Listening Beyond Sound and Life: Reflections on Imagined Music

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Abstract

This chapter is an exploration of the embodied experience of “involuntary musical imagery” (a.k.a. “earworms”) and of the dynamics of the auditory imagination more broadly. It argues that imagined sounds regularly exhibit strange behaviors that audible vibrations cannot achieve and draws upon Husserl’s description of the living present and Sartre’s writing on intuition to construct a theory for why this might be the case. The second half of the chapter comprises a sustained attempt at a phenomenological description of a discrete experience of musical imagery. A brief epilogue muses on the similarities between imagined music and the memory of the dead, casting both as a kind of “haunting.” Throughout, the auditory imagination is presented as an ethnographic field site: a palimpsestic ecosystem of interconnection and difference within which the discrete experiences of individuals and groups matter.

Keywords: auditory imagination, earworm, memory, phenomenology, sound, perception, endosonus, exosonus, haunting, death

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In memoriam: Donald S. Daughtry

Part One: The Strange Behaviors of Imagined Sounds

1.

I hear sounds in my head.

They are not “sounds” really, or at least not fully. To say that they are “sounds” is to invest them with a kind of vibrational materiality that these imagined entities lack. Nor, I suppose, do I actually “hear” them—
at least not fully. To say that I “hear” them is either to say that I perceive them as audible events (this is the biological definition of hearing) or that I comprehend them (as in the English phrase, “I hear you,” i.e., I get you, I understand you, I am no longer seeking your meaning but have found it). Well, these are not vibrations in the air to be sensed, and I manifestly do not comprehend them. And they are not “in my head,” really—or at least not fully. To say that they are “in my head” is to imply that they are mine, that they are private entities experienced by me alone, that they exist independently of the public, intersubjective sounds that envelop me and everyone else within earshot. None of these is strictly true.

While intermittent streams of these mind-dependent entities are present throughout my day, the most prominent and striking among them exhibit qualities I associate with music. Sometimes I attempt to conjure these sounds on purpose, but most of the time they appear unbidden. I have to admit that sometimes these instances of imaginary “music” are so insistently present, with their manic loop and their saturating affect, that I feel like I am being haunted by them. I feel like I am being hacked, as if a piece of malware has breached the firewall of my brain and installed a bug that uses up all of my available RAM. I feel like I am being so forcefully interpellated into the world of these imagined sounds that I forget, momentarily, to think the thoughts that make me me. In their presence I sometimes cease to be me.

At other times, imagined (or remembered, or anticipated) sounds blend so seamlessly with my perception of the external world that they withdraw from my consciousness altogether. The soft snippets of vague melodies that ebb and flow throughout my day just at or beneath the threshold of my attention; the echoic replay of recent sonorous events; the “inner voice” of me thinking, or remembering, or silently rehearsing the question I want to ask as soon as the colloquium speaker finishes her lecture—these are less sounds that I hear than they are facets of me. They are recursive thought–eddies within the smooth flow of my inner world worldling, of me being—of me me-ing. ²

In light of the aforementioned, my opening sentence becomes very conditional:

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“I”
“hear”
“sounds”
“in my head.”
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What is the relation between the mind-independent sounds we encounter in the world and the mind-dependent “sounds” of imagination, anticipation, and memory? Are they a pair of linked opposites, as public is to private, or presence is to absence? Or are they two fraternal members of a single class of phenomena, whose vibrational and non-vibrational aspects are of secondary significance? Are sounds in the mind faint facsimiles of sound in the world, copied onto neural pathways in the auditory cortex? Or does the fact that they aren’t beholden to the laws of acoustics mean that imagined sounds are fundamentally stranger than vibrational sounds? Are these phenomena in a zero-sum bid for attention, where to focus on one causes the other to slip into the background? Or is their relation one of symbiosis, in which the perception of a vibrational sound both shapes and is shaped by its imagined doppelgänger? And what is the status of my imagined sounds vis-à-vis the multitude of human and nonhuman creatures who may also have mind-dependent auditory experiences? In other words, are imagined sounds idiosyncratic (i.e., unique to your individual experience), culturally conditioned (i.e., broadly shaped by communities), or universal (i.e., a uniform capacity of humans, or even of all hearing beings)? Put more directly: do the sounds I hear in my head resemble the sounds you hear in your head?

This essay proceeds from the understanding that the auditory imagination, rather than being a monolithic, abstract entity that we all tap into (like the Jungian collective unconscious) or a fundamentally private realm
of insular thoughts, is best cast as an ethnographic field site: a palimpsestic ecosystem of interconnection and difference within which the discrete experiences of individuals and groups matter. In a sense, it is the ethnographic field site par excellence, where the challenge that all anthropologists (and, in a less-theorized but no less important fashion, all people) face—the challenge of knowing the other—is distilled down to its essence. How to hear the imagined sounds of the other? The seeming impossibility of this task engenders a healthy sense of humility: it is clear that we will never achieve perfect knowledge here. But of course we never can, even when attempting to understand something more concrete and public, like cultural institutions, or musical praxes, or warfare. All we can do is what we always do: think, and query, and listen, and share, and revise, and repeat.

Based on my preliminary work on this subject, it appears that for some people the auditory imagination is a radically logocentric zone, a cloud of inner monologues and dialogues, of remembered and anticipated words. For others it is a relatively still space filled with long moments of rich silence; practitioners of meditation, for example, tend to work hard to still the jangly acoustic residue that seeps into consciousness from our often–cacophonous surroundings. For many musicians, by contrast, the auditory imagination is an engrossing and occasionally overwhelming swirl of rhythmic grooves and orchestral flourishes and low drones and muffled calliopes and uninged yodels and glissando gurglings—it is the raucous, often joyous experimental zone where musical listening, improvisation, and composition take place. At the same time, for many survivors of armed combat or sexual violence, the auditory imagination can become, without warning, a fraught environment of unwanted traumatic memories, of “sounds” that are inextricably bound to the violent acts that produced or accompanied them. Imagined sound is, in this scenario, deeply entangled with the experience of post–traumatic stress. Lastly, it is crucial to acknowledge that, for those whose epistemologies eschew a hard boundary between interiority and exteriority, between self and world, intracorporeal auditory experiences may be understood not as imaginations but as visitations, as social experiences of co–presence with a spectral human, animal, or spiritual interlocutor. To study imagined sound or imagined music, then, is to explore not a singular phenomenon but an essential plurality of flickering, fluctuating events. These events can be banal or profound, life–affirming or deadening. But whatever they are, and whatever ontology one attributes to them, they make up the unsounded underside of the iceberg of musical experience and, even more fundamentally, much of the material from which consciousness is built.

2.

A quick word on terminology:

Neuroscientific and psychological literature tend to refer to the sounds you hear in your head as “auditory imagery”; this interestingly oculocentric term is often divided into subcategories such as “verbal imagery” (sometimes called “inner speech”) and “musical imagery.” “Auditory hallucination” is the pathologized term for imagined sounds that one cannot distinguish from sounds out in the world. Some scholars (e.g., Ihde [1976] 2007) set up a contrast between “perceived sound” and “imagined sound.” Others employ the “mind–dependent” and “mind–independent” binary that I mentioned earlier. “Involuntary musical imagery” (acronymed “INMI”) is the scientific term for a song fragment that gets lodged in your consciousness, repeating itself independently of your desire. Regional idioms for this phenomenon abound, including the French musique entêtante (stubborn music) and Italian canzone tormentone (tormenting songs). The colloquial term “earworm” (borrowed from the German Ohrwurm) has become increasingly common in Anglophone academic literature.

One recent treatise by Mark Grimshaw and Tom Garner joins audible vibrations and the auditory imagination together into a “sonic aggregate”:
The sonic aggregate comprises two sets of components: the *exosonus*, a set of material and sensuous components; and the *endosonus*, a set of immaterial and nonsensuous components. The endosonus is a requirement for the perception of sound to emerge. The exosonus is not. (2015, 4)

The exosonus, in other words, corresponds to vibration, and the endosonus to auditory imagery. While these two categories may appear at first glance to be mutually exclusive, they regularly cross-pollinate in practice. When produced by humans, at least, the exosonus—the thoroughly public, vibrational dimension of sound—is almost always the product of imaginative labor of one kind or another. Perhaps if you accidentally drop a plate, the sound the plate makes is not dependent upon your prior acts of imagination, anticipation, or memory; but whenever you make a sound intentionally—whenever you speak, sing, clap, walk, or even yelp in surprise at the plate you dropped—you draw upon a vast store of embodied memories and creative praxes that inform these sonorous (and, it must be said, always—more—than—sonorous) actions. Moreover, at the moment the plate crashes to the floor, it also crashes into your intellective world, enriching your memory of past events and your anticipation of future plates. In this way, the exosonus constantly invades the realm of the endosonus, while the endosonus ingests and digests the exosonus at every turn. To take another example: any trumpet fanfare that you could possibly conjure in your mind at this moment would be at least semi-dependent upon your past experiences of real-world trumpets. Even if you were to attempt to imagine a radically new sound, one that has never existed before, your memory of real-world sounds would come into play, if only as the necessary foil or “other” against which your new sound is calibrated. All of this is to say that your imagination is not a pure, ethereal realm of immaterial chimeras, nor is the intersubjective world a realm devoid of your imaginative energies.

