

## **"Something Inaudible":**

**Anthony Burgess's Mozart and the Wolf Gang  
and Kirsty Gunn's The Big Music as Literary Music through  
Roland Barthes's Concept of Listening**

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**Eric Behr**

In his essay entitled "Listening," Roland Barthes describes three types of listening. Barthes distinguishes between listening and hearing and describes the latter as a "physiological phenomenon" and the former a "psychological act" (Barthes 245). The first type of listening, according to Barthes, is the animalistic act of orienting the "physiological faculty of hearing" toward certain "indices" such as a predator or other stimuli (245). The second, he calls a "deciphering" and this refers to the locating of meaning within sounds, specifically in language. According to Barthes, this is where the human capabilities of listening begin. He suggests that what "fundamentally distinguished man from animal" was the "intentional reproduction of rhythm" (248). From rhythm, and the reproduction of rhythm, comes the sign which is "based on an oscillation, that of the marked and the non-marked" long before the introduction of writing (249). "By rhythm" comes the sign and thus "listening ceases to be a purely supervisory activity" as it was in the instance of the animalistic orientation of hearing but rather "becomes creation" through language and the reproduction of rhythm. In this second type of listening "what is listened for is no longer the possible (the prey, the threat, or the object of desire which occurs without warning), it is the secret; that which, concealed in reality, can reach the human consciousness only through a code, which serves simultaneously to encipher and decipher that reality" (249). This type of listening is extended beyond the physiological faculties of hearing into the realm of reading. The sign becomes represented in text and consequently listening becomes a psychological process completely independent of hearing.

The focus of Barthes' essay, however, is on the third type of listening which he claims to be "entirely modern" and focuses on the unconscious aspect of speech or what is absent in speech rather than present (245). Barthes' third listening type is "granted the power (and virtually the function) of playing over unknown spaces" (258). Barthes explains in the words of Dennis Vasse, that this type of listening offers, "precisely what the speaker does not say: the unconscious texture which associates his body-as-site with his discourse: an active texture which re-actualizes, in the subject's speech, the totality of his history" (qtd. in Barthes 255-56). Though Barthes compares this type of listening rigorously to the psychoanalytic method of treatment brought forward by Freud,

Barthes suggests that listening “includes in its field not only the unconscious in the topical sense of the term, but also, so to speak, its lay forms: the implicit, the indirect, the supplementary, the delayed,” relying less on the signified or the signifier found in the deciphering form of listening and more on the actual form, rhythm and cadence of the speaker (258).

Barthes admits that the third type of listening can be found “chiefly in the field of art” and in particular music (259). Barthes refers to the compositions of John Cage and the problems of attempting to listen to this kind of a work in the second sense, or rather trying to decipher the meaning of the composition as a whole when the third method seems to be better employed in such an instance. Barthes states that, listening to John Cage requires one to listen to “each sound one after the next” rather than “its syntagmatic extension” (259). A good example is Cage’s 4’33” in which a pianist is instructed to sit at a piano and time the silence as he or she plays nothing. The goal is to emphasize the silences inherent in music; the goal is to emphasize the cadences, which John Cage feels is just as important as the notes themselves. Such an approach to listening promotes “not the advent of a signified, object of a recognition or of a deciphering, but the very dispersion, the shimmering of signifiers, ceaselessly restored to a listening which ceaselessly produces new ones from them without ever arresting their meaning” (259). In the case of John Cage and other avant-garde composers, Barthes suggests that the individual textures and notes are more important to consider than understanding the work as a whole because the work does not necessarily arrest meaning.

Unfortunately, Barthes does not consider in this essay forms of art outside of music. If the second type of listening, or the act of deciphering, can be applied to text due to a disconnect with the physiological phenomenon of hearing, then surely the third type of listening described by Barthes can also be applied to text. In this essay, I will demonstrate how two novels, Anthony Burgess’s *Mozart and the Wolf Gang* and Kirsty Gunn’s *The Big Music*, promote a style of reading analogous to Barthes third type of listening and that in order to understand these texts a reader must approach them like music rather than like typical novels.

