very little by way of scholarship offering discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s views on music, and

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Amy Cimini, “Vibrating Colors and Silent Bodies: Music, Sound and Silence in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Dualism,” *Contemporary Music Review* 31 (2012): 353-70; Marc Duby, “A Unique Way of Being: The Place of Music in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception,” *Performance Philosophy: To the Thing Itself*, ed. Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly-Renaudie, and Matthew Wagner (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: 2019); Caleb Faul, “Institution and Divergence: Toward a Phenomenology of Music,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 34 (2020): 274-83; Jessica Wiskus, “Merleau-Ponty Through Mallarmé and Debussy: On Silence, Rhythm, and Expression,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 43 (2012): 230-49.

music's place in his overall phenomenological project.<sup>5</sup> Commentators have suggested that this is due, at least in part, to the neglect and dismissal of music in Merleau-Ponty's writings.<sup>6</sup> In both the early and later texts, music is overshadowed by a focus on art and painting — "Art and only art" (EM 123) — and when music is mentioned there is, as explained above, a seemingly disparaging account of its importance for phenomenology. As such, the literature is scant because there doesn't seem to be much to work with in the first place. The interpretation that I present in this paper highlights the significance of music in Merleau-Ponty's later phenomenology, as an exemplar of the transitional and chiasmic nature of the structure of perception. My hope is that from this analysis, music will find a place in Merleau-Ponty scholarship that might serve to challenge, cast doubt on, or at least sit comfortably alongside, the primacy of painting.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section Two, I present an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception as outlined in *The Visible and Invisible*, and the importance of his notion of the 'chiasm' as the moment of transition between sensible object and perceiving subject. In Section Three, I extend this theory of perception to music, especially focusing on how Merleau-Ponty explains the notion of the 'musical idea' as exemplary for understanding how sensible perception gives rise to meaning. In Section Four, I offer my interpretation that music should be understood as the transitional and dynamic movement between 'sound' and 'idea.' Finally, in Section Five I conclude by highlighting the importance of this interpretation of music for Merleau-Ponty's late phenomenological project.

## 2. THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF PERCEPTION

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible* centres on the close intertwining relationship between the perceived sensible object and the perceiving subject, accounting for the way in which

<sup>5</sup> One notable exception is the work of Jessica Wiskus, particularly her manuscript *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See Rhonda Sui, "Expression and Silence: Music and Language in Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 74 (2018): 1093-1116.

the perception and experience of the world is made possible. This close relationship is explained as “flesh offered to flesh” (VI 131). The distinctive notion of ‘flesh’ is, for Merleau-Ponty, something that he considered to be unnamed in philosophical discourse at the time of writing, but a notion that nonetheless is key to deciphering how object and subject generate such a close perceptual intimacy. ‘Flesh’ does not point to a substance or material object, it is not something that can itself be touched or perceived but is an “element of Being” (VI 139, 147). The flesh of the perceiving subject and the flesh of the thing perceived is “their means of communication” (VI 135) and is “the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility” (VI 132-3). Flesh therefore acts as the medium or element through which subject and object can access and reach each other, continually making possible the potential movement of perception between seeing and seen, touching and touched, hearing and heard.

The movement and interaction between the perceiving subject and the perceived object is further complicated by the fact that the body is not merely that which sees, touches and hears, but also an object that can be seen, touched and heard — “the body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh” (VI 137). Because the body has a flesh, it is part of the flesh of the world, existing within the sensible world as both perceiver and perceived. Merleau-Ponty exemplifies this through a description of the moment when one hand of the body touches the other; in this instant, the hand becomes an object of touch and the body becomes both touched and touching (VI 141). Likewise, the body can use its own vision to see itself, a moment which is especially enhanced when using a mirror to see ourselves seeing.

Merleau-Ponty specifically problematizes this double movement when it comes to auditory perception. He explains the difference in how we hear ourselves and how we hear others; our own voice is never thoroughly externalised as it always sounds from within, while on the other hand, the sounds emitted from external objects are always heard as ‘other’ (VI 148). This difference demonstrates that even though I am also able to perceive myself as a thing perceived in the world, the body as both subject and object are always connected as part of, and generated by, each

other. As Merleau-Ponty writes, there is a “reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other” (VI 138). This makes sense of why Merleau-Ponty explains the close intimacy of the perceiving and perceived as that of “an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand” (VI 130). Although there seems to be a clear demarcation between the two, the sea and the strand are already part of each other. The sea is that which forms the edge of the strand, and the strand is that which forms the end of the sea. By analogy, when it comes to the perception of my own body as both subject and object, my perception as subject is already part of and forms what I perceive as object, and what I perceive as object is already part of and formed by my perception as a subject.

