Sing with Understanding Also: The Operation of Angels

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The subject of music has been occasional and elliptical throughout Michel Serres's writing, continually evoked, but never, up until the book *Musique* of 2011, made the direct subject of his writing. Music has often served the angelic function of a connector or medium of transition from one topic to another. By the end of this paper, I will want to have concluded, to my satisfaction and that of as many of you as can be managed, that in that late book, Serres makes music mean so much that it vanishes from sight, or fades out of audibility, sacrificing the name and nature of music. Having been a phantom or fugitive presence, never sustained, to use a musical metaphor, flitting in and out of explicitness, music, in the *sostenuto* it undergoes in *Musique*, explodes – but is then scattered – into ubiquity. In doing this, Serres claims to be miming philosophically the tendency of music itself, and therefore to be offering not just a philosophy of music, but a musicalised philosophy, a philosophy made of music. I will wonder why music proves impossible to write of, using the association between music and angels to do so.

Serres's book *Angels* has only a short section devoted to music, but it provides the generative core that would be unfolded in and as the book he devoted to music in 2011. This looping, daisy-chain structure of reaching back to move forward is highly characteristic of Serres's writing. In *Angels*, Serres observes rightly if somewhat exaggeratedly, that 'music is so-called because it is the sum of all the Muses' (Serres 1993, 84), though its original usage seems actually to be strongly centred in the arts of song and poetry in particular. Serres also suggests that music may be related to mosaic. There is some etymological warrant for this too, mosaic being a back-formation from Greek μουσεῖον, *museion*, a school or temple dedicated to the muses, an

edifice that would often be ornamented with mosaic, though this depends on association rather than resemblance. Serres's favoured mode, the listing of disparate entities, verbally enacts the adjacency of mosaic, as clustering concertation:

> From the enormous moa to the smallest hummingbird, egret, bunting, petrel or booby, thousands of feathered species, with multicoloured, dazzling and subtle plumage arose there, increased and modulated ceaselessly the most marvellous concerts, of which nobody on planet Earth had ever heard the harmonious and diverse mosaic, the true name of Music. (Serres 2011, 60-1)

Redundancy

Serres associates music with redundancy, literally, the waving back of things, incorporating Latin *unda*, a wave, which is necessary for any reduction of chaos. The relativity of ideas of order and disorder seems to be answered by a mathematical definition of chaos, as a collection of phenomena that is not susceptible to any kind of compression, or rule of repetition that might allow for economising, and therefore the emergence of system. The mathematical definition of an irrational number, such as pi, is a number which cannot be expressed as the ratio of two whole integers, and so can never come to an end, or round on itself in any repeating sequence. As of last year, we have calculated pi to 300 trillion places, which so far have never shown any sign of developing into any kind of ritornello or iterable sequence. In order to repeat something, it would have to have been completed, in order to be begun again, meaning that, as Wittgenstein put it, if God wanted to know all the places of pi, he would have to do the maths, or, like us, invent a device to do the maths for him.

But the discussion of music in *Angels* introduces a reversion in the musical growth of order in prior disorder. Serres imagines the multiplication of angels in art as a kind of infestation:

> they began to appear everywhere, filling every conceivable space. Rome is absolutely full of them: you find them sculpted, in bas-reliefs, painted or embossed, every shape and size, of each sex or of no sex, naked, half-dressed, showing a knee, a shoulder, sometimes even a bottom, all chubby and dimpled. Immodestly modest. There are infants, portrayed in cloned series of winged heads, and adolescents, and tall, serious-looking adults .... They pass by in clouds, armies, legions, bundles, sudden gusts, multitudes. …
>
> Angels are charged with the maintenance of order and proper behavior, but they behave pretty abominably. Rowdily, even. Their jostling disturbs the unity of God and the rarity of saints! … While the messenger angels are out on the highways, the hooligan angels are hanging around on street corners and climbing over railings. (Serres 1993, 82, 85)

Serres offers a commentary on Breughel the Elder's *Fall of the Rebellious Angels* in terms of this battle between monotheism and polytheism, the order of good angels and the disorderly, parasitic fallen angels:

> Order emerges from the disorder of chaos ... Music flattens the prickles and spikes of noise and raises itself as a universal quality above the hubbub ...; good angels sound trumpets while their fellow angels battle with fallen angels and the forces of evil, lashing them mercilessly; the bad angels come tumbling down from the light-well above, monstrous and misshapen … One may either choose between these three versions, which appear as separate and distinct realities, or one may attempt to grasp the single truth which is concealed beneath these translations: the book which you are reading is such an attempt. (Serres 1993, 88)

