

Peter Ablinger

Hearing Hearing or: Thinking Without Words

The fact that I am speaking to you today has to do with the sad fact that the President of the Heinz von Foerster Society, Dr. Albert Müller, passed away last August. He obviously wanted me to give this lecture sometime, and to make this "sometime" a reality today is the fulfillment of a last will, a duty that I gladly take on.

I knew Albert since we were 16 (we are both from the same year). What brought us together was the music, and to be precise, the rock jazz, which was virulent around 1975, and with consequence to find ourselves in various Linz rehearsal rooms and practice cellars, in different constellations, but always with him on the electric bass and me on the electric piano, to deliver a couple of jam sessions.

Even though we had almost no contact in the 80s and 90s, Albert has shown interest in my work in the last one and a half decades and - surprisingly - once in a while showed up for a presentation of one of my pieces in Vienna. I can now blame his sympathy for bringing a composer like me into connection with the Heinz von Foerster Society, or with cybernetics.

I have already gambled away one of the few trump cards that might justify such a connection in the title of my lecture, which begins with "Hearing Hearing" and thus refers to the self-referentiality that easily reminds us of the feedback systems which are so important for cybernetics. I don't want to ride much further on an assumed connection to cybernetics, but in my lecture I will refer several times to Humberto Maturana, who as the creator of the concept of cellular autopoiesis¹ was not only a close friend and colleague of Heinz von Foerster, but is playing a crucial role also for my own thinking.

According to cybernetics, I just wish that my considerations would be interpreted as an attempt to reflect across systems. Reflecting beyond my own disciplines almost inevitably means -

¹ The term "autopoiesis": coined by Maturana around 1970, cf. Maturana / Pörkens, Vom Sein zum Tun (From Being to Doing), Heidelberg: Carl-Auer, 2008, 101

no: assumes - that I can only be dilettante in the other disciplines. Therefore, I am asking for some - but not too much - forgiveness.

Hearing hearing "2" I wrote because there was already a "Hearing hearing" in Vienna in 2008: Back then it was the title for an exhibition of my non-concert works here in the 9th district in the WUK, the Kunsthalle Exnergasse. (The bilingual catalog translated "Hören hören" with "Hearing LISTENING"). The headphones that hopefully many of you put on at the beginning also had been part of this exhibition. The experience with these headphones is perhaps the most important argument in my presentation - if not the only one. It is called "Weiss / Weisslich 36", but it could just as well be called "Hearing hearing" - at least for me one of its most far-reaching functions seems to be to let us perceive the process of perception.

Some of its users may have noticed that when the headphones are turned up loud and not touching the ears, they give off an uncomfortable feedback. The feedback signals what we are dealing with here: that it is a closed system that reflects itself - also this a reference to cybernetic feedback systems.

I would like to expand on some of the implications of "Weiss / Weisslich 36" that are important to me - knowing full well that all of you have had your own experience, and I don't want to take that away from you. My presentation should not replace your experience, it can at best supplement it, but above all it wants to get the curve towards the second part of my title, the "Thinking Without Words". Because - and I am already giving away what my presentation aims at overall - hearing is probably the most important 'actant' for me in terms of a conceptless thinking.

[HEADPHONES, FATIGUE²]

The piece 'Weiss/Weisslich 36,headphones' deals with different ways of observing the world around us—with, of course, two ways in particular: with or without headphones.

With headphones we are primarily hearing. Without headphones we engage in more of a typical human mixture of hearing, seeing, smelling, thinking and talking, being hungry, having cold feet, and not wanting to forget our impending appointment or necessary errand. But the moment we put our headphones on, we are ears through and through: the world seems to want to reduce itself to a primarily acoustic phenomenon.

² the following section is - partly changed - taken from an existing text: "Kopfhören / Notizen über das Wahrnehmen (Headphones / Notes on Perception", in: Peter Ablinger: Annäherung, Köln: Musiktexte, 2016, 219

Headphones-on and headphones-off are thus two co-existing modes of understanding the world, or re-discovering ourselves in it. Depending on the chosen mode, the world becomes another world.

But the difference lies not just in the reduction to the acoustic; there is in fact a simultaneous re-evaluation of the acoustic taking place. All sounds and noises are suddenly equivalent. Events, near and far, can all at once gain the same presence or importance, linguistic and non-linguistic noises interpenetrate each other such that it becomes difficult to concentrate solely on the messages they contain, and our mechanism for distinguishing between important and unimportant information, which is normally second nature to us, no longer works—as though we had unexpectedly landed in a Buddhist-Cagean parallel universe...