The inability to fully externalise my own body as an object is not unique to hearing, and Merleau-Ponty extends this to both visual and tactile perception. Considering the specifics of auditory perception only exemplifies and amplifies the reversibility between subject and object as eventually unattainable. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “it is a reversibility always imminent and never realised in fact [...] the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realisation” (VI 147). Because our perception can never fully escape from its embodiment, the finality in which my touching becomes touched or my seeing becomes seen is “interrupted” — “I am always on the same side as my body” (VI 148). There is a gap between the two experiences that result in their never being able to fully overlap or superimpose upon one other. For Merleau-Ponty, this “impotency,” as he terms it, is not a failure of our perceptual abilities but rather highlights the intertwining of flesh between subject and object as a “transition,” “hinge,” and “pivot” (VI 148). Perception is an intertwining between subject and object as “the transition and the metamorphosis of the one experience into the other” (VI 148), rather than an endpoint in which the transition has already occurred. Although subject and object closely intertwine with each other, they do not dissolve into the other, as Ted Toadvine has explained, they “cross into each other and blur their boundaries without their distinctiveness being erased.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ted Toadvine, “‘The Chiasm,’ in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (Abingdon, Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 341.

Merleau-Ponty claims that this necessary transitional moment of communication between flesh of the subject and the flesh of the object is an invisible part of perception — it remains “irremediably hidden” (VI 148). It is this hidden transitional moment in which the intertwining of flesh takes place and is made possible, that Merleau-Ponty names the ‘chiasm.’ The term ‘chiasm’ has two different interpretations. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty writes that the chiasm is “like the chiasm of the eyes” (VI 215), denoting the physiological structure in which the fibres of the optic nerves cross over one another, so that each eye is connected to the brain on the opposite side.<sup>8</sup> This crossing is what makes perception possible, turning the images gathered from two eyes into one unified image. By analogy, the chiasmic structure of perception allows for an “exchange” between “the phenomenal body and the ‘objective’ body, between the perceiving and the perceived” (VI 215), such that two individual entities are unified in perception, as a “unity in difference.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty also refers to the term chiasm (in French *chiasme*) as the literary rhetorical structure in which figures of speech are repeated in reverse order, creating a reversible mirror image.<sup>10</sup> This is usually represented as the visual structure of AB:BA, for example as found in Bryon’s *Don Juan* — “Pleasure’s a sin, and sometimes sin’s a pleasure.” Understanding the chiasmic structure of perception in this way highlights the reversibility of exchange between subject and object yet honours the interruption that is a necessary part of the transition keeping both sides as distinct. In the literary representation of the chiasmic structure, this transitional moment is visually represented with the use of a colon: each side mirrors and is formed from the structure of the other. In perception, however, Merleau-Ponty claims that this moment of transition between the two is hidden, as an invisible part of perception that makes this perception possible.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this first interpretation, see Toadvine, “‘The Chiasm,’ 336, 338-9.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this analogy, see Ted Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed 16 September 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/merleau-ponty>.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this second interpretation, see again Toadvine, “‘The Chiasm,’ 336, 339.

There is some debate as to whether Merleau-Ponty's use of the term chiasm is merely a metaphorical device that provides a useful way of thinking about the structure of perception, or whether the chiasm is a concept that accurately describes the ontology of the structure in which this reversible intertwining occurs.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, nothing rests on the choice between the chiasm understood as metaphor or ontological concept. For now, it is enough to acknowledge that Merleau-Ponty considers the transitional moment in which subject and object exchange as a chiasmic structure (metaphorical or ontological) that is an essential yet invisible part of the structure of perception.

There is also some difference in interpretation as to what the chiasm represents. On the one hand, the chiasm is understood as a useful synonym for the intertwining and reversible exchange between the flesh of the perceiving subject and thing perceived, as a word that captures the intimate proximity between the two.<sup>12</sup> For example, in a working note, Merleau-Ponty writes that the chiasm is "an exchange" between 'me' and 'other' as well as between 'me' and 'the world' (VI 215). This would mean the chiasm is a term that names the intertwining and reversibility between the flesh of the perceiving subject and perceived object. On the other hand, the chiasm is also understood as the structural space in which the intertwining and reversibility takes place, as that which makes possible the relationship between the two. For example, Cataldi writes that the chiasm itself does not reverse or intertwine, because it is not "a side, but that which lies, as a bond [...] that which makes the reversibilities possible."<sup>13</sup> Here the difference is whether the chiasm describes the nature of the intertwining relationship between subject or object, or whether it is the structural moment that makes such a relationship possible.