Take, for example, the activity known as “listening to music.” Common sense holds (and the majority of music scholarship implies) that this activity involves—it seems too obvious to state—attending to a succession of audible, material, vibrational (i.e., exosonic) “sounds” that are unfolding within earshot of the listener. (“What are you listening to?” you ask. “Music,” I respond, pointing my finger at the jazz band and not at my head.) But Grimshaw and Garner contend that these vibrations alone are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for “sound” or “music” to obtain. For them, the phenomenon known as “sound” refers not to these vibrations but to an “emergent perception” or “creative act within our mind” (2015, 3). In other words, vibrations only become “sound” when fused with the endosonus. By contrast, the endosonus in isolation is necessary and sufficient: according to their model, “imagined sound is sound.”

The implication here is that at the very moment when you think you are listening to music out in the world, the focal point of your consciousness is actually oscillating rapidly and unpredictably between the musical exosonus and the endosonic activities that it triggers in your mind. In other words, when you think you are listening out, you are actually listening in as well. (I have tried to illustrate this oscillation of attention below in Figure 1, the first of several hand-drawn, back-of-the-napkin diagrams that accompany this essay.) This imaginative engagement is the hidden *sine qua non* of anything we might reasonably call “musical” or “aesthetic” or “hermeneutic” experience: we hear as “music” (or as “beautiful” or “meaningful”) only that which triggers the creation of a parallel track of endosonic mimesis. (Of course, we need not be aware of this imaginative track in order for it to be a force within our lives.) This mixed environment is what phenomenologist Don Ihde ([1976] 2007) was referring to when he wrote about “that second modality of ongoing experience, the *imaginative mode*”:

With the introduction of a second modality of experience, in addition to what has been the predominantly perceptualist emphasis, listening becomes *polyphonic*. I hear not only the voices of the World, in some sense I “hear” myself or from myself. There is in polyphony a duet of voices in the doubled modalities of perceptual and imaginative modes. A new review of the field of possible auditory experience is called for in which attention would be focused on the copresence of the imaginative. (117, author’s emphasis)
Taking these propositions seriously means asserting the ubiquitous, active presence of the imagination, and of the endosonic in particular, within the terms “music” and “listening.” It means understanding musical listening as a bicameral, “polyphonic” activity that always involves the creation of a parallel endosonic track to provide a subconscious or quasi-conscious point of calibration for the exosonic event, if indeed such an event is present. To study music under these circumstances requires a lexicon like Grimshaw and Garner’s, which acknowledges the fundamental entanglement of imagination and perception (i.e., in the “sonic aggregate”) and the self-sufficiency of the endosonic as a mode of musical experience (i.e., “imagined sound is sound”). (Figure 2 presents these interrelationships in arithmetical terms.)

**Figure 1:**

![Graph showing oscillation of attention between exosonus and endosonus]

Oscillation of attention between exosonus and endosonus

**Figure 2:**

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\text{exosonus} + \text{endosonus} = \text{“sonic aggregate”} = \text{“sound”}
\]

\[
\text{sonic aggregate} - \text{exosonus} = \text{“sound”}
\]

\[
\text{sonic aggregate} - \text{endosonus} < \text{“sound”}
\]

Conditions for “sound” to obtain, according to Grimshaw and Garner

The other term of consequence for me here—phenomenology—is discussed in great detail in the introduction to this volume. I should probably mention here that I do not consider myself a phenomenologist, nor would I be inclined to present my work, here or elsewhere, as being phenomenology in the strictest, most rigorous sense of the word. At the same time, like the other authors in this volume, I have been moved and inspired by a broad array of phenomenological writing. Much of this writing, as I understand it, projects a playful, open, exploratory attitude toward the world, which I find attractive; it reminds me of the kind of pansensorial, let’s-see-what-this-tastes-like inquisitiveness that my children had when they were young and that many of the artists I admire seem to have maintained well into adulthood. In particular, I like the spirit behind Edmund Husserl’s ([1913] 1962) “phenomenological reduction,” in which he asks you to bracket out all that you think you know about the thing in question (be that thing a physical object, a musical performance, a metaphysical framework, or whatever). In the relative quiet that results from placing all of your presuppositions toward this thing, or “phenomenon,” out of play, he then asks you to approach the phenomenon anew, meticulously describe the way it unfolds before you, track the often subtle ways it changes you and you change it as you encounter one another, and try to discern the underlying structures shaping this encounter. One scholar recently wrote that the purpose of
this exercise in radical description is to “sustain the awakening force of astonishment” toward the phenomenon in question and toward the world more broadly.\textsuperscript{13} If you ask me, that’s not a bad way to do scholarship, engage with art, live life.

Of course, the sense of radical openness that the phenomenological attitude engenders is not absolute. Maurice Merleau–Ponty (1945 [2012, lxvii]) reminds us that the phenomenological reduction, valuable though it is, is always doomed to failure. In his words, “the most important lesson the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.” You can never forget all that you know; you can never create a pure state of tabula rasa. And yet, the Sisyphean struggle to actively explore, rather than presuppose, the nature of the phenomena that surround us can end up defamiliarizing the world in a way that allows astonishment to flood in—and with it, hopefully, a small measure of new understanding. In the second half of this essay I attempt a phenomenological description of a single endosonic experience in the hope that it will foster a sense of astonishment in you, reader, at the strange, Möbius–like curlings of your own auditory imagination. As an objective account of reality, my description is ultimately a failure, as you will soon see. But just as a fallen tree provides an ideal environment for a multitude of small creatures in the forest ecosystem, so too, I hope, will this quixotic attempt to describe a few fleeting scraps of auditory imagery serve as fecund ground for your own reflections.\textsuperscript{14} This, as I see it, is how phenomenology articulates with ethnography: phenomenological investigation doesn’t reveal atemporal, universal “structures of experience” so much as it provides a seed bed for asking grounded, ethnographic questions about the possible contours and variability of such structures. At the same time, the phenomenological project does suggest that there is some broadly shared experiential ground beneath the cultural variability that continues to be the primary object of fascination for ethnographers. When combined, then, phenomenological and ethnographic approaches form a robust system, one that can help us avoid the reductive pictures of the world that each may produce in isolation. The essays in this volume, along with a number of influential predecessors (e.g., Stone 1982 [2010]; Rice 1994; Friedson 1996; Berger 1999) demonstrate the power of this fusion.

3.

Now, a quick word on intellectual history:

Western philosophical interest in the imagination dates back at least to Aristotle, who distinguished it from both perception and mind, and thought of it as primarily imagistic.\textsuperscript{15} In the twentieth century, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau–Ponty, Casey, and others undertook phenomenological investigations of the imagination, although imagined sound was not the central concern for any of them.\textsuperscript{16} Ihde’s vivid account ([1976] 2007)) of the auditory imagination focuses largely on “inner speech”: the more–or–less constant state of being a person immersed in language.\textsuperscript{17} Lydia Goehr (1992), Nicholas Cook (1990), and Harris Berger (1999) have undertaken detailed studies of the musical imagination within the context of classically trained composers (Goehr), performers (Cook), and popular music (Berger); and two generations of feminist musicologists, from Suzanne Cusick (1994) to Elisabeth Le Guin (2005) to Jenny Olivia Johnson (2015), have explored the nexus of listening, imagination, and embodied experience. Eldritch Priest (2018) and Fred Maus (2018) have published provocative essays on the auditory imagination that draw new insights from continental philosophy (Priest) and psychoanalysis (Maus). The recent publication of the Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination (Grimshaw–Aagaard, Walther–Hansen, and Knakkergaard 2019), comprising seventy essays spread over two volumes, attests to the emergence of auditory imagery as a robust area of study.\textsuperscript{18} This work notwithstanding, the “massive lack of philosophical attention to the phenomena of auditory imagination” that Ihde (134) first began to discuss in 1976 remains a problem at present, especially when compared to the rapidly growing body of empirical scholarship on imagined sound coming from the fields of experimental psychology and neuroscience.\textsuperscript{19} At a moment when the neuroscientific understanding of auditory imagery is growing ever more detailed, it is up to scholars in the
humanities, and in music studies specifically, to deepen our understanding of the ontological complexity, affective intensity, epistemological variability, and social permeability of the auditory imagination.

Before the subject of “purely” endosonic (i.e., “imagined,” “remembered,” “mind-dependent”) music can be broached, we first need to reflect on the experience of listening to music within the regime of the sonic aggregate. As I mentioned earlier, it is a fundamental tenet of phenomenology that our experience of the world can only take place through a fusion of perception and imagination. Consider Husserl’s classic discussions of “the living present,” which he wrote between 1893 and 1917 ([1966] 1991, 21–75).20 (NB: Matthew Rahaim [2021] analyzes Husserl’s text in great depth elsewhere in this handbook.) Husserl observed that, in addition to the temporality of an event (e.g., the time it takes to perform a melody) or object (e.g., the relative stability of a piano between its formation and disintegration), consciousness itself has a temporality. In other words, we experience the world, its events and objects, not in a succession of “knife-edged moment[s]” (Kelly n.d.) or atemporal quanta, but rather within a living present that extends, dynamically and elastically, beyond any particular atomized now. To illustrate this principle, imagine you are listening to a recording of Judy Garland singing Harold Arlen’s immortal song “Over the Rainbow” from The Wizard of Oz. Do you really perceive the first melodic gesture (“Some–where, o-ver the rain–bow...”) as a series of discrete notes? If so, this would mean that each time Garland finished singing a note, it would be instantly removed from your active experience. It would mean that, at the moment the “-bow” of “rainbow” is sounding, “some-” and “-where” and “o-” and “-ver” and “the” and “rain-” are fully absent, and so would need to be actively recalled, in their proper order, to make sense of the melodic gesture as a gesture and the phrase “somewhere over the rainbow” as intelligible language. Moreover, since each of her sung notes is extended in time, you would have to reassemble each note out of a long chain of atomized memories (e.g., not the sung syllable “-bow” in its totality but something more like “b.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.w”). If you didn’t undertake this complex feat of memory, you wouldn’t be able to perceive this song as a song at all—you could only experience a long string of unrelated vocal sounds.