What, precisely, is happening here?

The membrane to the outer acoustic world—ordinarily the ear—is now 10 cm higher than usual. The shape of the ear conch, which screens incoming signals for spatial localization, is replaced by a neutral omnidirectional microphone—or rather two microphones: one left, one right. Without the individual form of our outer ear, however, the differentiation between left and right may be preserved, but—as with a typical stereo sound—the difference between above and below is lost.

Moreover, the depth of space diminishes due to the limited quality of the microphones. Thus hearing becomes flatter. But as with the seashell held to our ear, these limitations do not lead us to hear less, but quite the contrary. It's like in photography: the same view, photographed, makes us aware of things which we overlook in the actual presence of the subject.

This is all, by the way, in no way dependent on technological gadgetry. On occasion, we experience the same process without technology—right around the time when we get tired. Let's imagine the following situation: we have ridden the night train to a foreign city, barely closed our eyes on the train, and now sit, dead-tired in the early morning, in a crowded coffeehouse, across from the person we were scheduled to meet. We try to concentrate on the conversation, but we find it difficult. All the chipper voices at the other tables are overly present, the chorus of mumbling and clinking of cups in the background thrust into our consciousness, making it practically impossible to carry on a conversation. Our own Noise confronts us as exterior Noise, and even our own voice, which we don't notice at all when we're well-rested, seems foreign.

This all goes to show that the usual functional focus on speech during a conversation is an achievement of the waking brain. It's only partially related to the configuration of the ear itself.

Conversely: the differentiation between "important" and "unimportant" signals, which lies beyond the strength of the tired brain and which makes every sound land homogeneously in our ears, allows us to experience something which can show us (as with prepared headphones) that hearing is in no way a passive sense, as common prejudice would dictate, but that, ultimately, we hear only that which we create or 'construct'.

In Humberto Maturana, I finally found an author who has researched and articulated my assumptions (inferred from aural experience) about 'perception as construction' in a scientifically coherent manner. The process of constructing in perception - with Maturana's help - can be thought of as thinking. On the one hand, he formulates: "The thought process (...) is necessarily independent of language"³. Therefore, thinking does not require language. - 'Of course!', cries the musician: 'I can easily think a melody'. On the other hand, Maturana specifies: "Thinking is (...) a mode of operation of the nervous system that functionally reflects its internal (...) anatomical projection onto itself."⁴ We put on record: The self-reflection, the recursiveness, and not the language reference, is therefore a prerequisite for Maturana for thinking or a thinking. This now allows us to come back to perception and to link it with thinking. The thing about perception also contains a very special point for me: because, at a certain moment of my life I had chosen the topic of perception with emphasis, but not without - from the beginning on - operating with the phenomenon of illusion - or, if you will, with deceived perception. Maturana specifies: "In our experience, illusion (...) and perception are indistinguishable"⁵. Partly instructed by Maturana, partly by my own music, I finally had to accept: there is no perception - not in the sense of a perception of a world independent of us. Perception is self-portrait, is the perception of the structure of our own perception - is hearing - is self-reference - is thinking.

In addition to the melody heard or the melody presented, the musician knows another category of non-conceptual thinking, in particular the practicing musician: rehearsing, understood as a bodily memorization, whose infinite repetitions for the purpose of necessary self-control and constant adaptation also represent a kind of feedback system through which mastery is

³ Humberto Maturana: Biologie der Kognition (Biology of Cognition), in: Biologie der Realität, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 55

⁴ ibid.

⁵ ibid. 154

targeted. Let's take something as simple as a C major scale. But is it really that simple? That allows me to come back to Heinz von Foerster again; because according to him, there are no trivial systems as something that would be simply predictable and just run like a clock. Neither planetary orbits, natural constants nor C major scales are 'simple' in this sense⁶. - How many years did it take me as a pianist to make the C major work perfectly - until I could 'simply' do it!

I now come to the soporific part of my talk.

[THE UNSAYED.]

Not only the thing with the C major scale, things as a whole are not quite as easy as previously described. And Maturana, as the sole guarantor of the idea of thinking without words, is not without problems. On the one hand, he often contradicts himself regarding the dispensability of language for thought process, on the other hand, he was largely ignored by the philosophers. The latter tend to put up the greatest possible artillery against any attempt to deprive them of language - even only partially.