Information increases as order increases in a disorderly system. But it does not increase infinitely. The graph of information is generated by the principle that there is no information in a chaotic system, such that increasing order increases information, a word that has a theological origin, being used interchangeably with incarnation; information means

the imparting of form to the formless. But at the other end of things, in a condition of maximal redundancy, maximal order in which there is no disorder at all, there is, or would be if such a state could be achieved other than ideally, equally zero information. Order is rare, indeed, is rarity itself. But, as order increases, it becomes cramping, cribbing and confining. In the increasingly administered world, which has accompanied industrialisation from the seventeenth century onwards, and in which redundancy has begun to approach the condition of inundation, artists begin to crave and consecrate disorder, chance, randomness, as a principle of redemption. Information, defined as the kind of difference that makes a difference, is therefore not simply order, but a ratio, that may never be able to be exactly determined, of order to disorder.

Background Noise

Serres is one of the great philosophers of relation and communication. For Serres, everything is driven by prepositions, the intermediary or angelic categories of speech.

> Has not philosophy restricted itself to exploring – inadequately – the 'on' with respect to transcendence, the 'under', with respect to substance and the subject and the 'in' with respect to the immanence of the world and the self? Does this not leave room for expansion, in following out the 'with' of communication and contract, the 'across' of translation, the 'among' and 'between' of interferences, the 'through' of the channels through which Hermes and the Angels pass, the 'alongside' of the parasite, the 'beyond' of detachment? (Serres 1994, 83)

In *Statues*, his first meditation on objecthood and solidity, Serres evolves an understanding of the reciprocal constitution of subjects by objects and objects by subjects.

> I imagine, at the origin, a rapid vortex in which the transcendental constitution of the object by the subject grows just like, in the other direction, the symmetrical constitution of the subject by the

> object, in dizzying semi-cycles endlessly renewed, leading all the way back to the beginning. (Serres 1987, 209)

But Serres proves increasingly unable in his later works to resist the hardening of his soft, variable, inbetween concepts into invariant objects. One of the most conspicuous of these is the idea of noise. *Musique* follows many other Serres texts in working through a cosmogony that leads from chaos, the tohu-va-bohu of what in Genesis is said to be 'without form and void' before God intervenes to form it into Creation. For Serres inherits the implicit assumption, common to many Creation myths, that God is not the creator of matter, but rather its shaper. There must therefore be something there, some tohu-va-bohu, which must be given form by Creation.

But, in information theory, just as the object is the production of the subject as what is entirely other to itself, that which it is etymologically 'thrown up against', so noise is whatever muddles, muddies or impedes the transmission of a signal. This means that signal and noise must both be heteronomous rather than autonomous: noise is only noise for a subject, whether intended or intervening, for whom it is noise. In the 1930s, a case was brought by an occupant of an apartment block who was disturbed by a neighbour playing Beethoven loudly at night. The case was brought up under recently enacted noise abatement legislation and thrown out on the grounds that Beethoven's music could not be regarded as noise. The dissolution of that reification causes significant problems in the definition and regulation of noise. For noise, which derives perhaps from Greek *ναῦς* ship, and Latin *nausea*, or perhaps, alternatively, from Latin *noxa* and noxious, harm, injury, is whatever is a nuisance, from Latin *nocere*, as in its negation in the word *innocence*, or in the word *nocebo* which is the opposite of *placebo*, or annoyance, from Latin *inodiare*, to make odious or hateful.

Serres's account of background noise reifies this relativity into something that is already there before the redundancies of music began to smooth chaos out into iterability and therefore regularity. Background noise reasserts itself against the music of culture and knowledge in the form of evil:

> But now, with the emergence of meaning, representation, and language, new background noises appear, stemming from human violence and death. Why the bristling of this other murmur before speech emerges? Why do evil, error, pain, and murder arise from these second origins, like the tohu-bohu emerged from noise in the beginning?
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> Just as each Muse, soft, never ceases freeing herself us from the Bacchantes, in their hard fury, Orpheus never ceases to emerge from the Underworld. The journey starts again.
>
> Music, deliver us from Evil! (Serres 2011, 37)

A theory of noise requires a theory of prehensive entities who judge things to be noisy, or take them for noise. Noise can only ever be this taking for noise, just as, in the process philosophy of A.N. Whitehead, an object can only be that which is taken to be an object by some other entity: 'Objects are the elements in nature which can "be again". … Things which we thus recognise I call objects' (Whitehead 1964, 144, 169). Flies, who seem to be named for the noise they make – *zvuv* in Hebrew, *muia*, in Greek –depend largely on decomposing matter for the growth of their larvae. They are among a substantial class of entities for whom the decomposition that much of the living world strives to keep at bay is signal rather than noise, while the world of composed or integral entities must surely function for them as background noise in the system. There can be no background noise without a foreground yet equally no foreground background noise.