Clearly, this is not how the human experience of the world works. Rather, your consciousness involuntarily holds on to a bit of an ongoing event that has just occurred and projects a sense of the immediate future of that ongoing event, without differentiating these phenomena from the present moment at hand. Husserl called the auras of the near past of an ongoing event “retention” and likened it to a comet’s tail. (Retention is the faint “-where” and even fainter “some-” that you hold in your experience while Garland is technically singing the “o-” of “over.”)21 Contrast this with the involuntary projection of the near future (the fainter presence of “-bow” while Garland is singing “rain-”) that he called “protention.” This front edge of experience is necessarily more mercurial than the tapering tail of retention, as it involves a horizon of possibility that is by its nature plural. Protention takes on a more stable and elongated character, however, if you are experiencing something familiar or predictable, and thus can draw on specific memories and/or patterns that project you just beyond the emergent edge of the phenomenon.22 In any event, the retention and protention of sounds are not active feats of skill so much as they are structural aspects of your encounter with a world in time. Both of these emergent entities take place within your mind, and yet you generally perceive them not as internal, imagined phenomena but as hazy presences out in the world.23 According to Husserl, these three elements—retention, protention, and the enigmatic “primal imprint” of the unfolding perceptual now that is nestled between them—form the thick living present of a smoothly flowing consciousness. Consciousness, it follows, is always a conglomeration of retained, protended, and actively perceived material elements, an “experiential aggregate,” if you will.24 (See Figure 3.)
While Husserl intended for this temporal model to apply to all conscious experience, it seems particularly suited to musical experience. The structuring elements—repeating refrains, cyclical progressions, stable orchestrations, timbral envelopes, etc.—that are ubiquitous throughout most of the world’s musical traditions allow listeners’ retentions and protentions to stretch out luxuriantly; continued engagement with a particular tradition stretches them further. If I’m listening to a blues sung by Bessie Smith, say, my elastic musical “now” reaches out to encompass the entire twelve bars of the blues form that is familiar to me. I feel our (Smith and my conjoined) elastic position within that form, regardless of where the performance is at any given moment. I am not willfully anticipating the arrival of an absent subdominant chord sometime in the future so much as I am experiencing the protended subdominant chord that has not yet been struck into vibration, but that is already structurally (endosonically, phenomenologically) present. Smith sings “I hate to see / the evening sun go down,” and Louis Armstrong’s cornet responds to her plaintive call. But while he is doing so, he and Smith and their many listeners over the past 100 years and I, with overlapping consciousnesses that have been shaped by our individual histories with the blues, are already experiencing the repetition of her line over the future subdominant, whose gravitational, protentional pull we can actively feel. I urge you to stop your reading here and look up a recording of Bessie Smith’s “St. Louis Blues.” Listen to it once or twice, and then listen again, pausing the recording on the fourth beat of the fourth bar, as Armstrong’s instrumental response to Smith’s line “I hate to see/the evening sun go down” is concluding. As soon as you hit pause, direct your attention inwards. What do you notice? Do you find yourself awash in non-vibrational “sounds” and harmonic structures? Can you feel the ghostlike presence of the protended subdominant whose primal imprint lies one beat away in the future? If so, you have uncovered the ever-present endosonus, the silent mimetic byproduct of your listening, to which you have been, unbeknownst to yourself, sporadically attending all the while.

Perhaps this delicious sensation of a radically elongated living present is one of the many reasons that music has remained so powerful throughout the world and throughout history, and why so much music across cultures remains tied to cyclic forms like repeating harmonic progressions and verse–chorus structures. Such structures create an expansive, “audiotopic” (Kun 2005) environment that gives free range to the living present. The invigorating environments of free jazz, atonal art music, and many other forms of musical experimentalism, by contrast, draw upon the energy of surprise: here is music whose complex, cloaked structures refuse to allow your consciousness to stretch very far at all; this music calls out for listeners who enjoy the intensity of a living present that is compressed and therefore unpredictable—unprotendable. (Figure 4 is an attempt to visualize the difference between the elongated living present of predictable music [top] and the compressed living present of unpredictable music [bottom].) However, even at their most compact and contracted, the endosonic components of musical listening—the retained and protended sounds you unconsciously supply to the listening act—envelop, situate, and cathet the exosonus. This thick living present of retention, protention, and the primal imprint is the milieu within which music becomes meaningful.
4.

Whenever you are listening to music out in the world, you are experiencing a sonic aggregate in which your endosonic retentions and protentions are tethered to the exosonic vibrations of the primal imprint. Your consciousness of the living present is, in other words, yoked to the musical notes that are reverberating out in the world; it is moving unilinearly through time at the pace dictated by those unfolding tones. But what happens when you experience music in the absence of the exosonus? What happens when the “music” that you are “listening to” is not “out in the world” but “in your head”? How does this fully endosonic, imagined music behave?

If you are able, go to a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed and imagine a melody right now. Try to imagine a particular recording of a piece you know well. Make sure you don’t tap your foot or bob your head along to whatever beat or rhythm may be there, as this would provide an exosonic, kinesthetic anchor to your imagining. Now, with the piece present in your mind, focus intently on the unfolding melody. Are you paying close attention to it? Now focus in even harder—try to really hear each musical gesture in all its timbral and harmonic richness. Do you notice anything strange? Whenever I attempt this exercise, the harder I concentrate, the more the endosonus undergoes a kind of temporal distortion; the melody begins to stall and loop and skip around, and multiple versions seem to appear and disappear without warning. My suspicion is that this strange looping and pausing and layering is the result of my inability to distinguish (1) an imagined melody that I am experiencing (i.e., the imagined correlate to the primal imprint) from my (2) retention and (3) protention of that imagined experience. In the absence of an audible vibration unfolding unilinearly through time, all three of these entities are made of the same material: the fungible, mind-dependent synaptic firings of memory—imagination—anticipation. Lacking an exosonic anchor, they provide no firm calibration point for my attention. In this situation, retention, protention, and the imagined imprint all serve as a plausible surrogates for one another—and so they begin to slide in and out of place, pile atop one another, circle back, and skip ahead. (Figures 5a, 5b, and 5c depict this situation. The imagined imprint [a] becomes indistinguishable from its retention and protention [b], thus creating a kind of phenomenological shell game [c] that is experienced as a looped melody.)
Figures 5:

(a) Retention, imagined imprint, and protention of imagined music
(b) All three elements are made of the same substance: the endosonus
(c) Fungibility of retention, imagined imprint, and protention

It is not just their temporal aspect that is strange. Attend to your endosonic melody once again, and ask yourself: where do these sounds appear to be coming from? Can you point to the location in space from which they appear to emanate? Are they in mono or stereo? Can you make the sounds appear as though they are coming from a point near your left ear? Or from ten feet above your head? Or as though they are echoing throughout a Gothic cathedral, or sounding dully in an anechoic chamber? And how “loud” are these sounds, really? Can you turn up the volume on them? Can you do so to the point that they drown out the ambient sounds that surround you? And are you sure that they are in the same key as the original? Can you shift them down a half-step? If so, are you sure that this new key isn’t the key of the original recording? Now, consider the timbre of the imagined tune playing in your head. Is it really the same as that of the aggregate version with which you’re familiar? Are you sure? Do you have the orchestration, such as it exists, accurately represented at all points? Over the past few years I have asked many people questions like this, and their answers reveal a wildly variegated terrain of capacities for imagining music.

The kind of intent endosonic listening that I just asked you to do is, of course, a profoundly unnatural exercise. I don’t know about you, but normally I just enjoy—or perhaps more commonly endure—the presence of the music that pops into my head. If you encountered me humming under my breath and asked
me what I was doing, I wouldn’t pause, listen inward, and attempt to describe the intricacies of the experience I was having; I would say, simply, “I have Adele’s ‘Rolling in the Deep’ stuck in my head.” And at the moment I said this, I would believe it to be true. This isn’t surprising; there is certainly something that is presenting itself to my consciousness, and that something shares enough of the attributes of “Rolling in the Deep” to allow me to identify it. But if I were to listen intently to it, to ask myself how these imaginary sounds are actually behaving, I would be unable to ignore the improvisatory wildness, structural weirdness, and radical contingency that characterize this ontologically slippery “Adele.”

These slippery attributes pose a challenge to the phenomenological method, as it appears that the phenomenological attitude itself magnifies and multiplies the strange behaviors of the endosonus. Consider what Arlette Elkaïm–Sartre, in explaining Jean–Paul Sartre’s approach to phenomenology, had to say about studying the imagination:

[T]he mental image is almost inaccessible to [phenomenological] reflection; as long as ‘I have an image’, I can say nothing of it without it vanishing, since the intentionality becomes different; when it is not there I cannot give a detailed account of it; in addition, when I evoke an image, for example, of an absent friend or the tune of a song, I am guided by no present sensory impression—visual, auditory, or otherwise. This is why, for some psychologists, the mental image does not exist.