For the purposes of the discussion here, nothing rests on a choice between the chiasm as a synonym for the transition and interaction

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the chiasm as either metaphorical or ontological structure, see Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, "Chiasm in Merleau-Ponty: Metaphor or Concept?," in *Chiasmus and Culture*, ed. Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 92.

<sup>12</sup> See again Thomas-Fogiel, "Chiasm in Merleau-Ponty," 93.

<sup>13</sup> Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space, Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (New York: SUNY, 1993), 75.



between subject and object, or as the structural condition of its possibility. For what it's worth, it might be that the difference between the two interpretations is overstated: even if the chiasm does denote the nature of the exchange itself, it is this exchange that makes possible the relationship between perceiving subject and perceived object, and that which allows for the communication between their 'flesh.' The chiasm is therefore both the moment of intertwining and the structural "turning point" between the subject and object (VI 264), the intermediary hinge that facilitates the transition between the world perceived and the perceiving body. Throughout the rest of the discussion, I understand the chiasm in a way that allows for both interpretations: as the intermediary moment of transition and exchange between subject and object, a moment which is, for Merleau-Ponty, a structural and necessary element of perception.

### 3. THE CHIASTIC PERCEPTION OF MUSIC

Although Merleau-Ponty primarily uses visual and tactile examples to explain the chiasmic structure of perception, I propose that this can be extended to generate an account of musical perception that at the same time highlights a central aspect of Merleau-Ponty's general phenomenological project. This extension of Merleau-Ponty's theory is made possible especially in his later writings, where he makes use of musical word-choice to characterise the transitional quality of the chiasm and refers specifically to music to explain how ideas arise from sensible perception.

To begin with, Merleau-Ponty describes the chiasm as "an ephemeral *modulation* of this world" (VI 132, italics added). In general, modulation refers to an alteration or variation to achieve a desired change, such as the alteration of a waveform using carrier and modulated signals in electronics.<sup>14</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, this word choice reflects how the chiasm makes possible the reversibility between subject and object and thus enacts change

<sup>14</sup> See the entry for "modulation, n.," in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford Univ. Press, September 2022), accessed 16 September 2022, [www.oed.com.tilburguniversity.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/120684?redirectedFrom=modulation&](http://www.oed.com.tilburguniversity.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/120684?redirectedFrom=modulation&).

— altering things in the world from mere objects, to things that can be taken up in perception, unifying the world of the ‘other’ and the world of ‘my own’ as compossible. However, by characterising modulation as a specifically musical word choice, I suggest that this highlights the transitional nature of perception as that which allows for an intimate intertwining between subject and object that is at the same time never fully synthesised.

The process of modulation in music requires changing from one key to another; usually, such a transition will be prepared and resolved, connecting what has gone before with what comes after, as a moment of interaction. The fact that music can make this transitional moment explicitly audible, shows that it is a paradigmatic model for describing the structure of perception as Merleau-Ponty describes, as we can actively hear the change from one musical key to another, from one ‘flesh’ to another. It is also evident that the perception of the music, and the music itself as a perceived object, can become intertwined. When listening to music it might feel as if we are passively taking it in, and that the music is a dynamic force that takes over our sensibility. We need not do anything more than let the music wash over us. However, listening to music can often be active, by paying close attention to the harmonic and rhythmic details, and analysing individual sounds to make sense of an overarching musical structure. Merleau-Ponty writes of this dynamic movement between active and passive perception specifically with regards to vision: “my activity is equally my passivity [...] the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen” (VI 139).<sup>15</sup> In this respect, the perception of music follows the same chiasmic structure as Merleau-Ponty lays out for vision, touch and speech. The perception of music is both active and passive, and it is made possible by an exchange between my listening and that which is being listened to. The flesh of the music intertwines with our own embodied hearing of that music, so that our hearing is part of the music, and the music is part of our hearing.

<sup>15</sup> See also Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on the dialectic between passivity and activity: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2010).

