Walk into the music section of any decent library and select, in as aimless a way as you like, a dozen or so books about things like composition, the lives of the acknowledged masters, the rudiments of analysis, the history of specific forms and styles, the niceties of interpretation and so on. Read through them at random and pictures will begin to emerge of the experience of listening to music. Not, of course, that the writers need set out consciously to draw such pictures. Nor need their opening remarks lay down the fundamentals of musical experience. Rather, the beliefs they hold about listening will percolate through what they actually say. Whatever their conscious enterprise, they will have assumptions and presuppositions about listening which will inform their discussion. For, after all, it seems likely that it is their own listening which has motivated and indeed which perhaps largely constitutes their particular studies. To discourse, for instance, on a particular composer or on a particular style, or to elaborate on a theory of expression or of musical symbolism they will have listened intensively and extensively. And their own listening may have been of a very methodical and considered kind. The nature of listening is important to their field of interest.

Having said this, hardly any of the books of musicology, style, textual criticism or reviews of the repertoire pay much conscious attention to the listener, to his attitudes or to his qualifications. Yet they all make certain large assumptions, and these assumptions are quite as revealing as openly psychological or philosophical forays into musical aesthetics, where, as is too often the case, the nature of musical experience figures so prominently as to be in danger of shrivelling beyond recognition under the intensity of artificial lighting.

There is a rather odd book, Music Today, written in 1934 by one John Foulds, who, in the course of setting out an avowedly occult aesthetic full of astral planes and Buddhic symbolism, makes an observation about the sort of language in which most reflections on music are written. I think it is worth noticing:
The voluminous labours of aestheticians in the world of music are usually expressed in one or other of two ways: either in dry technical terms or in the language of poetic fiction. That their conclusions are distressingly nebulous may be not altogether unexpected from the nature of the subject: that they should in almost every case fail to mention one of the facts of outstanding importance to musicians and non-musicians alike is however surprising.¹

Promising though the ‘important fact’ sounds, it turns out to be quite as nebulous as the conclusions of the aestheticians who have so upset Foulds, and I don’t propose to pursue it. But that the vast bulk of writing on music does indeed consist, as Foulds claims, of a mixture of technical language (often dry) and figurative expressions (often perplexing) is undeniable. But anyone who tries – as I shall – to give a philosophical account of the position of the listener must start from these raw data. The moment that anyone begins to say what music in general or some piece of music in particular is, or ‘is about’, he starts to use either technical phrases like ‘invertible subject’, figurative terms like ‘incandescent radiance’ or mystical ones like ‘spirituality’. An account of the experience of listening must start with the sorts of things to which listening gives rise or in which listening is expressed – principally, the judgements made by those who listen about what they are listening to. And clearly the most widely available of these are the judgements of those whose listening is important (or lucrative) enough to propel pen to paper.

Let me say at once that the technical vocabulary of musical discourse is so well established, documented and explored that even were I able to examine it in anything like a scholarly fashion (which I am not) I should not propose to do so. It seems unlikely that we could infer anything about the prerequisites underlying the listener merely by elaborating in further detail upon the ramifications of technical analysis. On the other hand, there is not – nor could be – any systematic account of the meaning of verbal images, metaphors and figurative or poetic language more generally. That is not the sort of thing poetic language is. And as for the links between the two kinds of language, technical and poetic, if analytic descriptions alone of a particular piece of music could yield the images which are subsequently deployed towards it then the production of images would be an exact science, which it is not. Whereas if images could yield technical accounts, then disputes of