Pathos

Like war, weeds, art, politeness or tedium, music is an intentional category, meaning thatit is a judgement of value rather than of kind. Music is sound that people regard as good, which means pleasing, in the way of music. I need not myself value a particular piece of music to recognise it as belonging to the category of music and even the fact that I may positively loathe or recoil from particular musical works or styles will not disqualify them as music as long as I am persuaded that there

are at least some humans who do or might well accord them musical status. Typically, this means that they will not merely recognise them as music, but regard them for that reason as able to be enjoyed or admired. I cannot imagine how anything could be music that would not be regardable as musical in this way by some qualified entity, Qualified how? Qualified by having the capacity to salute some kinds of sonorous pleasingness as musical.

Perhaps this is to say no more than that music is sound, usually organised but not necessarily even that, that people, or some people, *like*: enjoy recognising and recognise through enjoyment as music. To listen musically, and thereby take sound as music, is to list, in the sense of bending towards or being disposed to. When Robin Rimbaud, who writes and performs under the name of Scanner, hung a microphone outside his bedroom window and recorded the ambient sound, the recording required no further treatment to be translated from the condition of noise to that of music than being presented as a musical piece by the electronic musician Scanner. This stipulative and self-authorising gesture has, of course, become tediously conventional among artists and their docile audiences for more than a century.

The enjoyment of music obviously takes many different forms and can be enjoyment of many different qualities – sadness, solemnity, liveliness, comedy, tranquillity, complexity, unexpectedness and so on. But I want to propose that there is one ingredient of musical enjoyment - an ingredient that is missing from many of the things that Serres celebrates as music - that is customarily at work. I will call it *pathos*.

In part this is one of the most familiar and conventional things that one can say about music, namely that it arouses feeling, which would be to say that it is experienced pathically. But I am minded to hold out for a little more than this. I want to suppose that music always has a constituent, the kind of thing that is commonly called a ‘feeling-tone’, that will on closer acquaintance be recognizable as pathos. Pathos is, of course, primarily a mode of sadness, but it is in the case of music as well as other human achievements, a sadness that it is characteristically mixed in with other feelings, and the always ambivalent feelings in

particular that attach to human aspiration, achievement and the will-to-power. Most typical of all, we can say, is the feeling of fragile, ephemeral, ambivalent triumph that is sometimes described as poignancy, a word that derives from the very experiences of the sharp, pointed, thorny or piercing that is Serres's recurrent metaphor for painful noise. Perhaps the residual poignancy of music is a kind of noise, the noise of the human, that is ineradicable from it.

Throughout *Musique*, Serres represents music as the smoothing or softening of the hard, the spikes and thorns subject to blandishments, soothing savage beasts and breasts. But if music is angelic it is never wholly analgesic. For music is sense plus sensibility, sound as pathos. Serres's idea of music, for all his evocation of the joy and praise of music, is bleakly computational. Music can relieve suffering, but not by reducing pain; rather music is a compounding of pleasure and pain, a relieving of pain by evoking a counter-pain. Music may not be for humans alone, but, despite its associations with eternity, music can only be heard by mortals, creatures for whom every joy is made more intense by the fact that it cannot last for ever.

The pathos of such achievement is that it is achieved in the temporary remission of the condition of weakness of humans (the relative feebleness, for example, of our sense of hearing, compared to that of many other creatures), and their knowledge of their own finitude, the defeat within every defiance, the surcease that is the susurrus beneath every success. Every piece of music is an address to death, which has no address, in the closing words of W.B. Yeats's 'Upon a Dying Lady': 'Give her a little grace,/What if a laughing eye/Have looked into your face?/It is about to die.' Music is sound that may be enjoyed but the pathos of that enjoyment, whether melancholy or joyous, is its solemnity, the hunger it surprises in us to be more serious.

As an art of sound, music is a form of impassioned passivity, a willed undergoing. One is subjected by music because one subjects oneself to it, and nowhere more intently than in the performing of it. Samuel Johnson wrote that 'the only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it' (Johnson 1774, 23). But the

enjoyment of music, along with that of writing perhaps, is always also in itself a kind of endurance. The arts that depend on the eye, or the word in its visual dimensions, are typically encountered, or made available rather than undergone, and when they are undergone, it will often be their sonorous qualities, that is their enactment of evanescent presence, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is, that are to the fore. In his 2011 book on music, Serres will call this the incarnate dimensions of music, as the flesh made word embodied in the word made flesh.