First an example of Maturana's own objection: "We human beings happen in language" and: "To be outside of language is absurd for us as observers"⁷. But, I oppose, what about music? Don't "we human beings" also happen in music? Certainly the music itself was often referred to as language, but on the one hand this only applies to a limited historical period, on the other hand it is hardly what Maturana means. Wanting to be in music means - conditionally - wanting to be outside of language, and for me that is not "absurd".

However, with his language-centric judgment, Maturana comes much closer to the "typical" philosopher - if there is one - than with the opposite approach. Let's take a look at someone who may be considered a typical philosopher: Giorgio Agamben, whom I appreciate for being so clear and focused that it often encourages me to formulate counter-questions which hopefully can help to sharpen the focus of my concern.

His own defense of language as a central instance never forgets to think about the fragility and danger of this instance, never forgets to carry along the unspeakable of saying. However, he also tries to assign its own limits to the unspeakable. For him, the unspeakable is only the shadow of the sayable. The unspeakable is a "language category that only

⁶ see for example: Heinz von Foerster: Der Anfang von Himmel und Erde hat keinen Namen (The beginning of heaven and earth has no name), Berlin: Kadmos, 2008, 50

⁷ Maturana: Realität (Reality), in: Biologie der Realität, 255

a speaking being can conceive"⁸. The unspeakable Agambens is only the negation of the sayable, which - and this is exactly what is typical of the philosopher - has no other form of thinking available. But there is an unspeakable that is not the negation of what can be said, and yet is not mysticism, but rather a sober description of a way of a thinking other than that of saying. Such a way of thinking, as it has been differentiated by listening and music, represents a much broader unspeakable than that which is at disposition with Agamben.

On closer inspection, it is not so much about the unspeakable than about the unsaid. Because this implies not only that which did not take place, but also that which took place *differently* than by saying. For example by singing. This unsaid then also carries out the shift from the negation of the omitted to its opposite as something positive, something that has taken place.

The decisive enthronement of language among philosophers celebrates surprisingly unanimously in the question of what makes man human, what constitutes us as human individuals. With Agamben too, the answer to this question can only be thought of in terms of language and as language.⁹ The possibility that music could also constitute us is usually far from the philosopher. Perhaps the possibility of self-constitution through singing would bring us too close to the birds? Perhaps then it would not be guaranteed that what is constituted here is really human? So often we have received that prayer from the philosophers that only language is what makes human beings that we finally believe. Every musician knows better. Every melody, every rhythm that we invent or re-create also creates us, generates us, constitutes us as an individual, different from those who invent or re-play a different melody or the same melody differently.

And of course the musicians are not the only non-linguistic subjects. A dancer is constituted by gesture and movement, a painter by color and form. And we are far from over; non-linguistic subject constitution is certainly not exhausted with the arts. Anyone who produces/creates something - a pair of shoes or a cake - also produces/creates himself as a creator through the created: one confronts the created and recognizes oneself in it. We encounter the principle of doubling within language also outside of language: as music, as dance, as cake.

The unspeakable, about which Agamben (and all philosophers) write many great books, therefore has quite different names than 'language'. But that's still not the whole spectrum. Even

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Was ist Philosophie?* (What is Philosophy?) Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2018, 65

⁹ *ibid.* 161

with arts and crafts, not all necessary extensions have been added to the subject-constituting instances beyond language: the simplest act of learning mimesis in children already contains all the components, and in a vivid way also that which goes far beyond language. If the father teaches the child "You don't", it won't be long before the child finds an opportunity to return the father a cocky triumphant "You don't". And of course the glove that the child puts on consists of much more than just the speech act. It also consists of a very specific moral tone (in a certain way music), an authoritarian gesture (thus dance), and also the accompanying enjoyment (hence the cake).

Agamben bases his considerations on the constituent function of language on the fact that there is no known human society without language. But, I have to hook up, is there a known human society without music? without picture (be it abstract or mimetic)? without "cake" (meaning without anything being made)? On the basis of this observation it is by no means possible to derive an exclusive function of language for the constitution of the human.

The philosopher notoriously overestimates language. But he has no choice. Only the immeasurable overestimation, that is, enlargement and inflation of the problem, can pull this tiny, this vanishing, up in front of the curtain and make it the center of thought in general, the center of what - if not man, then at least philosophy constitutes itself.