The perception of music does not only entail hearing sound instances, but these sounds as interacting with other sounds, constituting the music as a whole. When we listen to music, we do not only hear individual and isolated instances of sound, but also the particular sounds within a larger context, perhaps as part of a phrase, movement, or as connected to the entire trajectory of the piece. Merleau-Ponty makes this point about the relationship between particular and whole specifically with regards to colours. He claims that “the red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it” (VI 132), and that yellow “surpasses itself of itself [...]. With one sole movement it imposes itself as particular and ceases to be visible as particular [...], each part is *torn up* from the whole, comes with its roots, encroaches upon the whole” (VI 217-8). The particular colours we see are necessarily indexed to and bound with the other colours that make up its context, and we see each individual colour in relation to the differences and similarities it has with other colours around it. But it is not the case that the combination of particulars constitutes the whole of our visual context. Merleau-Ponty claims that the particular constitutes the whole and is at the same time ‘torn’ or excavated from it. This implies that there is a dynamic transitional movement between particular and whole which is necessary and reversible; they are both part of the other, already found reciprocally within the other as mutually necessary yet distinct.

In the same way as the perception of one instance of colour depends on the overall context of colour of which it is constitutive and constituted, the perception of one instance of sound depends on the whole piece of music of which it, along with other sounds, is constitutive, and from which it is constituted. Listening to the combination of each individual sound in a piece of music does not by default give a perception of the piece of music as a whole. It is the whole piece which brings forth these individuated sounds. At the same time, the whole piece of music is constituted by these individual sounds. Here the relationship is not a dialectic or a synthesis but a chiasmic structure — the particular and the whole intimately exchange yet are distinct and so never fully superimpose on one another.

The relation between particular and whole is, for Merleau-Ponty, “a fabric of invisible being” (VI, 132); it is an unobvious and hidden moment of transition that constitutes our perception. This is clearly evident in music, where what comes before and after each particular sound in a phrase merges almost instantly into one impression of the whole piece, so that the individual elements are at the same time enveloped in the whole yet kept as distinct instances of sound. Similarly, what might be called the ‘background’ of a piece of music, the underlying and supporting harmonies or rhythmic structures, are hidden from our attention insofar as they bring the foreground of the music specifically to awareness. Even though our focus on one will make the other invisible to our attention, neither background nor foreground is conceivable without the other.<sup>16</sup>

Merleau-Ponty further claims that the contextuality of particular elements of perception is something we experience not merely through perception of the sensible objects themselves, but is beyond them, outside the embodiment that comprises perception: “the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only through experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself” (VI 136). The experience that Merleau-Ponty mentions here points to the thoughts, meanings, significations, and more generally, *ideas*, that are beyond the mere physical perception of the objects that we see, hear and touch. It is when discussing this movement from body

<sup>16</sup> The way in which Merleau-Ponty describes the relationship between part and whole in relation to sound is similar to Husserl’s account of melody and memory, as requiring and being an exemplification of perceptual ‘retention’ and ‘protention.’ Merleau-Ponty explicitly uses and expands upon Husserl’s account of temporality in his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to explore further the relationship between Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s accounts, although this discussion has been taken up by others. See: Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991); Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Finlay (Oxon: Routledge, 2001), particularly *Investigation III*, 1-46; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 432 onwards; Jessica Wiskus, “On the Nonindependent Parts of Time-Consciousness: Husserl’s Early Phenomenological Investigations and the Perception of Melody,” in *Music Theory Spectrum* 43 (2021): 114-22; Christoph Hoerl, “Husserl, The Absolute Flow, and Temporal Experience,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86 (2013): 233-494; Françoise Dastur, *Questions of Phenomenology: Language, Alterity, Temporality, Finitude*, trans. Robert Vallier (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2017), 105-77.

to mind, perception to idea, that Merleau-Ponty specifically uses the notion of the musical idea as a paradigmatic example.

When we listen to music as more than an amalgamation of individual sounds, we will often become caught up in our ideas of the music; we have emotional responses to it, memories and feelings that we associate with it, and we might even imagine stories that are thought to represent the characters of the sounds. These ideas might be concrete depictions of imaginary images, such as when a piece of music brings to mind a memory of a loved one, or the memory of an impressive landscape. A good example of this is given by programme music, which is intentionally created to evoke certain visual images or events (such as Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, or *Carnival of the Animals* by Saint-Saëns). By contrast, music might generate ideas that are not fixed images or representations, but a mere feeling or intuition of meaning, such as intuitive like or dislike, or a pang of sadness at a particularly beautiful chord resolution. (I have in mind Wagner's Prelude of Act 1 of *Tristan and Isolde*).<sup>17</sup>

In both cases, the ideas that come with our perception of music are alluded to in its sounds, but for Merleau-Ponty, nevertheless remain invisible, hidden from our perceptual awareness. This invisibility is not a non-visible or un-visible, but rather in-visible, *in* the visible as "another dimension" (VI 228). Merleau-Ponty claims that ideas are not opposed to sensible objects, but are rather their "invisible inner framework [...], the secret counterpart of the visible [...], one cannot see it there and every effort to see it there makes it disappear, but it is *in the line* of the visible [...], it is inscribed within it" (VI 215, see also VI 149).