> I call it the Incarnated. She cannot exist without voice or flesh, whether of the rapper or the soprano, without the vibrating strings of the guitar or viola, the undulating columns of air in great organs, without the metal or wood of the violin or bassoon, without the paper of the score, without cymbals, castanets, percussion … she depends on the pressure of fingers, their velvet touch, on breath, on electricity … emissions undetachable from their frames. (Serres 2011, 142-3)

But for Serres, this pathos is taken up and swept away by the fluctuant but in the long run unrelentingly invariant tide of the movement from the sensible to the intelligible, even though it contradicts and is contradicted by the philosophy of mixed bodies to which he has aspired since announcing it in the subtitle of his book *The Five Senses*. In French, *les sens* have direction, they are vectors, or tendencies, on the way from action to sign, from event to meaning. Serres seems to have made himself obedient to the words of Paul in which he counsels the Corinthians to eschew the sounding brass of unintelligible preaching, in which 'I shall be to him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh will be a barbarian unto me' (I Corinthains 14.11). For Paul, spirit must be fused with and edified by understanding, in order that 'I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also [ψαλῶ δὲ καὶ τῷ νοΐ). (1 Corinthians 14.15)

Praise

For Serres, the highest aspiration of music is the work of praise. Since the invention of the musical angels in medieval art and theology, their function has been imagined as that of the constant praise of God. The angels that throng the roofs of East Anglian churches are imaginary forces of physical as well as figurative exaltation, their unheard music ascending on the angelic wings that offer themselves to be imagined as holding up the very roofs of which they form a part.

> Assuredly, Johann Sebastian Bach, possibly Haydn and Handel, Couperin and Fauré sometimes, passed lives of enchantment composing works of praise. *Praise Him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise Him with the harp and lyre, praise Him with timbrel and dancing, praise Him with the strings and pipe, praise Him with the clash of cymbals, praise Him with resounding cymbals.* (Psalm 150). They earned their livelihoods – I mean, they earned bodies and souls – by celebration, glorification, and magnification. I have yet to earn mine – my joy, I mean, in losing myself, body and wherewithal – in these holy waters of laudation. (Serres 2011, 133)

But angels are not just a desirable image of the work of praise for mortal creatures to emulate, they are also potentially an image of the alternative work of glory, pursued by what we have heard Serres call the 'hooligan angels', the parasites who intercept the work of praise:

> All the misery of the world comes from it, and from it alone, with exceptions. From it flow envies and jealousies, hatreds, conflicts and resentments, wars of all against all, and countless deaths. Why? Because we all want to win, we all want to come first, to become as quickly as possible, life being so short, the strongest, the richest, the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most elevated, supported, feted, acclaimed … we long only for glory … the more glory, the more contagion. Pandemic plague of which advertising media are the most assured vectors and for which rankings of all kinds measure the endemic fever. (Serres 2011, 133-4)

So, on the one hand, Serres sees music as paradisal, Pentecostal transfiguration:

> Music elevates all the arts, encodes all the sciences, breathes underneath all languages, assembles all societies, inspires all thoughts; better yet it beats time for, envelops and develops the motions of our emotions and, ordered but unexpected, the series of numbers; beneath it, behind it, between it and the ample appeal of things and bodies, lies the mute mystery, storehouse of all secrets. The one who discovers it speaks virtually all languages and hears all the voices of the World. (Serres 2011, 72-3)

But, by contrast, he also sees and knows music as, or able to become, infernal. In allowing the information theory which has impelled so much of his work since the 1960s to congeal into a religious mythology, Serres must refuse the axiom taught by information theory itself: that there is no good thing of which it is true that the more you have of it the better.

> Just as angels occupy space and time in our civilisation, where messengers abound, where messages swarm in myriads, and where millions of messaging services multiply, so too has Music, in recent decades, taken on a temporal and spatial extent that no other practice, no other art form has ever known. Everywhere dense in the air that humanity breathes, it can be heard. Pervasive throughout every corner where humanity breathes, it makes itself heard day and night in roads, houses and public places, in shops and in private ears, a compulsory companion in exchanges, transactions, spectacles, rituals and festivities, in work and in solitude. (Serres 2011, 83)

It is for this reason that I cannot heave my heart into my mouth to join in praise of Serres's praise of the angelic function of praise itself. For the profane mirror of praise is advertising, just as glory is betrayed in the infantile idiocies of glorification (Connor 2024).

