

Standing Still in Music

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Our conception of music as movement seems to be so self-evident that we sometimes forget the fact that in different musical epochs different aesthetic concepts of *movement* also determine music.

Thus, the moving in baroque music is certainly of a different quality than the romantic streaming, constantly developing movement in a Wagner opera.

The Swiss music theorist Ernst Kurth (1886–1946) writes about the quality of movement in music:

The basic content of the melodic is, in the psychological sense, not a succession of tones, [...] but the moment of transition between the tones and across the tones; transition is movement, a process prevailing between the tones, a force sensation flowing through their chain [...].

The sensations of movement, which we have to recognize as the connecting, flowing-through force between the tones, point to supporting and generating primordial processes of musical creation, to energies whose character we have to recognize as psychic states of tension that urge to be released into movement.”¹

The quotation is deliberately chosen here because of the temporal proximity of Ernst Kurth and Émile Jacques-Dalcroze: It seems to me that both of them, against the background of a very specific listening experience (namely the late Romantic one), ascribed to music as such a fundamentally dynamic, i.e., kinetic quality. In this sense, even what does not sound can be movement, insofar as it takes on a dynamic role in the musical course.

Music example:

Anton Bruckner: Symphonie No. 2 in c-minor, WAB 102, “Pausen-Symphonie”

At the same time, Schoenberg, Webern and Berg already write music which in the end leads to a "spatialisation" of music. Later, La Monte Young, for example, describes "stasis" as a spatial quality of music.

[This kind of music] interests me because it involves stasis in contrast to climax.

I feel that in most music peculiar to the Western hemisphere since the thirteenth century, climax and directionality have been among the most important guiding factors, whereas music before that time, [...]used stasis as a point of structure a little bit more the way certain Eastern musical systems have.

¹ Ernst Kurth: *Grundlagen des Linearen Kontrapunkts. Bachs melodische Polyphonie*, Hildesheim 1996 (First ed.: Bern 1917), S. 2

[...] We have the same information repeated over and over and over again.²

For La Monte Young, the classical concept of a work with its purposeful progression of tension is no longer of interest. Standing still is supposed to take place in the sounding itself; incessant repetition/circling, even distribution of musical events or drones, according to La Monte Young, all create an impression of space and less of time.

Music examples:

Anton Webern: Klavier Variationen Op. 27

Perotin: Sederunt Principes

La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela: Dream House

For Kurth and Jacques-Dalcroze, music is an expressive carrier of a kinetic energy; real standstill would only exist when the piece is over (and in Kurth's understanding not even then, since he located the origin of all movement in the psyche of man). For a composer like La Monte Young, standstill itself becomes an aesthetic ideal with the aim of turning away from a classical-romantic understanding of music.



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² Friedrich Munchen (Ed.): La Monte Young & Marian Zazeela: Selected Writings, first ed. 1969; New Ed. 2004, p. 24