Before examining the texts, it might be prudent to offer an explanation as to why the following is not the typical style of writing in the same manner that John Cage’s work is not a typical style of composition. According to Theodore W. Adorno: “The consciousness of the mass listeners...listens according to formula” (45). In essence, I would argue, that it is easier for a listener to accept, enjoy and remember a piece of music if it has clear “climaxes and repetitions” (41). For Adorno, composing music in a manner that obeys formula, or does “what everybody does” is ultimately “the sacrifice of individuality” (40). Adorno also claims that the reduction of music to the formulaic reduces the ability of the listener. I argue that the same can be said about novels. The texts that will be

discussed in this essay employ techniques that challenge the accepted formulae usually associated with novels: namely narrative arcs, climaxes, traditional formats, and narrative authority. Through a variety of subversive techniques that provide an "inquiry into the very notion of subjectivity" we will find that a text can promote a similar experience to the kind of listening described by Barthes in relation to avant-garde music (Hutcheon 1998).

The first work that I will examine is Anthony Burgess' *Mozart and the Wolf Gang*: a novel that attempts to provide a musical experience through narrative. The narrative depicts "an improbable heaven with squabbling sanctified musicians in it" casually watching a play about the life of Mozart some "two hundred years after his death" (Burgess 92). *Mozart and the Wolf Gang* is full of speculation and argument about the location of Mozart within the realm of heaven and the justification of "the layman's adoration" for Mozart (92).

The text however does not come to many conclusions about Mozart, nor does its narrative offer much coherence. The work simply gives an array of differing opinions and ideas about Mozart as a man, the relevance of his life to the music he created and about music in general, none of which are conclusive or even enlightening. The arguments presented by the various voices—there are over fifty of them—seem futile because of the sheer number of these voices presented without focus. The first arguments between Beethoven, Wagner, and a few other composers about the purity of Mozart's music, which I will discuss more fully later, are compelling but are interrupted by act one of the play. Mendelssohn puts forward his "propósito" to continue the discussion after the conclusion of the play with no title, claiming that they will have plenty of flexible time to return to the topic (15). The expectation of the reader is that, once the play has concluded, the novel will return to the argument so it can be fleshed out, but instead an entirely different group of musical figures are introduced and the subject of musical purity is abandoned. Every section of arguing musicians is interrupted in a similar fashion either by the play or the K. 550 section. The novel, if approached in the pursuit of some insight into Mozart's significance would provide a cacophonous experience. None of the characters recur and therefore no one voice is given more credence than any other. Even Burgess loses his authority to an argument with himself in which his personality becomes split in two, one named Anthony and the other Burgess. These personalities ultimately become "tired of talking" to and tired of "hearing" each other, rather than reaching a coherent conclusion (102). The narrative of Burgess' novel never arrests its meaning as a whole as its discourse is never allowed to come to fruition.

Meaning is also subverted by a non-formulaic narrative structure. *Mozart and the Wolf Gang* is fragmented in its presentation. As mentioned earlier, none of the characters recur. No progression of character or plot occurs. Time seems to move forward in that a play is put on a stage in various acts and that conversations occur, but, other than that, there is no real narrative progression.

The play of Mozart's life is incoherent. It depicts random and seemingly inconsequential scenes that are more than likely completely fabricated including a scene of billiards at the imperial palace. Throughout the novel it is suggested that the play's significance is questionable. Directly following the third act, the play is referred to as "totally preposterous" and having no "pertinence to the artist's (Mozart) work" (76). One character even goes so far as to say that "Mozart's life is not worth presenting," rejecting the idea that narrative can hold any credence on the significance or insignificance of music.

Within the continuous arguments found throughout the work, the only discernible consensus is the need for Barthes's third type of listening; "renouncing his inwardness" (Barthes 259) while listening, meaning to renounce those meanings projected onto music by the listener. The most poignant example is Beethoven's rebuttal to his own ninth symphony. He refers to the stupidity of attaching meaning to the fourth movement by denoting it the "Ode to Joy" and including lyrics. According to Beethoven, "joy can be joy in anything—in shoving Jews into gas ovens...in butchering Slavs, gypsies and sexual inverts, in turning a Linz house painter into a God" (13). Beethoven argues that by adding signifiers to music, which without lyrics "has no referent" (93), music is allowed to be politicized and used to support violence and atrocities like the holocaust. Beethoven states the "to have musical instruments pretending to be inferior to the human voice" was a "sin" (13). Giving labels to music, or denoting meaning, is called "the verbal heresy" by Beethoven (15). Instruments being greater than voice are perhaps the only running theme in the novel. It is seen again in the second act of the play when Constanze tells her sister that though instruments were once "humble accoutrements" that "now they have a soul" and are more perfect than the human voice "enthroned on high/ too long" (41). The true way to listen to music, according to Mozart and the Wolf Gang is to separate it from the signified in a manner similar to Barthes listening.