At the end of my little disput with Agamben, I would like to read one more sentence to you that took my breath away. Agamben formulates: "Today, philosophizing is only possible as reform of music." My blood is stagnant with this electrically charged sentence - but only if I don't continue reading on right away, because Agamben relativizes immediately with his special understanding of music, which can only be understood "if we understand music (...) as the experience of the origin and occurrence of the word."¹⁰. So Agamben stays true to word. He just emphasizes the non-conceptual, non-semantic part of speaking, its sounding, its musical aspect, so to speak. Of course this is not nothing. And personally exciting and stimulating for me. But I also have a strong tendency to want to take this sentence out of the specific context of Agamben and to adopt it as a starting point for a completely different discourse. I repeat as a refrain: "Today, philosophizing is only possible as reform of music." And, varying, I add what may only seem to some as a delusion or dream, however, I experience it as something that no longer constitutes a diametrical contradiction to daily practice: "Today, philosophizing is only possible as music."

¹⁰ *ibid.*

[AUFHÖREN.]

One of my favorite german terms is 'Aufhören' [untranslatable: it means both, to cease/to end and to suddenly listen]. In it, the ending of something and leaving behind, together with a sudden listening and awareness, hearing and thinking fall into one in an ear-opening presence, which for me is one of the highest disciplines of thinking.

It seems to me possible to draw a connecting line from 'Aufhören' understood in this way to Walter Benjamin's terms of "standstill"¹¹ and "interruption"¹², which he puts into conjunction with "awakening"¹³, and in their connection he is seeing even a "weak messianic force"¹⁴.

What is remarkable about the concept of awakening is that Benjamin does not simply (in a Buddhist mode) think of it as leaving behind an old state and entering a new one, but conceives of awakening as a transition zone in which both are present: the sleep that has not yet been completed and a wakefulness which has not yet full alertness. Benjamin speaks of "all conceivable degrees of awakening" where dream consciousness is not categorically different from awake consciousness, but exists in a wide variety of mixed states. The degrees and mixed states envisaged here provide the palette for the grammar of a consciousness in which the words neither exercise sole authority nor sovereignty. Awakening is therefore not a purified return to "awake" language, but "salvation" in the intermediate area between dream and reason. And this intermediate area is not a border - not an edge - but a threshold: in other words, an extended area, a zone of "multiple patterned, diced consciousness".¹⁵

What distinguishes the threshold from the edge could be described as horizontal versus vertical differentiation. Other than the horizontal threshold, we experience 'Aufhören' as an edge or vertical, as that, what separates 'before' and 'after', as an in-between, something that apparently does not seem to consume time. I say 'apparently' because non-temporality also takes time. Among other things, this has to do with the interval between nerve stimulus and reaction in the brain, which Helmholtz had already measured in the middle of the 19th century. This interval, the "emptiness"¹⁶, is often interpreted as the gap between us and things, as what always

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze* (On the Critique of Violence and Other Essays), Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965, 119

¹² Sven Kramer: *Walter Benjamin*, Hamburg: Junius, 2013, 133

¹³ *ibid.* 120

¹⁴ *ibid.* 133

¹⁵ *ibid.* 122

¹⁶ see: Henning Schmidgen: *Die Helmholtz-Kurven* (The Helmholtz Curves), Berlin: Merve, 2009, 13

already separates us from the 'now'¹⁷. However, the interval, the in-between can also be interpreted the other way around: Only through the interval, the emptiness we border on a now, only the in-between can guarantee a now. The emptiness, the inarticulate, the undecided, the in-between brings us closer to the present instead of distancing ourselves from it.

For an understanding of what the present can mean for us, it is not only crucial how long the transmission paths of the nerve fibers take. Different stimuli are transported in different channels at different speeds. According to own measurements, the ear - perhaps our main organ for a 'now' - is able to perceive differences well below a millisecond.¹⁸ The ear is only a few millimeters from the brain, and the nerve speed here only records a marginal 'retarding effect' between stimulus and reaction. In hearing we therefore encounter a far more accurate 'resolution' than in seeing or touching.¹⁹ In hearing we are perhaps - also physiologically - closest to a 'now'.

We can inspect this 'now' in 'Aufhören'. Let's take the common phenomenon that we only notice something the moment it stops abruptly: crickets, for example, or the buzzing of the fridge.