There are two significant points to take from Merleau-Ponty's characterisation of the musical idea in the fragments of these passages quoted above. First, the hidden ideas and meanings found in perceptual objects are necessarily embodied presences of meaning; the ideas are "inscribed" in the sensible, presented through the perception of the sensible objects to a sensible perceiving subject. Merleau-Ponty is insistent on this,

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of clarifying an idea as both image and/or non-representational feeling or intuition of meaning.

claiming that ideas would be “inaccessible” to us if we had no sensible, perceiving body; “they could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience” (VI 150), and furthermore, “every thought known to us occurs to a flesh” (VI 146). There is a relation of reversibility between the meaning and sounds, between the visible and invisible, and likewise between thought and the flesh of the perceived object; there is a mutual intertwining and reciprocity that is necessary for the other to be possible. In the same way that there is a chiasm between the flesh of the perceived and the perceiving, there is a chiasm between the mind and the body. As Merleau-Ponty phrases it, “there is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body” (VI 259) — note that this is a straightforwardly explicit example of the literary chiasmic structure of reversibility (AB:BA), where the body and mind cross over as mirror images of each other, so that the body is already part of the mind, and the mind is already part of the body.

The second point to take from Merleau-Ponty’s account of the intertwining of idea and perception, is the claim that the embodied presence of meaning is ultimately ungraspable, unable to be pinned down; “every effort to see it [idea] there [musical sounds] makes it [idea] disappear” (VI 215), and our attempt to fully unveil the idea in a piece of music is “misconceived” (VI 150). By drawing on Proust’s account of the musical idea in his *In Search of Lost Time*, Merleau-Ponty uses Proust’s example of ‘the little phrase’ of music that reminds the character Swann of his love for Odette. The music, which Proust attributes to the imaginary composer Vinteuil, carries for Swann the significance of the memories and feelings associated with his love.<sup>18</sup> However, this does not imply that Swann has identified or understood what the music means. Another person could listen to the phrase and signify it with a variety of different significations and ideas to the ones that Swann finds within it. Likewise, Swann may listen to the piece of music at another time or place and find that the music signifies something other than feelings of love for Odette. The possibility that the same musical sounds will

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of this example, see Mauro Carbone, “Composing Vinteuil; Proust’s Unheard Music,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 48 (2005): 163-65.

generate different ideas for different subjects, or even the same subject in different contexts, demonstrates that the ideas are not themselves found only within the musical sounds, but also within the perceiving subject.

Despite the multiplicity of ideas that are potentially inscribed in specific phrases or pieces of music, each phrase or piece does have a distinctive quality to it that allows us to recognise the music as *that* specific instance of music, as for example, the little phrase that carries the significance of love for Swann. Merleau-Ponty does not suggest relativism here: the relationship between object and idea is chiasmic. Ideas are always *of* the sensible objects that generate them, “inscribed” in them, and so this serves to define the possible ideas and meanings that can be generated from any given object, from any given piece of music.<sup>19</sup>

The inability to fully grasp or realise a musical idea within any given piece of music is exemplified by the fact that the music itself exists and develops through time: it is by nature temporal and dynamic. As soon as we try to grasp this temporal quality by de-temporalising and analysing its constituent parts, then the nature of the music is missed. Merleau-Ponty claims that such an attempt to unveil the signification of the music gives us “a second version of it [the music], a more manageable derivative [...] while he [Swann] is thinking of these signs and this sense, he no longer has the ‘little phrase’ itself” (VI 150). While Swann is thinking of the music’s meaning he does not grasp hold of the phrase of music itself that he once perceived. Instead, by attempting to grasp hold of music we are left with a memory, an idea, of what we once heard in time.<sup>20</sup> The idea is indexed to what was once perceived, but as a ‘derivative’ or ‘second version’ of it rather than the object itself.

Merleau-Ponty uses another musical metaphor to emphasise the importance of temporal structure for the chiasmic structure of perception: “the sense [meaning/idea] upon which the arrangement of the sounds opens reflects back upon that arrangement [...] a *retrograde*

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s account of temporality and musical ideas, see Jessica Wiskus, “The Universality of the Sensible: On Plato and the Musical Idea according to Merleau-Ponty,” *Epoché* 13 (2008): 121-32 (esp. pp. 128-30).

movement which is never completely belied” (VI 154, italics added). As a piece of music unfolds through time, Merleau-Ponty describes the relational movement between sound and idea as a retrograde, the backwards reverse of an originally stated musical line. This metaphor can be understood as merely providing more descriptive support for Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of the chiasmic structure of reversibility in perception: a retrograde inversion only makes sense in relation to the original musical line, as a backwards reversal or mirror image, such as in the literary representation of AB:BA. The original musical line is already *in* the retrograde, it is that which generates and makes the retrograde possible, yet at the same time the retrograde is already *in* and constitutive of the original musical line. By analogy, the idea is already *in* the sounds, and the sounds are already *in* the idea.