Due to the ultimately fragmented narrative that lacks a locatable authority or meaning via its syntagmatic extension, the focus of the work is placed onto the individual fragments instead. Like the avant-garde works of John Cage, Mozart and the Wolf Gang forces the reader to pay attention to the individual sounds of the text rather than deciphering its meaning. Some of the best examples come from within the acts of the play. The format of the play draws attention to Burgess's manipulation of phonetics. Consider the simultaneous utterances of Constanze and Aloysia to Mozart regarding a plagiarized composition:

Constanze:

Forgive him sir.

He has good reason.

Aloysia:

Don't give him, sir

The chance to season

To plagiarize	Such blatant lies
Is worse than treason.	With spurious reason.
Observe the look	Observe the look
That films his eyes.	That films his eyes.
Administer	Administer
A brief rebuke.	A grand rebuke.
Make it appear	Out on his ear.
What happened here	He is a mere
Did not occur.	Ungrateful cur.
Forgive him, sir.	Dismiss him, sir.

(32)

These two sets of dialogue which occupy the same space in time, force the reader to examine both sets carefully for the intimate phonetic relationship they have with each other instead of simply deciphering the meaning of each passage. It is obvious that Constanze is expressing a desire for mercy while Aloysia is expressing a desire for swift justice, but that is not what is interesting here. Both sentiments could have been expressed in a line or two of traditional dialogue, but here we are given rhythmic and phonetic harmonies to express disharmony of thought. This is a common occurrence in the various acts of the play and each provides a similar level of phonetic equivalence as is displayed in the passage above.

But, this is not all. Mozart and the Wolf Gang causes the reader to listen intently to each "sound" of a passage in a unprecedentedly ambitious way: The section entitled K. 550 (1788) is not only completely separate from the tone, style, and narrative of the rest of the work (as it takes place neither in the improbable heaven nor the play depicting Mozart's life), but it also focuses on the rhythm of the language used in a way that is not located in the rest of this and perhaps any other book. By presenting the section as K. 550 (1788) the reader is ultimately forced to look at the following passages in their movements not for their narrative meaning, but for their temporal and rhythmic relation to Mozart's most famous symphony. If taken at face value as narrative, the passages are repetitive and could be easily regarded as "gibberish" (92). As stated by the character Burgess, in music "there are phones but no phonemes" and, therefore, an attempt to decipher meaning from this section seems futile (92). Thus, Burgess's text is presented in a manner that is to be read consistent with the manner its character's prescribe music to be listened to.

Kirsty Gunn's *The Big Music* presents itself as a selection of papers, interviews, historical documents and narratives that attempt to reflect the structure of a piobaireachd, a piece of bagpipe music orchestrated around a constant drone and separated into four movements. The main narrative of the

novel is revealed like the music of a piobaireachd; it introduces a stripped down moment—that of John holding a baby waiting for inspiration in the highland hills of Scotland—and then slowly adds context and embellishment to that moment like the notes of a piobaireachd “held against the line of the drone” and, eventually, both the narrative and the notes “have no choice about where they will go, only the inevitability of its eventual return” to the original moment or theme (Gunn 128-129). The novel presents this reflection of the piobaireachd as a meticulous collection of “selected papers” made by the character Helen, and therefore places her as the apparent authority of the narrative. However, this allocation of authority becomes problematized with the inclusion of extensive appendices and footnotes that intrude on the main narrative in a manner that challenges, as Linda Hutcheon’s theory of Post-Modernism would suggest, “traditional notions of perspective” and provides an “inquiry into the very notion of subjectivity” (Hutcheon 1998). Through narrative and hyper-textual elements, postmodern tendencies described by Linda Hutcheon, create a narrator who becomes “disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate” and a text that often “undermines its own omniscience” (1998). By problematizing both the narrative and hyper-textual elements of *The Big Music*, Kirsty Gunn brings constant attention to the structure and style of the text and, by doing so, exposes its potential as a musical experience through Barthes’s listening.