If something stops [aufhört] and I only notice it when it stops [aufhört], I have nevertheless noticed it, even if the 'noticing', i.e. the perception, has nothing to do with a - as always relative - simultaneity of what has been noticed and noticing itself. It is a kind of perception on the back of time. Or a perception *ex negativo*. In addition, in this perception I learn something about my own not-knowing. About something being there before I realized it. So I have access to something that is somewhat inaccessible, something that is not 'the case'. The world, therefore, is more than what is the case. And this is still not mysticism.

[MUSIC THINKS.]

In 1798, the young Friedrich Schlegel observed that musicians „had more thoughts in their music than about it.“²⁰ He adds that some find this strange or ridiculous. His observation marks in the process a historical moment of change, a transition in the musical thinking of his time: between thinking about music and the idea that music itself is the one that thinks, or at least contains thoughts.

¹⁷ see: Jonathan Crary: *Aufmerksamkeit, Wahrnehmung und moderne Kultur* (Attention, Perception and Modern Culture), Frankfurt a.M., 2002, 255

¹⁸ down to one sample difference = 0.00227 ms. See my investigation in: *Cézanne und die Musik* (Cézanne and the music), in: Peter Ablinger: *Annäherung*, Köln: Musiktexte, 2016, 233

¹⁹ The eye can no longer distinguish differences below 40ms. For the musician, 40ms and well below, are magnitudes with which he is still consciously dealing.

²⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäums Fragmente* (Stuttgart: Reclams, 2007), 140.

Music that thinks situates itself within a critical constellation with music that speaks or represents a speaker—the almost exclusive musical paradigm of the past 250 years.

Even though I have probably interpreted Schlegel's „more thoughts in music" too widely—because it does not explicitly include the difference between „music represents a thinker" and „music thinks itself"—all the same the latter thought is what I want to stay on, take up, and pursue further.

In contrast to music that speaks, music that thinks no longer wants to be a surrogate for the speaking, self-expressing individual. It no longer needs the thinker it represents, it thinks itself. It is more than what can be thought „about" it. The music is not just in our head. It is also beyond it. It draws us into something. It involves us. It lets us participate. Only part of this participation is in our head, another part is outside: in the room, in the air that vibrates, in the architecture that helps these vibrations to resonate. And the entirety of this process, the interaction of all its components, can still be called thinking.

My image of thinking music finds a welcome seconding in W.J.T. Mitchell, whose „picture theory" lends me some formulations I can paraphrase for the purposes of music:

„Sounds want the same rights as language, they do not want to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled out into 'sound studies' or lifted up into a 'music history,' but rather to be seen as complex individuals who assume multiple subject positions and identities."²¹

Music is not language, it is speaker: „An artwork is not so much a statement or a speech act as a speaker capable of innumerable utterances. The work is not a text that wants to be read, but a ventriloquist's dummy, into which we project our own voice." And although from a certain angle a work's utterances come „from us," we cannot control them. They function more like the „discourse of the unconscious"—or „as a kind of Tourette syndrome."²²

This music that thinks is therefore a kind of „actant" that cannot be strictly localized in individual thinking and perception. That which is not merely contained to individual thinking is—in accordance with systems theory—observable. Music that thinks is, at least in part, also a form of perception. But a perception that distinguishes itself from individual perception, from perception in the first degree as

²¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 247.

²² *Ibid.*, 140.

it were. From this distinction and its attendant observability, perhaps a way opens up to connect music that thinks with hearing that hears itself.

Hearing that hears itself is, on the contrary, strictly forbidden by systems theory—[Niklas] Luhmann et al.—and along with it thinking that thinks itself.²³ For systems theory, thinking means making distinctions. That can't be wrong. And I have to hesitate here before going on—if only because I owe Luhmann and systems theory so much. But I MUST go on and ask whether there could be other forms of thinking besides thinking that makes distinctions. Isn't [Walter] Benjamin's idea of interruption, the standstill of thinking, nonetheless also an act of thinking? Let's hear Benjamin again: „Thinking is not only about the movement of thoughts, but also about their stilling [*Stillstellung*].“²⁴ And how should we judge the experience with the headphones? It's not that we don't notice any distinctions with headphones—quite the opposite. But these distinctions are not automatically linked to making choices as in everyday listening, where the situation is dominated by the difference between important and unimportant. Listening with headphones paradoxically involves a distinction that does not distinguish. So: this hearing distinguishes at the level of phenomena, where it is likely to find even more details than everyday hearing, but it does not differentiate at the level of evaluation: no phenomenon, no event, is preferred to any other. Without such evaluation, however, the decision to select a certain phenomenon (e.g. in the pursuit of language)—which necessarily hides other phenomena or relegates them to the background—is suspended, thereby depriving us of the greater part of what constitutes the current „now.“