(Elkaïm–Sartre 2010, x, my emphasis)

Sartre draws a distinction between “unreflective consciousness” (i.e., the general state of being absorbed in one’s activities) and “reflective consciousness,” or consciousness of consciousness. These terms help to clarify the paradoxical challenge faced by anyone attempting a phenomenological investigation of imagined sound: namely, the endosonus is a product of unreflective consciousness, but to describe its behavior requires an act of reflective consciousness. How can one reflect on an unreflective process without transforming or even annihilating it? Sartre calls such an activity an “impure reflection” and marks it as a futile enterprise, an instance of “bad faith.” By this, he means that this kind of reflection necessarily transforms the previously unreflected—upon activity (here, the endosonus) into a “psychic object,” a self-contradictory abstraction that, to the extent that it exists at all, operates according to a different mode of being than the original activity did. (Sartre contrasts this with “pure reflection,” an attentiveness to one’s present state of mind that does not objectify it.) In his account, an emotion like “hatred” is a psychic object that is created through impure reflection upon the flux of one’s own unreflective urges and repulsions. Like any virtual entity, once constituted, it appears to take on an agency of its own: now it’s your abstract “hatred” of vermin, rather than the dynamics of a particular encounter, that causes you to squash the cockroach in the hallway. Similarly, my impure reflection on an evanescent experience of endosonic music constituted the psychic object called “earworm,” which I then treated as if it were a faithful facsimile of Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep.”

Phenomenologist Edward Casey concurs with Sartre’s characterization of this conundrum, arguing that “imagination is easy enough to enact or experience, but it is extremely difficult to capture in midair for purposes of scrutiny and examination” (2000a, 4). In a similar vein, Ihde has observed that “it is of the very essence of the imaginative noema to be easily changable and variable. For no sooner do I ‘think of it’ than it is ‘there.’ Its dissolubility, its rapidity of transformation, its vivid but ‘evanescent’ presences make it difficult to ‘fix’ what is imagined” (2007, 122). If the phenomenological project is precisely this, to “fix,” through exhaustive description, the “noema” (i.e., the object—as–experienced), we may be sending ourselves down a rabbit hole with no discernable bottom. (This abyss is part of what Sartre was gesturing at with his discussion of “the illusion of immanence,” the untenable notion that the imagination is made up of stable objects that we can observe.) 10 Under the intensity of the phenomenological attitude, the gossamer gestures of the endosonus writhe, multiply, withdraw, evaporate. If we are to engage with them, then, we
need a sneaky, oblique phenomenology, one that won’t disintegrate them with the directness of its gaze. We need a phenomenology of peripheral glances and eavesdropping, a poetic or speculative phenomenology that seeks less to describe a stable phenomenon than to evoke an evanescent one.

Katharine Galloway Young finds the possibility of just such a phenomenology in Sartre’s concept of “intuition.” “Despite these philosophical tangles,” she writes, “there are in [Sartre’s work] hints of a solution to the problem of catching a glimpse of my own consciousness.” She continues:

It is the moment reflection gets dirty but not yet impure or the moment impure reflection purges itself of its viscosity before it achieves the status of pure reflection. Just before impure reflection freezes my thoughts into objects, I get what Sartre calls an intuition of impure reflection (Sartre 1943 [1964]:136). I have not yet made my own psychic processes objects, but they are getting viscous; I have not settled into thinking and my consciousness is still, as [Iris] Murdoch puts it, flickering (1980:42, 43, 66). Here, as I move from [unreflective consciousness] ... to impure reflection, I might catch myself, in both the sense of getting an inkling of what I am like when I am not paying attention to myself and of stopping myself short of plunging from unreflective consciousness into either pure or impure reflection. At that moment, I am, however ephemeral, possessed by a sense of my own meaning as presence. (2011, 78)

Assuming, with Sartre and Young, that a brief, flickering “intuition” of the endosonous is possible, what would it reveal? More than anything, I think it would reveal that endosonic music is surreal—in the strict etymological sense of being above or beyond or unbeholden to perceptual reality, but also in the more historicized aesthetic sense that comes from the early twentieth-century artistic movement of the same name. This is an obvious point of reference for thinking about the endosonous, as the surrealist project that began in 1920s France was dedicated to uncovering the dynamics of “an absolute or ‘super’ reality” that blended rational thought and perception with “instinctual, subconscious, and dream experience.” Andre Breton’s description, in the 1924, Manifesto of Surrealism, of the struggle to explore the mysterious realm that lay beyond rationalism and empirical reality will remind you of the scholars of the imagination I quoted above. “It requires,” he wrote, “a great deal of fortitude to try to set up one’s abode in these distant regions [of the imagination] where everything seems at first to be so awkward and difficult, all the more so if one wants to try to take someone there. Besides, one is never sure of really being there” ([1924] 2010, my emphasis). If one is never sure of really being in the realm of pure reflection, then an exhaustive description of the auditory imagination is not an option. One can only evoke, as the surrealists did, the hazy presence of strange entities and events that are both embedded in and not fully accessible to consciousness. Like a surrealist composition—or like many sacred performance practices around the world, or like much of the academic writing in the so-called “speculative turn,” the list of fellow travelers goes on and on—our investigation of the auditory imagination must be attuned to uncertainty, amorphousness, opacity, and irrationality. For these are the salient attributes of an aggregate, intercorporeal world where internal and external realities are always already topographically conjoined and always already in a state of flux and overflow. A description of the endosonous must be, for lack of a better word, paradoxophilic: comfortable with the contradictory nature of the “sounds” “we” “hear” “in our heads,” and with the imperfection of our methods for examining and describing them.

My own imperfect, paradoxophilic method takes inspiration from the surrealist writing practice that was initiated in 1919 by Breton and his collaborator Philippe Soupault. That spring, the two young men, still reeling from their experiences as soldiers in the First World War, initiated an experiment in unselfconscious writing. Their goal was to break away from the rationalist discourse and mainstream morality that had led the world to war and a host of other “trials and tribulations” and instead create a “new morality” that drew upon the creative, irrational energies of the unconscious. Every day for a week they sat down and wrote as fast as possible, without ever pausing to revise or edit. The result was Les Champs Magnétiques (The
magnetic fields) (1920 [20]), the first major work of what came to be called “automatic writing.” In a similar vein, over the past several years, I have held dozens of half-hour sessions in which I sit in a quiet room, eyes closed, fingers on the computer keyboard, typing shorthand descriptions of the sounds I hear in my head. Initially, the act of writing severely disrupted my ability to “eavesdrop” on the sounds in my head; with time, however, the process became more fluid and less invasive. Like Breton and Soupault, I strove to detach myself from my inner censor, just letting the words flow without ever pausing to think about them. However, unlike them, my automatic writing experiments were designed not to unearth some kind of Freudian or collective unconscious but rather to capture an intuitive snippet of the “unreflective consciousness” that Sartre described in his writings. In another departure from the surrealists, I allowed myself to return to my “automatic” shorthand scribblings, flesh them out, and revise them extensively. The result is a careful elaboration of a kind of evanescent endosonic experience that lies at or just beyond the threshold of conscious reflection.

5.

I am of course far from the first person to attempt a description such as this. Ihde’s work from the 1970s is replete with accounts of the auditory imagination. In his 1990 monograph Music, Imagination, and Culture, to take another well-known example, musicologist Nicholas Cook undertook a fine-grained description of a snippet of music he was imagining. I quote him at length to give you a sense of the depth of his insights:

I am reading a novel when I realize that for some time I have been ‘hearing’ a passage from Allegri’s Miserere.... But this ‘hearing’ is very different from what it would be like to hear the music in real life, for instance if someone suddenly switched on a radio in the next room. In particular its temporal aspect is different, for there is a kind of static quality in the image that is quite alien to the world of real, audible music. The music does not seem to progress from bar to bar in strict tempo: rather, it is focused on a single point in time, namely the high note sung by the boy soprano just before the melody falls to its melismatic cadence.... [I]t is hard to describe this experience adequately in terms of our ordinary, perceptually oriented vocabulary for music. It is not as if the phrase were repeating itself over and over again like a record player with a stuck needle, or as if the boy’s high note were being sustained indefinitely like the sound of an organ with a jammed key: for though my image of the music is centred upon that note, I grasp it as being already imbued with the melodic descent that follows it in the score. That is to say, the temporal evolution of the phrase as a whole forms an essential part of my imaginative experience of the boy’s high note, even though the experience itself does not seem to change from one moment to the next, or at least not in the same manner as the real, audible music does. (86–87, my emphasis)

Cook’s description highlights some of the ontological differences between the endosonic and exosonic, differences more profound than the obvious one that one can be heard by other people and the other cannot. The “static quality” of some imagined sounds, the insistent presence of melodic gestures that have not yet properly occurred—a phenomenon we may call, following Stefan Helmreich (2015), preverberation—and the general aura of strangeness that he struggles to evoke are, I would argue, the inevitable result of a situation where protention, retention, and the imagined primal imprint all serve as surrogates for one another.

Cook presents imagined sound as having a set of affordances that overlap with but exceed those of sound in the physical world; he follows Sartre’s contention that the “illusion of immanence” masks their differences, creating a false picture of fidelity between them. While it is possible to imagine the German tenor Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing in a naturalistic manner—moving from one note to the next, unilinearly through time—“it is equally possible (and perhaps more natural) to imagine simply Fischer-Dieskau’s singing.... The image is at least in part a generic one” (90). You may think you are listening to a particular piece of “luxuriant orchestral” music with “graceful harmonies” that are being faithfully replicated by your
imagination. But you are likely, Cook asserts, to be not “listening” at all but rather imagining the qualities of “harmonic gracefulness and orchestral luxuriance” that the original piece of music contained (92). To imagine sounds, in other words, may remove some of their fine-grained specificity, but it also may allow you to grasp them all at once, freed from the constraints of audible vibrations, which must unfold in time and space. (Figure 6 is an attempt to evoke the breadth of imagined sound’s surreal affordances.)