The narrative of *The Big Music* is undermined first and foremost by its own presentation. In the place of chapter numbers and/or titles are a slew of official document titles such as “one/ first paper,” (Gunn 3) the ever repeating “insert/ John Callum” (13) and others like “embellishment/ 1a: domestic detail: Margaret McKay” (197). The titles, however, do not seem to correlate with the format of each selection. For instance, each section entitled “narrative” contains passages that resemble recorded interviews while sections entitled “papers” are clearly prose narratives. Even though the proximal correlation between selection format and title are consistent throughout the text, the gap between what is presented and what is typically expected in terms of formatting, especially in the aforementioned instance, undermines the concept of these selections as official documents. In this manner Gunn, without even having to regard the actual content of each selection, problematizes the potential authority of the narrative by making the oddness of its structure obvious. The consistency between format and title suggest, rather than a collection of documents or a typical novel, a musical experience with recurring themes and melodies through which the chapter headings are a guide.

Though *The Big Music* does not have the breadth of characters found in *Mozart and the Wolf Gang*, there is a difficulty in locating the narrator/collector in a similar way that authority was difficult to locate in Burgess’ work. The narrative voice is referred to in several footnotes – the invasiveness of which I

will discuss later—that suggest it might be Helen MacKay (Gunn 73). However, it is very clear that there are details in the narrative that she could not possibly know given her location during each event. This is most apparent in the inclusion of John’s delusions. In the second movement, John is lying in a bed seeing visions of his father and mother who have been dead for forty and thirty years respectively (86). These hallucinations are included in the selection of papers in spite of the fact that John is placed in a room so far removed from the rest of the house and its occupants that Callum had “never been in that little room before” (132). Helen and the other members of the household could not possibly know of anything happening to John in his isolated state – never mind his introspective thoughts and hallucinatory visions – and there is no evidence that John ever becomes coherent enough to inform Helen or any potential collector of documents of his state. John himself cannot be an active narrator, and these accounts could not be procured from any journals that he might have made at the time due to narrative insights that seem to go beyond his experience. In an earlier part of the novel, for example, the narrator refers to the fact that John “needs a lullaby now, all right, a real lullaby, to keep her still and steady” in spite of the fact that, according to Gunn’s footnotes, “it is unlikely that John Sutherland would have known any of these” lullabies and a “different voice” is implied (25). Both the narrative as well as the footnotes makes it difficult to pinpoint a singular narrative voice, and therefore Gunn presents an unreliability that makes it difficult to immerse oneself in the narrative.

The footnotes are intrusive to the flow and interpretation of the narrative. The footnotes point to locations further in the novel where “details of the Sutherland family and the history of where they have lived” (8) or “how John Callum MacKay returned to playing his father’s instrument” (81) can be located within the novel rather than allowing the typical narrative flow to keep its authority. Gunn goes even so far as to use the footnotes to provide interpretation for passages such as the hints described above toward Helen as a narrator or directing the reader to the “ambivalence” of the A note found in “various sections” of the text (160). What is confusing, other than the blatant undermining of the reader’s own interpretations, is that some of these invasive footnotes do not include answers but rather questions. A particularly interesting footnote reads as follows:

Who speaks here, and about whom? Is it John Mackay himself, addressing Callum on one of his return journeys home? Or is it the narrative voice we have been hearing more and more throughout “The Big Music”....or is it John’s father or grandfather...or is it...all of these? (179)

In this footnote, Gunn deliberately refuses to give the reader a clear answer to the ambiguity it *brings attention* to. If the note does not enlighten or clarify, then the only purpose for the inclusion of the footnote seems to be to make the narrative more opaque. Other peculiar footnotes include the one which points, for no discernible reason, to the footnote directly preceding it (229). Because their existence is often perplexing and, because they serve more to confuse than to clarify, the footnotes found in *The Big Music* become as unreliable as the un-locatable narrator and undermines their authority in providing meaning.

The extensive appendices are as perplexing as the footnotes. They completely contradict the style of the narrative. In *The Big Music*, the scenery, the characters, the house and rooms are barely described. The focus of Gunn's description throughout the narrative is placed on a representation of an audible experience rather than a visual one. This focus allows a reader to fill in the visual gaps with his or her own imaginative interpretation, and creating a sense of subjectivity. However, in the same manner that the footnotes interrupt the narrative with forced guided interpretation, the appendices pervade the subjective experience of the novel with detailed maps (383, 387, 397), blueprints of the house (464-465), and even examples of scored bagpipe music of the piobaireachd written by John in the narrative (456-459). And, like the footnotes, the information included in the appendices seems odd at times. In some instances, the information is relevant to the story, such as the history of the clearances (390) and is even sometimes illuminating, like the inclusion of the connotations of each note in bagpipe music near the end of the appendices (443); however, in other instances, the information seems completely irrelevant, such as the inclusion of the eradication of the wolf population in the United Kingdom. In some cases, the appendices refer the reader to look back to the narrative for information that the footnotes refer the reader to find in the appendices, leading the reader on a circular journey for non-existent answers (399). Since both the narrative and the appendices are presented as a collection of documents, both claim authority. Yet they refer to each other in the aforementioned convoluted manner, diminishing the authority of both. To reinforce the invalidity of the appendices, they also lie. The appendices refers to archives that do not exist (453) and, though they are sprinkled with information about the history of the highlands, which may or may not be true, these "facts" are strewn in amongst fabricated documents related to the Sutherland family. The papers and appendices are presented like a history even though *The Big Music* is clearly a work of fiction that Kirsty Gunn asserts the right "to be identified as author of" (copyright page). Throughout the entirety of *The Big Music*, Gunn destroys the illusion of an academic presentation by exposing it as a meticulous labour of craft rather than an