The prohibition sign erected in front of thought that thinks itself then implies a further prohibition, namely one against the contemporaneity [*Gegenwärtigkeit*] of thought. Because if it is imposed on thought never to think itself, always to think something else, it also means never being in the now, but always afterwards. In the words of the systems theorist Peter Fuchs: „The actuality of a thought (...) is characterized by the fact that it cannot imagine itself (...). The system is blind to what is going on now.“ Here too we have to ask questions about alternatives and shadings, about „degrees and mixed states.“²⁵ The paradox diagnosed above about headphones can also be formulated thus: a lessening of distinction can lead to an increase in attention and contemporaneity. The waning of a distinction that selects and hierarchizes into more important and less important events

²³ See Peter Fuchs, „Vom Zeitzauber der Musik, Eine Diskussionsanregung,“ in Dirk Baecker et al., eds., *Theorie als 4 Passion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), 224, 226.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, „Theses on the Philosophy of History,“ in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4 (1938–40), ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 396.

²⁵ Fuchs, „Vom Zeitzauber der Musik.“

allows those events to become unfiltered and equally present. But while a strictly conceptual thinking draws me away from my own present, a conceptless thinking or hearing includes me in its present. In this case observer and observed are not separated from each other; the most classical of all philosophical abysses, the subject-object dichotomy, seems to be bridged in this constellation. This would be at least an approximation of a consciousness that can imagine itself, a thought that thinks itself, and finally a hearing that hears itself.

[DISTILLED HEARING.]

In the past, I have occasionally been inclined to regard conceptless hearing as preceding conceptual thinking, but I am increasingly realizing that such a hearing is not some untouched „natural state“ that gets corrupted through conceptual thinking, but rather that it actually has to go through thinking, has to traverse it, before it can „come into itself.“ Such hearing succeeds thought, and in a way exceeds it. It has to sweat the concept out of itself, so to speak, before it becomes a „distilled“ or even „pure“ hearing—„pure“ in the sense of „pure alcohol.“

I have often described a kind of formative experience in which, during a summer walk in the fields east of Vienna, I suddenly heard the distinction in sound-color between different types of grain. But in order to hear the sonic distinction between a wheat field and a rye field swaying in the wind, I first had to pass through the act of naming, a signifying hearing, to traverse it and then tick it off. In order to „hear,“ I have to be able to turn my back on meaning and be somewhat semantically empty. Then it can start.

[HEAR LIKE A DEER.]

A final comparison is necessary here.

It can certainly be said of Buddhist meditation that it also tries to empty itself of meaning and conceptual thought. Would philosophy then label it „lost in being“? Of course, for the meditator, a term like „being“ does not play the least role. But can't one nonetheless—or precisely because of this—assume a much greater experience of contemporaneity in the meditator than in any attempt to think being? I am not a Buddhist, but I fancy I can find something comparable in music. Of course, it is clear to me that a large part of listening to music is a kind of thinking hearing or hearing thinking, which is populated with certain conceptualisms or symbolizations that it incorporates and effectively holds at the ready in the background, or else actualizes through the difference between expectation and fulfillment. But there are also moments in

hearing that are at the same time completely empty and yet reach a degree of presence that corresponds to the degree of emptiness: strongest presence with greatest possible semantic emptiness. This is perhaps comparable to sudden fright. Suppose I'm alone in the forest and it's pitch dark. Suddenly I hear a noise. I freeze and my ears are pricked to the limit. Any thought would be an unforgivable inattention. I am all open expectation. Or let's imagine a deer in the same situation. The way its movement freezes at the moment of the noise. Its survival depends on 100% attention. After all: the danger that it could be distracted by a conceptual thought does not exist for the deer. Arguably, it is here that the Benjaminian concept of the stilling of thought is realized in its pure or „distilled“ form.

What matters is this: With Benjamin, with the Buddhists, with non-symbolic hearing, with fright, maybe even with the deer—in all these cases, stilled thinking is experienced as the most concentrated form of presence, as the closest possible approximation of contemporaneity.

(This is a mix of translations: the paragraphs following "Headphones, Fatigue" is translated by Meaghan Burke for an upcoming book of selected writings in English; from "MUSIC THINKS" to the end, the translation is by Seth Brodsky; all other parts are just a roughly edited google translation.)