However, the musical notion of a retrograde is not merely metaphorical but highlights the peculiar temporality of the way in which ideas are generated from sensible perception. When we listen to music and an idea is generated from this music, the idea does not merely refer to the sounds themselves as they are heard in the moment of perception. Given that particular sound instances will constitute a musical phrase, which will in turn constitute the parts of music that form a whole piece of music, the ideas that are generated from our audible perception rely on this temporal relationship between particular and whole. The meaning that is generated from a phrase or piece of music does not only depend on the sounds that have already been heard, but how these sounds are taken up in the present, and how they are projected onto forthcoming sounds. The idea of the music is constituted by the exchange and intertwining between past, present and future sounds. That is why, for Merleau-Ponty, the retrograde (backwards) movement between idea and sounds is never completely “belied,” as the ideas are never merely just a movement backwards, referring back to the sounds that we have heard, but also a movement forward, projecting onto the sounds that are continually heard in the present and future. This temporal structure is chiasmic: the musical idea is generated by the intertwining of both a backwards reflection and forward projection, as a moment of transition between the two.



#### 4. MUSIC BETWEEN SOUND AND IDEA

From this interpretation of the perception of music through its sounds, and how these sounds are embedded with an in-visible meaning and idea, it is still unclear what we are really pointing to when we say that we hear or are listening to ‘music.’ The question is this: where is the ‘music’ in our perception if it is not merely our perception of individual sounds, nor merely the ideas that are brought forth from our perception of those sounds?

I propose that for Merleau-Ponty, music should be understood as the interstice between the sounds and the idea, the in-between moment of reversibility and intertwining of the two.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, because this interstice has a chiasmic structure, it is not without that which lies on either side of it: the chiasm makes possible the communication between the two, and so is necessarily constituted of both sound and idea, where each of the two are already part of and generated by the other. Because music can be heard as movement in time, it acts as an embodied way to experience the relationality between musical sounds and ideas, as an ideal example of the chiasmic perception that Merleau-Ponty sets out in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this respect, music is the paradigm example for the transitional moment of relationality between the sensory object and the subjective taking-up of that object. This moment of transition is not the result of the shifts between oppositions, or the result of the intertwining reversibility of one and the other, but rather as Fiona Hughes has defined it, a “mediating process,” the “ongoing play of what will become difference and convergences [...] the transitions without which ends would be impossible.”<sup>22</sup> The music is the site at which reversibility occurs, the transitional movement itself, rather than the product of that transition. Merleau-Ponty calls this movement

<sup>21</sup> The understanding of music that I have attributed to Merleau-Ponty, as the intertwining between sound and idea, differs from the classical phenomenological analysis of music as an ‘ideal object.’ For a discussion of this classical position, see: Saulius Geniušas, “Musical Works as Ideal Objects: Phenomenology of Music and Its Implications for Philosophical Anthropology,” *Dialogue and Universalism* 28 (2018): 231-44.

<sup>22</sup> Fiona Hughes, “A Passivity Prior to Passive and Active: Merleau-Ponty’s Re-Reading of the Freudian Unconscious and Looking at Lascaux,” *Mind*, issue 122, vol. 486 (2013): 419-50, esp. p. 421.

an invisible and hidden “hinge” or “pivot” between the two oppositions (VI 148), which goes some way to explaining why it is so difficult to hear and grasp music *as music*, rather than as its sounds or the ideas that arise when we listen to it. Our attempts to grasp an understanding of music outside of time is always “interrupted” or “belied,” never fully realised.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not make this interpretation explicit, his “Two Unpublished Notes on Music” imply and hint that music is to be conceived of as a moment of transition. In the first note, Merleau-Ponty writes of “this music that unrolls [volute] of motifs, rolled up around an *Etwas* — inverting itself, turning the background into a figure and the figure unto a background” (NM 18). Here Merleau-Ponty describes music as a ‘volute,’ a spiral or scroll which unfolds through motifs and is simultaneously folded up around them, inverting its foreground and background. There is a sense here that the music is constantly moving, shifting between background and foreground, rolling and unrolling. The music is neither one oppositional pole nor the other, but the movement between them. Interestingly, as well as being represented as a cross or mirror-image, the chiasm has also been referred to by literary and cultural theorists as represented by the shape of a spiral, as the representation of a potentially “unending process” that allows for paradox, contradiction and the folding of itself upon itself.<sup>23</sup> In this way, that music is described as a *volute* is another way to represent music’s chiasmic structure as a transitional movement of intertwining and reversibility between sound and idea.