amalgamation of facts, and she does this while also subverting the cohesiveness of narrative expected of the formulaic readers of a novel.

Like *Mozart and the Wolf Gang*, the presentation of *The Big Music* undermines the ability of the reader to find authoritative meaning in the text. The narrator is unreliable. The narrative seems to have no resolution or climax, and the footnotes and appendices ultimately fail in giving needed insight into the characters and events in the novel because they are, likewise, untrustworthy. Because the presentation of the novel simultaneously undermines the narrative and the appendices as well as the footnotes and their authority, the simultaneous presentation of all these must be a vehicle for something else. Consider this passage presented at the novel's opening:

The hills only come back the same: I don't mind, and all the flat moorland and the sky. I don't mind they say, and the water says it too, those black falls that are rimmed with peat, and the mountains in the distance to the west say it, and to the north. . . . As though the whole empty wasted lovely space is calling back at him in the silence that is around him, to this man out here in the midst of it, in the midst of all these hills and all the air. That his presence means nothing, that he could walk for miles into these same hills, in bad weather or in fine, could fall down and not get up again, could go crying into the peat with music for his thoughts maybe, and ideas for a tune, but none of it according him a place here, amongst the grasses and the water and the sky . . . . Still it would come back to him the same in the silence, in the fineness of the air . . . . I don't mind, I don't mind, I don't mind. (Gunn 3, Author's emphasis)

The vivid auditory imagery of the highlands presented here in the "opening movement" recurs throughout the work, as does the refrain "I don't mind" (3). This passage sets the tone for the rest of Gunn's novel by presenting writing that will be embellished upon like the opening melody of a piobaireachd. Its stylistic importance is emphasized by the passage's recurrence at the very end of the novel, again reflecting the musical structure of the piobaireachd rather than following the typical formula of the novel. The imagery of the highland hills and their sounds recur alongside the imagery of family in John Callum's several hallucinations that appear in about the proximity in each of the novels movements. Again, this suggests a musical style of writing with melodies and themes rather than plot points. The dialogue and narration of the novel often uses sentence fragments to create the illusion of meter. For example:

The most simple fear perhaps the most dangerous part of all.  
For the criminal has nothing with him, nothing.

To protect a child from the weather, to keep her from the sudden  
cold  
– and though the dogs have a scent, he could be anywhere out  
there...  
Anywhere.  
But for the thin white blanket.  
The white blanket that Iain will see.  
The flag to bring her home. (48-49).

In this example, one sentence fragment seems to complete the other, but the two are separated. Odd compositions, like these, bring attention to themselves and their rhythm. Gunn's novel is undoubtedly prose, but the language is rhythmic. The pauses forced upon the reader by oddly placed punctuation create and emphasize cadence in a similar manner to John Cage's 4'33". By undermining the presumed trajectory of the novel, or its syntagmatic extension, and by deliberately filling the entire work with sentence fragments and odd punctuation, Gunn places the focus on the sentence structure, the ellipsis, the imagery, the repetition and cadence in the novel and how they relate to the piobaireachd, forcing the reader into a close musical reading of the text that may or may not "arrest meaning".

To power through *The Big Music* or *Mozart and the Wolf Gang* in the hope of resolution or revelation in the form of a narrative arc is counterintuitive to the experience provided by the language and cadence of either novel in the same way that longing for the conclusion of a piece of music to find its signified meaning seems counterintuitive. By abandoning what Adorno would call a "formulaic listening" and through a close analysis of music as well as texts with the type of listening proposed by Barthes, we become better "listeners" and better readers, equipped with the ability to find the musical in the written.

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