The Creation of Audible Time

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I. Introduction

John Cage once remarked about David Tudor, “His music has no beginning, no middle, and no end.” What Cage meant by this cryptic comment was that Tudor’s music studiously avoids the conventional rhetoric—the various opening and closing gambits, tactics, and behaviors that audiences have come to expect in different genres and styles of music. This “conventional rhetoric” is the subject of the present paper. Our method is an exploration of how musical compositions begin: what it takes to transport the listener from the external world of clock time to the internal time which a piece of music creates and which is shared by composer, performer, and listener. And how—by means of specific actions, energy, duration, speed of pulsation, patterning, and a variety of other clues—we are brought under the control of an audible, hierarchical time that is more palpable, more insistent, more clearly articulated, and more flexible than the world of everyday time to which we eventually return.

Although textbooks on music are full of examples of musical beginnings, only a few authors have addressed our main problem in any depth. We obviously take musical beginnings for granted! Two short but provocative discussions deserve to be mentioned here: Ernst Toch’s The Shaping Forces in Music and Edward T. Cone’s Musical Form and Musical Performance. The approach taken in this paper is consonant with theirs, but the discussion goes considerably beyond the scope of the works cited.

One could easily write a history of music based on beginning mannerisms and gambits. In fact the analogy to the game of chess is a very good one: just as in chess there are certain combinations of opening moves (gambits) that implement the strategic principles of the opening game, namely (1) the rapid development of pieces and (2) control of the center of the board, in music there are various gestures which are designed to achieve some important strategic objectives of what we might call the
"opening game" of music. Such a history of music would be fun to write, but the
goal of the present paper is a more modest one—to set forth some general principles
that govern beginnings of musical compositions and thus establish a framework of
ideas within which various musical beginnings may be studied and compared.

This paper deals with the commonplace in music rather than with brilliant,
individual solutions. The pianist Artur Schnabel has been often quoted as saying that
"genius begins to be apparent only at about the fifth measure," by which time the
composer has delivered himself of one of his assortment of opening gambits and now
faces a far more critical question—"What next?" The beginning of a piece of music
accomplishes simultaneously an amazing number of objectives, but—like the various
chess openings—it can be mastered by any first-year student. So, although most of
our examples are taken from great masterpieces of the Western symphonic repertoire,
they should be regarded as typical rather than atypical. If a bias toward the
Austro-Germanic "mainstream" of 18th- and 19th-century composers is detected, let
it be attributed to the spell cast by the lovely Tyrolean hillsides on all those attending
the Conference.

I should like to emphasize how different are the situations that the composer
confronts at the beginning and at the ending of a piece: nearing the end, he has
deployed an intricate array of forces, an accumulation of energy, momentum,
probabilities and expectations, tonal tendencies that demand resolution—internal
forces that have been developed within the composition, entailing certain musical
consequences. Certainly there are conventional ending gestures, and certainly musi-
cal endings display some of the same rigidity of cadence structure that we find in
poetry, but a successful resolution of a composition requires a much more sophisti-
cated solution than simply tacking on one's favorite fanfare or chord progression. But
at the beginning nothing already exists—no accumulation, no momentum, no
tendencies—only silence and inertia to overcome. Musical endings require a selec-
tion from among the potential consequences of the musical accumulation; musical
beginnings are selected from all the possible choices in the world. To narrow the
range of choices from this overwhelming array, composers have resorted to specific
opening behaviors.

We make certain exclusions: most types of functional musics in which the
beginning is directed by an extra-musical idea—descriptive music, music for the
theatre and films, church music,\(^3\) marches, dance music, wake-up music, and
background music (which should ideally have no beginning). The storm music that
opens Verdi's opera \textit{Otello} and the pistol shot that serves as the sole overture to
Wolf-Ferrari's \textit{I Gioielli della Madonna} are strikingly effective as openings but do not
represent an intrinsically-musical solution. They do, perhaps, serve as microcosmic
equivalents to the "Big Bang!"

\section*{II. Principia}

There is a lot to be accomplished at the beginning of a piece of music, and most of it
happens within the first few seconds. The immediate, tactical objectives include
these: first, the translation from external time to the internal time of the composition;