The second note further emphasises music’s movement of reversibility as a transitional pivot or hinge: “the impression that this movement that starts up is already at its endpoint, which it is going to have been, or [that it is] sinking into the future that we have a hold of as well as the past [...] Anticipated retrospection — Retrograde movement *in future*” (NM 18). Merleau-Ponty uses strange linguistic tenses here to explain

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the chiasm as spiral, see Anthony Paul and Boris Wiseman, “Chiasmus in the Drama of Life,” in *Chiasmus and Culture*, ed. Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 9.

the teleology of music. He describes the end as “going to have been,” and the future is described as something that we fall back into with “retrograde movement.” Thus, for Merleau-Ponty music not only inverts the background and foreground of sound, but also the way in which we take up those sounds, as the intertwining of both the past and the future, the beginning and end. Music is not the finished product of such an inversion, but the moment of inversion itself, the pivot or hinge on which we hear the past and the present intertwining and inverting through musical sounds.<sup>24</sup>

Although this moment of transition is a necessary part within all types of perception and not just the auditory perception of music, the perception of music is an exemplary model that allows us to specifically locate the moment of transition and reversibility that Merleau-Ponty’s theory rests on. Works of visual art, such as painting, also have this transitional moment insofar as they are not merely the individual brushstrokes or colours that make up the total context, nor are they merely the ideas formed through the perception of the artwork. However, because the art is seen as a visual object, it is thought of as fixed in time, as a realised or finished product. Music on the other hand is by definition the unfolding of reversibility in time, the dynamic process of perception exemplified; it cannot be mistaken for a fixed and graspable element of perception. This dynamism is also evident in any event that occurs and unfolds across time, such as performance art and dance — both of these cannot be reduced to merely individual perceptual events nor the meanings that are elicited from these events. The nature of performative art or dance is found in the embodiment of the transition, hidden from perception, and never completely realised. Therefore, my claim is not that music has a unique perceptual structure, but rather

<sup>24</sup> This interpretation differs from Wiskus, who understands the musical *idea* to be the pivot and hinge, and not the music itself (Wiskus, “The Universality of the Sensible,” 124). See also Renaud Barbaras, who considers the idea to be that which “manifests a particular reversibility” (*The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Flesh*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Indiana Univ. Press, 2004), 280). My interpretation sits well with Mauro Carbone, who agrees that the *passage* from the sensible to the idea involves a “metamorphosis” (“The Thinking of the Sensible,” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (New York: SUNY, 2000), 121).

that by analysing the elements that make up the perception of music, music can be isolated as an embodied paradigm example of the chiasmic perceptual structure that, for Merleau-Ponty, constitutes all the other senses. Music's essential temporality merely prolongs and makes visible this moment of transition.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is now possible to interpret the relevant passages in Merleau-Ponty's later work as offering compatible claims about the phenomenology of music. Merleau-Ponty's apparently disparaging remarks about music in "Eye and Mind" are rather descriptions about the dynamic status of musical movement, as a representation of the chiasmic structure that makes possible the transition and reversibility of flesh between sound and idea. Merleau-Ponty writes that music is unable to depict anything concrete about Being, but rather "its ebb and flow, its growth, upheavals, its turbulence" (EM 123). However, this description of turbulent ebb and flow compliments the status of relationality that Merleau-Ponty gives to music in *The Visible and the Invisible*. The comments about music seem negative in "Eye and Mind" because Merleau-Ponty is assessing music's ability to bring forth the "fabric of brute meaning" (VI 123), the ability to give "visible existence to what profane vision believed to be invisible" (VI 127). Music, however, should not and does not have this capacity precisely because it is the moment of reversibility between the visible and the invisible. It cannot be the intertwined, reversed and finished product of art, but rather the moment in which the two coalesce yet at the same time keep their distinctiveness.