**Figure 6:**

![](image)

Strange behavior of imagined music

Offering a more critical take on the endosonic dimension of contemporary life, media theorist Eldritch Priest has recently written about the involuntary, “sticky” presence of earworms, characterizing them as a kind of “parasite” feeding off our minds. He argues that the energy that drives this kind of parasitic imagined sound is linked to commerce, and specifically to:

contemporary capitalism’s aim to draw value from involuntary nervous activities.... From this perspective, earworms [are] ... signs of a fatalistic tendency intrinsic to contemporary capitalism’s nonstop expropriation of attention driven by “the imposition of a machinic model of duration and efficiency onto the human body” (Crary, 2013:3). This is to say that there is something strangely intelligent or logical about the appearance of earworms, and the correlative disappearance of musical sounds in them, that is proper to the accelerated functioning of capitalism.

(Priest 2018, 142)

According to this logic, advertising jingles, popular music in stores and on radios, film soundtracks, Mozart for babies, TV theme songs, Kenny G tracks played at the end of the Chinese workday, the most recent song you heard leaking through a pair of earbuds on the bus—these things are nothing less than the acoustic manifestation of global capitalism, and as such they are powerful colonizers of the auditory imagination. When we reproduce these commoditized sounds in our heads, we are thrust into a form of unwitting endosonic servitude. In this scenario, the earworm virally transports music throughout the global system, increasing the odds of a future purchase or stream, and also increasing the odds that the ideology or product with which a piece of music is entangled will be ingested and digested and recursively reproduced by the unwitting host.
Priest contends that, aside from generating this crude kind of value, earworms are strangely pointless:

Unlike daydreams, whose affair with counterfactuals and anticipated futures makes its streamy content rife with narrative coordinates and trajectories that can be continually exchanged for possibilities and alternatives, earworms just twist and turn. The earworm’s loopy performance, in which its ending is at the same time its beginning, cannot be exchanged for anything but itself.

[Earworms realize the entertainment apparatus’s desire for sensation that ‘passes without obstacles.’ (156–157, my emphasis)]

I wish Priest were wrong about the capitalist underpinning of the contemporary earworm, but I fear he is right. I know there are massive forces that have infiltrated the seemingly private realm of my imagination, and I imagine the same is true with yours. It is disquieting, in every sense of this term, to realize that your brain is unconsciously participating in a kind of silent labor that profits strangers at a distance. However, it would be a mistake to reduce the auditory imagination—or even the earworm, its most reprehensible inhabitant—to a simple, homogenous extension of the operations of capital. Earworms may be performing a kind of distributional labor by reproducing the obsessively looped soundtrack of neoliberalism and globalization, but this is not the only labor they are capable of performing. While they may appear to be the flat and mindless replication of commoditized sounds, earworms carry the potential to produce cathexis, solace, memory, communion, and other valuable forms of worlding. In what follows, I offer a detailed description of a single, exceedingly small endosonic incident that I experienced in the spring of 2018. In it, the earworm reveals itself to be more surreal and social and generous than you might expect. Here, reconstructed from my contemporaneous automatic sketches, is my story:

**Part Two: A Half-Remembered Hymn**

I’ve got a song stuck in my head.

I can’t remember its name, but it—or, rather, an enigmatic fragment of it—is here, inside me, insistently banging away. This is precisely the kind of mind-dependent object that the term “earworm” refers to: it is involuntary, partial, looped, unbanishable. If you asked me right now, however, I wouldn’t call it an earworm. I would be compelled to call my private musical experience a “haunting,” as that term foregrounds the uncannily fluid, ectoplasmic manner in which this specter of a song glided into my consciousness and the vaporous way it crowds in on me from all sides while simultaneously eluding the grip of my attention. However, if “haunting” is phenomenologically apt, the connotation of horror that accompanies it is all wrong: this song is a friendly ghost.34

While I can’t recall its title, I can confidently say that the song in question is a hymn. I can tell because I recognize its hymn-like characteristics but also because I recognize the way it makes me feel. What does it mean, to feel? Here, at this moment, it means that, at the same time that I am aware of the presence of the fragment that haunts me, I am also aware of a vague pulling sensation, of a force pulling my attention toward an as-yet-undisclosed store of memories. I am not, to be clear, experiencing the memories themselves; they remain tantalizingly out of reach, in the future. But their affective agency, the humming energy of their potential, is present, like the radiated warmth of a sunbeam that lies around the next bend in a dark woodland path. Just as a lightening of the spaces between the leaves and a certain change in the damp coolness of the air presage the moment when you turn the corner and step into the full brightness and warmth of the sun, so do these small patches of affective intensity presage what it would be like to be immersed in the memory that lies in wait for me. This sensation of being pulled in the direction of an as-yet-unrecognized memory is somehow key to the churchlike cadence of the fragment, the particular voicing of its chordal movement, and the knowledge that a plagal “Amen” is sure to follow. Increasing my
attention to this unfolding moment, in which I find myself suspended somehow between a present and future cadence, intensifies the sensation of being pulled, of being coaxed or urged into a state of being different than this one. Nonetheless, the destination that is the memory of my own history with this hymn remains just out of reach. I am quiveringly adjacent to it. This, here and now, is what it means to feel.35

The fragment of the hymn that I hear in my head is instrumental, without words. It is cycling, never quite reaching the beginning of itself, failing to produce a conclusive end. The bulk of my attention is drawn to the fragment’s “sound,” but a portion of it is captured by a hazy, somewhat abstracted visual image of the keyboard that might plausibly be producing it (if the fragment and keyboard were real and not imagined). This image is accompanied by a subtle awareness of pressure on my fingertips, as if my fingers are currently playing this piece—though they aren’t, and they couldn’t even if I had a real keyboard in front of me, as I haven’t yet quite figured out how this tune inside me goes. As I attend to the image of the keyboard, it appears to morph uneasily between a spinet (a low-slung upright piano) and a small organ. Its sound at this moment is that of both and neither; it is palpably present but weirdly indeterminate, like a lava-lamp, or a wet lump of clay being shaped and reshaped on a potter’s wheel. This spectral keyboard, whatever it is, is dreamily, gauzily producing a very familiar kind of four-part harmony, the kind that dates back to the Bach chorale, the kind that was ubiquitous in mainstream American Protestant churches in the homely, pre-megachurch 1970s. This last fact is unsurprising, because I’m sure I last heard this hymn when I was a boy, growing up the son of a Congregationalist pastor in that decade.

So yes, the hymn fragment is here, right now, inside me—but hazily so. The notes don’t have a hard attack; it’s as if they’re swathed in cotton. They don’t have the crispness or heft of vibrational sounds in the intersubjective world. That world, the world of sound and smell and sight and touch, is also present, of course; it attempts to pull me away from my introspection and into an engagement with it. I can see through squinted eyes my shorthand transcript of this experience haltingly marching across the screen of my laptop: my upper back and buttocks are pressing into a creaky wooden chair, the smell of spring vegetation and residual chimney smoke is in the air, and I can hear birds singing and a chorus of frogs croaking outside the window of the cabin I’m in. This expansive, empirical world vies for my attention but, at the moment, the secret inner performance is winning. I think of the spinet again, and independent of my desire the sound transforms into something closer to a piano’s. Envisioning a pipe organ pulls the hymn into that instrument’s lushier sound world, partially silencing the piano that preceded it. But soon the tune returns to its original, more neutral timbre, closer to the sound of the small, unremarkable organ in my dad’s church four decades ago. But it’s not fully that—it’s not fully anything, really. It is the enigmatic timbre of an imagined sound, a sound that is experientially present and ontologically withdrawn.36

The hymn’s strange, lava-like timbral shapeshifting is accompanied by an equally amorphous and unpredictable combination of temporal flows and stoppages. I can feel the hymn cadence, which means it is in motion, but at the same time it appears to be standing still, in a way that vibrational sound in the world cannot. The still version of the hymn, or rather of the fragment I possess, presents itself as an object, a fuzzy invisible structure—a sculpture, even: it is all there at once. How can this be? How can sound stand still? And how can a single piece of imagined music have one aspect or iteration that appears to move while another aspect or iteration remains in stasis? Things get stranger: when I give up my (naturalistic) search for the tune’s identity and resume my (phenomenological) examination of “the thing itself” (Husserl), I notice an inverse relation between the intensity of my focus and the fragment’s ability to move forward through time. When I attend closely to the fragment’s ever-unfolding “now,” it begins to retard, slowing down while maintaining its pitch. I increase my attention, and the three-note phrase I’m listening to slows further, and then begins a slippery, skipping motion, jumping back a few notes, slowly moving forward, holding in place, resuming its natural tempo, only to jump back again—without ever fully erasing its former position when it does so. It is as if the fragment is multiplying, efflorescing, calving off multiple versions of itself in response to the heat of my attention. But—and this is key—these different iterations are not
clashing with each other, not creating a chaotic polyphony of static and moving lines. Their co-presence is conceptual, not acoustic. Regardless of their behavior—stalled or sluggish, stuttering or fluid—they are all equal contenders for my attention. There is no obvious foreground or center to this multitude. All of these imaginary sounds are equally peripheral, equally remote, equally Other.