If mosaic is 'music by its true name', (Serres 2011, 61) then the cognomen of music is muzak, the word invented in 1934 by George Owen Squier, on the model of the imitative word Kodak, to name the

system of mechanical piped music he had developed. Muzak is parasite music that is indistinguishable from music except in the absence of any possibility of pathos:

> Contemporary music, by contrast, is composed and listened to by populations equipped with eardrums that know of no silence, meticulously splintered as it is by faecal cacophony that leaves no space or time for even an atom of muteness. … Intensive and extensive, personal and collective, interior and public, this globalization derives from the fact that this muzak cleaves closely to the thunderous growth of information, which shares its condition. Just as universal, just as pansemic just as totipotent, information, independent of sensing, precedes all sense. Precisely like music. (Serres 2011, 84)

Understanding Also

Music is not itself knowledge, but for Serres, it seems, ever alert to potentials, tendencies and assays of bias, finding directions by indirections out, it seems to be something like a principle of epistemic incipience, naming, in the words put into the mouth of the Muse Urania, ‘Muse of precise, rigorous and universal knowledge’ (Serres 2011, 34), what in the world may have already begun to become knowable by it.

> Yes, music precedes both meanings and languages, but the many algorithms it uses also anticipate all mathematics, the numerous branches and potential of which form my own language. … No science that is not preceded by music. If mathematical language explain the world, they are begotten by this music. (Serres 2011, 33-4)

So the background noise will, after all, not have been pure and absolute noise, requiring and awaiting the intercession of the muses of Serres's fable, for the possibility of that intercession, moving disorder toward order through memory, retention and redundancy, would have to be part of the precession of the knowable. Serres's simplistic objectification of the idea of absolute noise might on this account be excused as a

necessarily mythical stratagem to arrive at a temporal convolution that is more complex.

But this narrative, the narrative of the emergent auto-narration of the Grand Récit, with music as the harbinger of knowledge, especially the mathematical knowledge that is taken to be the condition and coefficient of scientific understanding, itself suffers from a further fixation, on knowledge as the sense and destination of being, both inanimate and inanimate. In this sense, Serres's mystical philosophy can be seen as a kind of Gnosticism. The later movements of *Musique* hold out the prospect of a kind of musical knowledge, which would trace an ascent to a new kind of knowledge, gained through the ear rather than the eye, and through listening rather than the predatory operations of inspection and scrutiny. One can scarcely repress the objection that, though many forms of order may be comparable to the forms of order found in music, this offers no kind of warrant for reciprocally identifying every kind of order as not just musical but as *per se* music itself, as Serres explicitly, inexplicably does: 'From chaos toward music, from this music toward language, and from that toward knowledge, this musical stream flows toward increasing information' (Serres 2011, 109).

> And the Universe itself, does it not swirl too? Spiral galaxies, solar systems, planets, cyclones, tides, climate, do they not also depart from equilibrium, ceaselessly compensated by rhythms and returns on themselves? Or rhythms endlessly destroyed by departures from equilibrium?
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> So it is right to become a musician to inhabit one's body better, live one's life better, to attain at last the condition of Being-in-the-World. Live the rhythms of your body, of live, of rivers, of the World and of galaxies, and you will naturally find yourself to be a composer of music. In this immense musical consonance, body and life keep the beat of the rhythm kept by rivers and the planet. In the first two movements, allegro and presto, of his opus 25, Chopin allows us to hear these turbines. (Serres 2011, 68)

To make music into the promise and means of the cosmic redemption of nature from noise is to denature it, to sweep it up into an improbable and voluntaristic fable of universal rapture, the very universality of which is the proof of its pinched parochialism. The reduction of noise by music increases information, negentropically. But the increase of information gradually causes it to revert to noise, and so increases entropy. Music is cacosonically drowned by universal music. You have to like music for there to be music, but though you can understand music in general nobody can like all music in general and in principle any more than, to recall a Serresian proverb, you can sleep on both ears at once. I once heard a producer for the UK's BBC Radio 3, the station devoted, far too austerely for many nowadays, to classical music, lamenting the fact that, far from being the most homogenous audience, as you might expect, Radio 3 listeners are in fact the most contentious and internally rivalrous of any listening audience. Devotees of Handel cannot bear to be in the same room as lovers of Hindemith. Information and order, Serres has often reminded us, are rare – are rarity itself. Hence, the more ubiquitously available and coercively pervasive music is, the rarer it must become.

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