In "Eye and Mind" Merleau-Ponty searches for a replacement to the scientific and operationalist thinking of philosophy, which he claims 'manipulates' and 'limits' our understanding of objects in the world. Instead, Merleau-Ponty looks to painting as an exemplary way to represent what philosophy should become, or return to, as phenomenology: "Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees" (EM 123). The painter has the ability to escape

operationalism and scientific thinking, returning to “the soil of the sensible,” to “see” and experience objects as they are (EM 121-2). Merleau-Ponty claims that in doing so, the painter makes visible the invisible aspects of our experience, painting not only foreground but background, light and also shadow, form and depth: painting “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible” (EM 127) and has the potential to offer and express “actualized resemblances” (EM 130). As such, the process of painting is inherently temporal and dynamic, a continual interplay or “overlapping” between the artist and world that they perceive and paint: “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into painting” (EM 123). This allows Merleau-Ponty to present painting as an exemplary illustration of the chiasmic structure of the perception, as transitional, dynamic, and temporal. Merleau-Ponty even goes so far as to acclaim the ‘incompleteness’ of painting, as a process that is always moving, transitioning, drawing on what has come before and anticipating what will come after: “If no painting completes painting, if no work is itself ever absolutely completed, still, each creation changes, alters, clarifies, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates by anticipation all the others” (EM 149).

Despite the dynamism and transitional nature of painting, it still ‘makes visible’ and ‘actualizes’ resemblances and the invisible aspects of perception and experience. The artwork itself is a moment in which the chiasmic structure of perception is realised and made visible.<sup>25</sup> Music, however, cannot be the representation of finished or actualised resemblances, as it does not actualise or make visible, but rather is the invisible intermediary pivot between sense and idea. Music is exemplary of, and necessarily embodies the process of perception itself as the chiasmic reversibility between flesh, sensible and idea. This reversibility necessarily remains hidden, transitional, and dynamic. Music exemplifies the inability to capture or grasp the temporal nature of the chiasm, whereas painting has the potential to actualise, resemble and realize. Music, in

<sup>25</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising the question of whether Merleau-Ponty is right to focus on non-temporal art form like painting, even though the process itself is exemplary of the temporal and dynamic chiasmic structure of perception.

other words, is an ideal model to convey the unfinished and the transitional nature of the relation between phenomena that is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's later phenomenology. Importantly, this 'model' is not only a metaphor that allows us to accurately think and understand the structure of perception. The musical references in the text point to something important about the ontological structure of perception that cannot be stated with the example of painting. That is, the transitional intertwining of object and idea, body and world, perceiver and perceived, is necessarily temporal, unable to be pinned down, always invisible, and never fully actualisable or realisable.<sup>26</sup>

This casts doubt on why Merleau-Ponty so often returns to painting as an exemplary understanding of what phenomenology should be and return to. If Merleau-Ponty makes central to his phenomenology of perception the chiasmic structure of a continually shifting yet hidden transitional movement between subject and object or mind and body, then the reliance on and veneration of painting that represents actualised or visible resemblances of the sensible seems misplaced. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenological project was even more radical than he himself envisaged, suggesting the significance of a perceptual movement that is always interrupted, never fully realised, and so never fully paintable or captured by visual art. At the very least, the interpretation that I have offered here demonstrates that music has an important place within Merleau-Ponty's late phenomenology that is, despite initial impressions, internally consistent, complementary across his different texts, and serves to exemplify the chiasmic structure of the nature of perception.

**KEYWORDS:** phenomenology, music, Merleau-Ponty, sound, idea, chiasm, perception.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this distinction between Merleau-Ponty's use of musical terminology either as an exemplary metaphor, or as signalling something important about the ontology of transitional moment found in perception.

## SUMMARY

In his later works, Merleau-Ponty seems to offer two contradictory claims about the phenomenology of music. In *Eye and Mind*, he is disparaging of music's ability to capture 'brute meaning,' which he considers as vital to phenomenology. Instead, he condemns music as only being able to depict the 'movement of Being.' By contrast, in his posthumous *Two Unpublished Notes on Music* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes music as an exemplary model of how meaning arises from the perception of sensible objects. He uses the specific notion of a musical idea to explore the complex relation between sensible experiences and the ideas that arise from them, a relation which he considers to pose the most difficult and important challenge to phenomenology. Rather than dismissing these claims as inconsistent, I propose that they can and should be reconciled. The very reason why Merleau-Ponty claims that music is only able to represent the 'ebb and flow' of experience, is also the justification for why music is an exemplary model of the structure of perceptual experience. I suggest that in Merleau-Ponty's later texts, music should be understood as the chiasmic moment of transition between the sensible perception of 'sound' and the generation of 'idea.' As such, the disparaging characteristics bestowed on music in *Eye and Mind*, and the complimentary discussion of the musical idea in the posthumous texts are not just compatible, but mutually necessary for understanding Merleau-Ponty's late phenomenological project.