Returning to the quest for identity, the hymn’s title is, as they say, on the tip of my tongue. As I frown and try harder to remember a single line of the text, I find myself in the presence of what appears to be human vocal timbre. My instrumental fragment just got choral: a group of invisible men and women are singing the hymn, but without the words. That’s not exactly right: their singing has the generic qualities of words, but lacks the specific sounds of actual phonemes. It’s as if they’re singing the words but at a great distance. I can’t quite make them out. This in itself is strange, as it also appears to me that these voices, if one can call them that, are nearby, close to my ear—no, inside my ears, inside my head, as if the choir is exciting my tympanic membranes from within. But not in the normal sense of “inside” or “within”—not in the sense that a headache is confined inside my head. Weirdly, when I attempt to locate the voices in space, it feels as if the sound is emanating from a single point inside my head that is roughly three feet to the right of my left ear, and an equal distance to the left of my right. Given that my head isn’t six feet across, this point appears to exist in a strange, non-Euclidean space. This is a hard thing for me to wrap my mind around, but that is precisely where the voices appear to be located: inside a six-foot space that is inside my head, a surreal enclosure which, as I project my attention into it, expands to the size of a room, or, it occurs to me, of a small church.

With an unexpected flash of intuition, I realize that I know how this tune got here! Just before it appeared, I was remembering a talk I gave in London last month. The talk was on music and the Anthropocene, and it discussed the possibility of a world after humans, a world after music. After my lecture, one of the audience members—I believe it was Roger Parker—and I were talking about the music on the deck of the Titanic, about how important the choice of music would be at a moment like that, when death was imminent. This hymn is vaguely related to my memory of that conversation, I’m sure of it. I don’t know why this should be, as the ensemble that played as the Titanic sank was a string quartet, not a piano/organ, and I think they played “Nearer My God to Thee” and not this hymn, which I still can’t identify. But nonetheless the succession of thoughts is clear: Titanic → string quartet → mystery hymn. And now I hear, as if on cue, a string quartet doubling my organ-like instrument, and I am aware of the visual image of the dark deck of a ship at nighttime. I roll my eyes at the obviousness of this development. Luckily, before the actors Winslet and DiCaprio and the Irish flute appear (although of course they are already here, lurking somewhere deep in the wings) the string quartet and the deck image fade away. The fuzzy organ is back, alone, futilely gesturing toward the same two phrases.

I don’t remember how this piece begins, and so it can’t begin. It can only “middle,” and end, although the end brings no sense of finality or resolution. It is what in jazz they call a “turnaround,” the melody’s sinuous slide back to the beginning—only in my case it’s back into the middle. (Figure 7 depicts this maddening situation.)
I concentrate harder. Where before I attended to location, I now focus on the specific sound the organ is producing. This mental intervention, this thinking about the organ, now ignites a flamboyant set of musical gestures from a Hammond B3 organ: double-handed glissando up, lots of vibrato, all stops out, Black gospel choir standing at the ready. But then that too dies away, replaced by the voices for a second, and then, because I’m thinking about its absence, by the presence of the piano. Everything is taking on an unruly and wild character, like a bronco bucking when the rider pulls the reins. My attention is the bit clamped between the imagined hymn’s teeth, causing it to thrash and leap and attempt to throw the rider.

I’m losing control. I need another way to think about this.

It occurs to me that the attention I’m directing toward the hymn is somewhat analogous to the probing capacity of my fingertip, which at this moment is absent-mindedly tracing the pattern of the wood on the rough-hewn table at which I sit. If I close my eyes, I can almost see the wood’s grain as my finger feels its way along the table’s surface. The grain bends to accommodate a knot in the pine plank; I circle my finger around the unseen knot, and its shape comes into focus in my mind. As my finger twirls, my memory of the finger’s approach to the knot fades away—the ridges I traced earlier are dark and quiet now. So too is this melody an object in the dark that I can coax to partial presence by rubbing my attention up against the section I can reach. From where I’m sitting, I cannot reach the far end of the table; likewise, the beginning of the hymn is outside my grasp.

I am aware of my finger’s sensation as it slides upon the table. At the same time, I am aware of the pliancy of the pine itself. If I applied pressure to the soft wood, I could scar it with my fingernail. If I replaced my finger with a saw, I could slice through it; I could burn a hole through it with a blowtorch. Similarly, I am aware both of the sensation of my mind brushing up against the surface of the hymn fragment and of the fragment’s fragility, its vulnerability to the burning intensity of my attention. I remind myself that a light touch is what’s required. I remind myself that the hymn in my mind is less like pine and more like jello: soft, malleable, vulnerable, wobbly. A gentle, desultory sweep along the surface is what’s needed, with no more pressure than a Braille reader would apply.

I relax my attention, and try to float just above the music, allowing it to slip into the background and resume its previous pace. Now the fuzzy organ is back, doggedly trying to find the beginning that should precede this eternal middle. It occurs to me that the organ is not merely the instrument or medium of my straining—but-failing-to-remember; it is that act of labor and frustration. My attempt to recall a melody that is synaptically stored somewhere in the inaccessible recesses of my deep memory is manifest in the loop of
that infernal organ. The effort and the instrument and I are, at this moment, inseparable. We—the quicksilver blob that is myself and the half-remembered melody and my struggle to recall the rest of it and the organ reverberating in the non-space of my imagined skull, all of us together—we loop back to what we hope this time will be the beginning ... but we fail. We fail to hook onto the opening notes of the submerged melody and drag it onto the banks of consciousness. We are like unlucky fly fishermen, making cast after cast into the river, never landing the trout.

Everything is tantalizingly close. I can even hear the soft feltly thuds that fingers make when they release the keys of an organ, an inadvertent percussive accompaniment not unlike the quiet clacking of my fingers on the laptop keyboard now. With the arrival of this paradoxical sound of a phantasmagoric organist’s nonexistent fingers, the melody withdraws ever further, retreating finally into the shadowy background hum of consciousness as smoothly as an octopus seeking shelter beneath a rock on the ocean floor.

Out of options, I phone my father, the retired pastor, who is now eighty-eight and living in Florida. I stopped attending church as a teenager, and he, for complex spiritual and logistical reasons, left the ministry in the 1980s and became a taxi driver. We seldom talk about religion, but the music runs deep in both of us. Before my mother died I would often catch him humming one hymn or another as he padded around the house. It occurs to me now that it’s been years since he’s done that. I wonder if he still hears those tunes in his head or if the sadness of widowerhood has extinguished them. A prolonged shuffling sound indicates that he’s working to bring the receiver to his ear. After hearing his creaky-voiced “Hello?” I greet him with my habitual “Hiya, Pops!” and tell him I’m trying to remember a hymn that I imagine we used to sing in his church when I was a boy. I sing the two lines I know, without words, “la–la–la” to him over the phone. He is groggy—I think I woke him up—and he responds with a prolonged silence. Then, in his slow, melodic Charlestonian accent, he says he’s sorry, but he can’t recall the name of the hymn. I press him, asking if he remembers anything, anything at all, any snatch of melody or text. I sing the lines again. He is silent for an even longer stretch, and I worry that the call has been disconnected or that he’s dozed off. Then, just as I am about to call out, “Are you there?” I hear him vocalizing, softly. He isn’t singing the melody; rather, he’s producing an involuntary, prolonged drone, “ahhhhhhhhh,” not unlike the famous groans that Glenn Gould and Keith Jarrett produced while performing. It hits me that my father, separated from me by forty years and a thousand miles, is engaged in the same imaginary fishing expedition that I am, seeking to hook the very same fish. I wonder if his groan, and by implication Gould’s and Jarrett’s, is the sound of a person striving to hear a sound in his head—as if imagined sounds issued from a pump that needed to be primed. After what seems like a full minute, he softly utters three enigmatic words: “mystic ... sweet ... communion.” He says he thinks those words might have had something to do with it, and then abruptly hangs up to resume his nap.

A quick Google search of that phrase brings me to “The Church’s One Foundation,” composed by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876) with a text by Samuel J. Stone (1839–1900), and published in the Hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church of 1878. In the space of one heartbeat’s rush of blood through my veins I realize this is absolutely the source of my auditory imagery, which instantaneously attains the sharp lines and detailed shadings of a full portrait instead of the vague and incomplete surrealist sketch I had before. The sound of the hymn and its envoiced text comes flooding in, along with vivid memories of my long-dead mother, of me as a boy in a clip-on tie standing between her and my sister in a creaky wooden pew that smells of lacquer, propping a heavy, faded–blue hymnal on the back of the next pew, singing the words, oblivious of the theology but intoxicated by the goosebump-inducing sense of communitas created by voices lifted up together in song. This multisensory memorial swirl surges in with immediacy and then subsides, leaving the faint imagined melody—more or less intact now—in its wake. At this moment, satisfied, my mind smoothly shifts away from its introspective reverie and toward the external, outward-facing senses that had until now constituted the deep background of my secret hymn: I am once again conscious of my back on the chair, the frogs in the grass, my fingers on the keyboard. I take a deep breath and appreciate the
smoky smell of the fireplace. The sound of my imagined melody, still present though attenuated, is entangled with my perception of my body and the world that surrounds me.  

Now, when I think of the hymn, it starts from the beginning. I can’t easily access the looped, hyperstatic middle that had ensnared me before. My knowledge of “The Church’s One Foundation” overwrites my now-hazy memory of not quite knowing it, forcing this memory of a partially withdrawn mental object itself to withdraw. I can remember experiencing the inchoate loop of the hymn’s middle. I can remember more or less what it felt like to experience it. But I cannot for the life of me re-experience or rehear it as it was. This fragile, intimate musical event was site- and time-specific, the unique product of the particular discursive vectors, thought paths, sensory stimuli, social histories, musical logics, affective energies, and other contingencies that conjured it. Having happened, in all its ephemeral richness, it negates the possibility of faithful return. There was simply too much going on at once. The loping orbit around its own middle, the recursive skips and micro-wobblings as it moved and stayed still, the timbral and instrumental transmutations—all of these resist transcription. At the same time, the fragment’s irregular orbit was rendered even more complicated by its smooth lateral movement across the domains of imagination and memory, inside and outside, will and submission, sound and silence, composition and reception, self and community, listening and seeing and thinking and feeling, blurring any boundaries we might want to draw between them. The particular trajectory of this musical specter—a trajectory so much more complex and cathexed than the word “earworm” could ever convey—cannot be retraced, even with this text as a roadmap.

This is the submerged half of the iceberg of musical experience: the unsounded, unheard underside that silently cruises beneath the public sounds we compose and rehearse and record and enjoy and buy and sell and study. The drastic loops and feverish images of the auditory imagination precede, accompany, and perdure beyond the vibrational sounds with which they are intimately linked, from which they are ontologically withdrawn. When these imagined sounds are present, they provoke thoughts, distribute affect, inspire movement, trigger memories. They distract, disturb, delight, haunt. Their irreducible complexity and surreal intimacy combine to pull even the most banal experience (e.g., “I’ve got a song stuck in my head”) in the direction of the sublime.
Epilogue: On Death and Imagined Sound

I wrote this account of the elusive hymn fragment in the spring of 2018 for a conference that was to take place in Newfoundland that summer. On June 8th of that year, at Memorial University in St. John’s, I read it aloud to the assembled audience. Later that evening, I called my father down in Florida, and we chuckled together at the fact that I started my career writing about Russian singer-songwriters, pivoted to study the sounds of warfare in Iraq, and have now, bizarrely, ended up writing about him and me talking on the telephone. Unbeknownst to us, this was to be our last conversation, as one day later, unexpectedly, he died. I will spare you a description of how it feels to lose a parent: if you haven’t experienced this yourself, you probably will someday, and if you have, you don’t need me to explain what it feels like. But I will tell you that, more than two years later, I can still hear the sound of his voice in my head, just as I could when he was alive. No … that’s not quite right: it’s not “just as I could.” His voice in my head—the spectral product of memory and imagination and a now–useless, rudderless form of anticipation—is losing its capacity to serve as a vessel for any particular memory, any particular thing he once said to me. It is becoming hypological—a voice incapable of speech. At the same time, his endosonic voice fills me with the kind of tugging, throbbing gravity that I termed “feeling” earlier. It has become hyperaffective—capable of altering my mood, conjuring involuntary memories, moistening my eyes, placing a lump in my throat. When it is present, it gives my body extra weight and extra emotional burdens, and it does this whether I am reflecting upon it or not. Occasionally I will fully conjure it, but more often his voice simply visits me, floating up through layers of thought and feeling to act upon me before I have a chance even to recognize it. The unsummoned voice of my father is powerfully performative, in J. L. Austin’s sense of that word; it is always doing something, even when it is saying nothing.

As Sartre once wrote:

If the image of a dead loved one appears to me abruptly, there is no need for a [phenomenological] ‘reduction’ to feel the ache in my heart: it is part of the image, it is the direct consequence of the fact that the image gives its object as a nothingness of being. ([1940] 2010, 13)

It strikes me now, at the end of this essay, that the relationship between listening to music in the world and listening to music in your head is akin to the relationship between experiencing the living and experiencing the dead. The entangled forces of imagination, memory, and anticipation are present in all four types of encounter, but with music under the regime of the sonic aggregate—as with people under the regime of the living—these forces are tightly bound to empirical phenomena in the world; the twinned acts of retention and pretention are shaped by, calibrated against, and beholden to the behavior of worldly sounds and animate bodies. With the dead—as with the endosonus in the absence of an exosONUS—imagination, memory, and anticipation are released from the grip of vibrant, vibrating bodies, and so begin to wander more freely, and act more strangely.

How robust are the similarities between the endosonus and the dead? Observe the ease with which I can recruit phrases from earlier in this essay to refer equally to both of these entities. The ghostly presence of the dead, like the surreal behavior of imagined music, is hard to describe … adequately in terms of our ordinary, perceptually oriented vocabulary. When the memory of the dead, or of a piece of music, is alive within a sensate body embedded in the cacophonous world, listening becomes polyphonic. Both phenomena are non-linear and non-teleological: they just twist and turn. And both inhabit spatialities that resist rational description: despite initial appearances, neither imagined music nor the specter of my dead father are “in my head,” really—or at least, not fully. They are partly there, for sure, but their trajectories neither begin nor end within the confines of my mind. The imagined sound of a beloved song, like the haunting presence of a dead loved one, is inseparable from the ache in my heart. Both are disseminated through and through with social energies that transcend the experiencing self. And lest you think that with this mention of the transcendence of
the dead I’ve allowed some kind of Christian or other eschatological vibe to sneak into this essay at the very end, let me state outright that one doesn’t need to subscribe to any particular metaphysics to acknowledge
the presence and profundity of this ... ahhhhhhhh ... of this ... ahhhhhhhh ... this ... mystic ... sweet ...
communion—the smooth process whereby perception, imagination, memory, anticipation, and our endless
entanglements (from the corporeal to the linguistic to the social, the ecological, the technocultural, and on
and on) are transubstantiated into the unified thing we call “experience.”

The freewheeling, surreal weirdness of the dead can be felt, faintly, as a latent energy humming within our
cherished subjects (e.g., music, listening, sound, voice, history, society, etc.), troubling them, destabilizing
them, creating resonant absences within them. Likewise, the Möbius curlings of the auditory imagination
haunt and enstrate our archives and our repertoires, our soundscapes and our social relations, our
materialities and virtualities, our local neighborhoods and global networks, all of it. One cannot fully
understand the worlds into which we have been thrown without accounting for these ethereal entities.

But how to perform this accounting? As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, I feel that I ultimately
failed to coax the freedom-loving endosonus to full presence on the page. By “failed” I am referring not to
the general inability of writing to capture life in all its complex richness but to the particular obstacles that
imagined music presents to those who attempt to describe or understand it. I fear the most one can ever do
with a fragile musical memory such as mine is to “fix” it, in the unyielding and mortal sense that a collector
fixes a butterfly to a mounting board with a pin. The exoskeleton is there, neatly preserved, but the butterfly
itself—that kinetic enigma, that airborne splash of color and consciousness, that vibrant knot in the
planetary tangle—isn’t. Turn your attention inward to eavesdrop on the endosonus and, like Euridice, the
ghostly melody is pulled forever into the shadows. Try to reflect on unreflective consciousness, and
impurities flood into it like formaldehyde. Paradox and opacity turn memory into caricature, expressivity
into death mask—and unlike worldly music, the endosonus cannot be recorded, rewound, and heard again.
In the end, it remains an open question as to whether this attempt at a phenomenological description of an
earworm has any real utility, beyond its function as a personal work of mourning, or a textual exorcism, or a
tremulous question cast into the darkness.

Hello?

Is anybody there?

I have a haunting song, and a dead man’s voice, in my head.

...

Can you hear them?
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Notes

1 Jean-Luc Nancy presents hearing as comprehension in his 2007 treatise Listening. “If ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible” (6). In Nancy’s sense of these terms, then, I may not be fully “hearing” the sounds of the imagination, but I am certainly “listening” to them.

2 The concept of “worlding” comes to me from Heidegger via Donna Haraway, who, in a now-famous riff on Marilyn Strathern’s contention that “it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas,” wrote, “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories” (2016, 34–35). I might continue this wordplay here by saying, “it matters what I’m me, a location that produces the interesting corollary, “it matters what you’s me you.” In other words, the stakes of investigating the auditory imagination are high (e.g., it is one of the tools we use to build our inner world and to occupy the world we share), but they are also radically contingent: my account of listening to myself becoming myself does not automatically tell you what you will hear if you listen to yourself becoming yourself.

3 I have conducted formal and informal interviews with a few dozen of my colleagues and friends outside academia, surveyed around one-hundred students in various classes at New York University (NYU), and engaged in concerted introspective exercises as described in section four of this essay. A particularly fruitful stage of the research process involved two graduate seminars on listening that I co-taught with Deborah Kapchan, where the auditory imagination was a central object of our inquiry.

4 See Johnson (2015), Cusick (2008), and Daughtry (2014; 2015, 98–102) for discussions of sound, trauma, and the auditory imagination.


6 See for example Priest (2018), Hubbard (2010), and Levitin (2006).

7 Thanks to Harry Berger for sharing this insight with me. See Berger (2010, 11–12).

8 While I have adopted Grimshaw and Garner’s terminology in this essay, I remain interested in the vibrant conversation on the ontology of sound that has been taking place among analytic philosophers in the twenty-first century. Some of them consider sound to be an emergent perception, as Grimshaw and Garner do; some equate sound with acoustic waves moving through a medium; and some understand sound as a material vibrational event that is distinct from both waves and perceptions. See Nudds and O’Callaghan (2009) for an overview of this debate.

9 MRI studies of people listening to recordings that have had gaps of silence inserted in them suggest that this is the case. When the gap appears, subjects continue to listen to the endosonic trace that, unbeknownst to them, was running in parallel with the exosonic recording the whole time. See, for example, Kraemer et al (2005). For an early and influential empirical account of the relationship between internal and external sensory perceptions, see Llinás and Paré (1991).
If your consciousness fails to establish such a mental representation of a sonorous event, and so is unable to shuttle back and forth between them, then you will find yourself in a situation that I have elsewhere called the “audible inaudible”—a zone of bodily exposure to sounds that are within your range of hearing but that are beyond the reach of your consciousness. See Daughtry (2015, 77–80).

This position dovetails with, but adds some phenomenological granularity to, the widespread position within philosophical aesthetics that listening involves perception and imagination. Theodore Gracyk (2019, 467) asserts that, “[f]or over three centuries, major figures in philosophical aesthetics have argued that aesthetic engagement with art—and therefore music—includes pleasures of the imagination (Addison and Steele 1965). So listening is both perceptual and imaginative.” In this important essay, Gracyk goes on to critique what he sees as an excessive emphasis, within discourse on aesthetics and musical meaning, on the role played by the imagination.


Cogan (2009). Cogan’s “astonishment” can be fruitfully compared to the sense of “wonder” that Richard Rorty (cited in Ingold 2014) finds notable in philosophy and poetry and that Tim Ingold (2014, 388–389) locates in the anthropological project.

For a classic, albeit fictionalized, account of wondrous failure, see “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in Borges (1998).

See Aristotle, De Anima iii 3. The European and American cast of characters in what follows marks this intellectual history as a provincial one. While there are clearly intellectual traditions around the world that are concerned with the nature of the imagination, my aim here is to lay out a few notable works in the phenomenological tradition, which accounts for the lack of demographic diversity in this list.

See Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012, 183) for a discussion of “inner speech.” See also Bullot and Égré (2010), O’Callaghan (2016), and Badcock (2010) for cogent discussions of imagined sound.


The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination was published after this essay was first drafted, which accounts for its superficial treatment here.

See for example Liikkanen (2012), Kraemer et al. (2005), and Hubbard (2010). Margulis (2013) contains a large bibliography of empirical sources on auditory imagery. A 2006 article by Steven Brown provides a particularly interesting discussion that is based in the psychological literature. In the article, Brown, who is a professor of psychology, offers a phenomenological account of his “perpetual [imagined] music track”—the near-constant stream of musical imagery that he experiences throughout the day.

Understanding the temporal dimension of consciousness was for Husserl the most “important and difficult of phenomenological problems.” (Husserl [1966] 1991, Supplementary Texts IV, No. 39, quoted in Jacquette 2018, 284).

Retention is different from “recollection,” which is the willful act of recalling something that is now absent. Retention is the perceived presence of the immediate past.

As Matthew Rahaim reminds us in his essay in this volume, protention is ubiquitous within the world of embodied action. Your flexing hand pretends the ball-in-flight it is about to grasp; the singer’s indrawn breath “pretends the melody to come.” (See also Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012, 106.)

“Anticipation,” for Husserl, is the imagination of a future that has not yet occurred. Two pairs result: recollection and anticipation, organized around absence, flank retention and protention, both of which are perceived as present.

In Grimshaw and Garner’s terms, the primal imprint corresponds to the exosonus, and retention and protention to the endosonus.

Indeed, Husserl’s preferred object for demonstrating the extended nature of the living present is a musical melody (see, for example, [1966] 1991, 235–237).

Ihde (2007, 134) describes an instance of willed alternation between perceptual and imagined modalities. Here I mean to
assert an unwilled, constant oscillation between these modalities whenever we think we are listening to music.

See Margulis (2013) and Fink (2005) for varying takes on the interlocked themes of music, repeatability, memory, and the aesthetics of the loop.

Of course, while I am arguing here that the endosonus is a crucial part of musical experience, this doesn’t mean that it is always prominent enough to draw your attention; the long tails of retention and protention are generally so much fainter and more ethereal than the vibrational primal imprint that you could easily go your entire life without noticing their existence. (If you are like me, you only began to perceive them after you were exposed to Husserl’s description of them.) These two qualities of the endosonus—its relative subtlety in the face of exosonic music, and its submission to the movement of the exosonus through time—appear to be relatively stable features within the experience of listening to music in the world. “Relatively stable” does not mean universal, however, as the burgeoning disability studies literature is teaching us. See Bakan et al (2018) for a series of conversations on musical perception and imagination among people with autism.

Young describes “impure reflection” as “the attempt to turn my attention to what I am doing while I am doing it or to what I am thinking as I am thinking it. It arises as I try to make sense of myself. I try, as it were, to catch myself in my own act. Impure reflection is consciousness’s paradoxical attempt to make itself its own object, as if it could break itself off and look back at itself or fold back over on itself and experience itself from both the inside and the outside” (2011, 76).

See Sartre ([1940] 2010). This inability to reflect directly on the imagination also fuels Derrida’s critique of the “metaphysics of presence” that he claimed undergirded, and to a great extent invalidated, Husserl’s phenomenology. See Derrida ([1967] 2010, especially chapters 4–6.

OED Online, s.v., “surreal, adj,” accessed October 04, 2019, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/195018?redirectedFrom=surreality. Another illuminating definition comes from Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto: Surrealism is “[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” ([1924] 2010, my emphasis).

On the speculative turn, phenomenology, and philosophy as “weird realism,” see Harman (2010). For a phenomenological investigation of the surrealism of the audiovisual, see Richardson (2012). Of course, the Surrealists had a politics, metaphysics, and Freudian orientation that I do not mean to import into this discussion of the sonic aggregate at this time.

Here are Breton’s instructions for automatic writing, which conclude with a phrase that is particularly evocative for scholars of the endosonus: “After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you’re writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard. It is somewhat of a problem to form an opinion about the next sentence; it doubtless partakes both of our conscious activity and of the other, if one agrees that the fact of having written the first involves the minimum of perception. This should be of no importance to you, however; to a large extent, this is what is most interesting and intriguing about the Surrealist game. The fact still remains that punctuation no doubt resists the absolute continuity of the flow with which we are concerned, although it may seem as necessary as the arrangement of knots in a vibrating cord. Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur…” ([1924] 2010, my emphasis).

The term “haunting” also conjures the specter of Jacques Derrida, whose discussion of “hauntology” has been applied to musique concrete, reel-to-reel bleedthrough, and other musical phenomena that involve layered temporalities or time disjunctions. More broadly, as Elisabeth Loevlie writes, “[t]he term has proven itself a fruitful critical topos because it permits the discussion of a repeated, ungraspable roaming that colours our lives. Haunting questions (or haunts!) its homophone concept ontology as it attempts to indicate that which moves insistently in-between being and non-being, existence and death. Haunting therefore performs and releases what I shall describe as an ontological quivering” (Loevlie 2013, 337). Note also that Oliver Sacks gave the title “Haunted by Music” to the first part of his popular study Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain (2008, 2). For a compelling study of “haunting and the sociological imagination,”
Fred Maus has recently proposed a model of understanding “musical imagery” that includes all that I mention above. “Calling up the music from within oneself,” he writes, “will usually involve sonic imagery but need not be confined to sonic imagery. Typically it involves much more than that, feelings beyond sound such as emotional and kinesthetic images. I think we can call all these types of imagery ‘musical images’” (2018, 445, my emphasis).

Philosophers working under the umbrella term “Object-Oriented Ontology” often draw from Heidegger the insight that all objects are partially withdrawn, in that they are never fully exhausted by their perception, theorization, or use. Something always remains in excess and is inaccessible. See Harman (2011) for a representative articulation of this position. As I understand it, phenomenologists working before the advent of Object-Oriented Ontology tended to have a narrower understanding of the withdrawn nature of objects, one that was more closely tied to the observer’s positionality. For example, when you look at a coin, its obverse face is unavailable to your gaze.

In The Imaginary, Sartre makes a similar claim about images: “Two colours … which maintain a certain discordant relation in reality can coexist in imagery without having any kind of relation between them. The objects exist only in so far as they are thought” ([1940] 2010, 10).

Or perhaps, as Berger has suggested, “it’s not that the space in one’s head is non-Euclidean, but that the spatiality of memory and imagination aren’t “in” the head at all…. [T]he language of inner and outer are really just forms of metaphysical shorthand, and they do a poor job of accounting for the nature of lived experience. While memories are clearly mind-dependent … memory isn’t inside my head at all, and what is needed is a much more complex phenomenology. To my mind, showing the limits of the spatial language of the natural attitude and its flawed metaphysics is the main work that the epoché does” (personal correspondence, 26 June 2018).

See Howells (2012) for a review of Titanic-themed films that portray the scene of “Nearer My God, to Thee” being performed as the ship sinks.

See Beckerman (2011) for a groundbreaking discussion of musical middles.

See Moreno (1999) for a discussion of Jarrett’s vocalization within the context of his pianism.

For me, this experience echoes Merleau-Ponty: “When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operation or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, [equally my body listened to and my body listening—JMD] there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things” ([1964] 1968, 123).

Here I am using “drastic” in Carolyn Abbate’s (2004) sense: “…[D]rastic connotes physicality, but also desperation and peril, involving a category of knowledge that flows from drastic actions or experiences and not from verbally mediated reasoning. Gnostic as its antithesis implies not just knowledge per se but making the opaque transparent, knowledge based on semiosis and disclosed secrets, reserved for the elite and hidden from others” (510). With this as a reference point, we can say that imagined sounds are radically drastic.

Compare this with Peter Mendelsund’s description of immersion in a text: “The story of reading is a remembered story. When we read, we are immersed. And the more we are immersed, the less we are able, in the moment, to bring our analytic minds to bear upon the experience in which we are absorbed. Thus, when we discuss the feeling of reading we are really talking about the memory of having read. And this memory of reading is a false memory” (2014, 9).

For the record, the italicized phrases in the sentences that follow are from Cook, Ihde, Priest, myself, Sartre, myself, and my father, in that order.

See Stanyek and Piekut (2010) for a provocative examination of the agency of the dead.