Phenomenology as a Tool for Musical Analysis

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UNDERLYING musical analysis is a fundamental yet obscured premise. This is the implicit belief that the knowledge that is acquired as a result of analytical methods is and ought to be objective. The "ought to be" half of that belief is rooted in generations of scientific methodology in which the a priori separation between subject and object was a tacit axiom. The method utilized by scientists (and by musical analysts) is tacitly thought to cleanse the experiment (or analysis) of the confounding variables that a too involved subject might cause. That knowledge is objective is of course a myth, whether it refers to music, the other arts, or the sciences. The noted physical chemist and philosopher, Michael Polanyi, demonstrated that the scientist's "personal" participation is an indispensable characteristic of scientific knowledge. The scientist is not only involved in scientific conclusions but in "personal" decisions. There is an implicit belief by the scientist that his view of the context at hand or broadly speaking of the world is the most cogent. Polanyi points out that the dogma which attempts to make knowledge impersonal in our culture has split science from humanity. Marjorie Grene, with an overt debt to Polanyi's formulation, notes that since the time of Plato Western man has endeavored to acquire objective, certain, and impersonal knowledge. In Western man's zeal to obtain objective knowledge, the "knower" has been lost. Polanyi and Grene


2 The Knower and the Known (Berkeley, 1974).
bring import to the consideration of the personal (experiential) involvement of a "knower" in all acts of understanding. Hence, for Polanyi and Grene—who are in this context representative of current philosophers of science—all knowledge is "personal." Similarly, the use of traditional methods of analysis in applied theory does not objectify the conclusions drawn by the analyst. Value assumptions and personal decisions are embedded (and obscured) in the constitution and use of the methods employed.

Standard theoretical designs in music theory tend to result in a dominant position of the method in relation to the work. The method dominates the work by forcing what one can know and report about that work into the matrix of categorial characteristics that constitute the method. The analyst cannot remain "open" to all of the potential dimensions of meaning that might emerge in a work; the method forms a conceptual obstacle between the analyst and the music. The method decides what musical data should and can be collected and how that data can be treated. Implicitly, there is no experiential person, no "knower."

Phenomenologists presume that what one hears is affected by how one hears. The analyst's modes of orientation to a work must be considered and articulated. One can close or open many potential meanings of a work given a particular mode of orientation. A distinctive phenomenological tactic is that, rather than manipulate a work through a formal grid of analytical questions or positions, one responds to questions posed by the work. The interpreter discovers that, in the traditional sense of the terms "subject" and "object," he is now object; the music, as subject, questions the analyst.

Some phenomenologists accept that at the least there may be syntactical and "depth" (i.e., referential) meanings in a work that

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3 Bas C. van Fraassan presents a convincing discussion of the scientist's "commitment" to a particular research method rather than to another. The scientist's "commitment" is generated by criteria such as coherence and parsimony exemplified by a particular method as well as his own abilities and training to utilize various research designs. Thus "commitment" is "personal." See The Scientific Image (Oxford, 1980).

4 The presentation of phenomenology below is by no means an exhaustive discussion of this philosophical movement. Phenomenology has multifarious divergences within the field and has served as a tool for analysis in disciplines as varied as art criticism, theology, psychotherapy and sociology. The particular "brand" of phenomenology presented in this essay is more German than French in its roots and within the German phenomenological tradition, more Heideggerian than Husserlian.

must be attended to. Other phenomenologists have demonstrated that there are also "ontological" meanings in some works which present a glimpse of the historically based "world" of the composer. The work functions not only as a series of solved (by the composer and reconstructed by the analyst) problems to technical questions. The work also functions as a dynamic interplay of the world of the composer symbolically transformed into a musical language and the sounds in their particular syntactical presentation. It is this polyphonic texture of syntactical, semantic, and ontological meanings that is an important part of any functioning, experiential work.

Phenomenological analysis is grounded in an a priori reverence for the human element in music. At both the composing and interpreting stages, music is imbued with a human presence. That presence is marked by the historical being there of the composer and the equally historical being here of the analyst. While it may not be possible to fully decipher what a composer's intention was or is, it is necessary to understand a work within the perspective of the world in which it was written. Great music grounds the world of the composer as the world is "brought to a stand" in the experience of the music. Such a happening or historical event in great music must be received and described by the musical analyst. The phenomenological analyst accepts the responsibility to "hold open" the world of the composer. Through such an act of appreciation, the world of the composer is preserved and is allowed to manifest itself. Thus, phenomenological literature has made major strides in articulating what musical analysts have largely left tacit. No one tends to deny that great works of music function at one level as symbols; we are metaphorically transported into the world of the composer as we attend to the work. In that transportation we still remain, through our mode of orientation, in our own time and historical

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8 This is a Langerian theme. See Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 246-65.
setting. In experiencing the ontological world of Bach we do not step out of our own world but become more knowingly present. The work of art calls into question our own mode of existence. A current musical analysis takes place in the unity and continuity of late twentieth-century life experience. When we move into the world of the composer, we do not discontinue dwelling in our own world; we come home to it with a renewed sense of curiosity and interest. For in “bringing to a stand” in sound, his world, a composer does not create some chimerical place. The great composer injects, through his manipulation of sound, the factual day-to-day world in which he exists in a new form. In remaining open to that world, the analyst does not respond to it purely and objectively but within the boundaries and limitations of his own world and culture.\textsuperscript{11}

Many if not most theoretical systems of musical analysis break down when an attempt is made to apply them to atonal and electronic music. The purpose of this essay is to present a systematic and cogent method for doing musical analysis of these works. Phenomenological analysis is not limited to these works; it works well in all styles, tonal or atonal. However, since there is a plethora of fruitful methods for musical analysis of tonal music, it might be a more propitious tactical move to bring phenomenology into the field of musical analysis through the “back door.” This does not diminish the impressive power and worth of traditional designs. The point being suggested is that applied music theory can be broadened to include the implementation of philosophical interpretation.

Countless volumes have been written concerning phenomenology in the field of aesthetics and specifically as a tool for doing art criticism. Relatively little has been presented connecting music and phenomenology. In this endeavor, the recent work of F. Joseph Smith is important.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, in almost all of the writings about phenomenology there are few actual examples of doing the phenomenological analysis of music.\textsuperscript{13} The second half of this

\textsuperscript{11} Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp. 235-73.


\textsuperscript{13} At the time this essay was accepted for publication (in Nov., 1981) one of the few available examples was Thomas Clifton, “Music as Constituted Object,” in Smith, In Search of Musical Method, pp. 73-98. Since that time, three books have been published that incorporate extensive phenomenological analysis of music. They are: Thomas Clifton, Music
Phenomenology as a Tool

essay presents an in-depth phenomenological analysis of a large scoped work, Poème électronique by Edgard Varèse. Systematically moving through the levels of syntax, semantics, and ontology, this analysis provides a practical and transferable application of phenomenological method for the analysis of music.

The Procedure

The procedure for phenomenological analysis carried out in Poème électronique begins by listening “openly” to the piece, allowing any dimension of meaning (syntactical, semantic, or ontological) to emerge. The purpose of these “open” listenings is to orient the analyst to the work. These are termed “open” because unlike later listenings the analyst may respond to any level of meaning in the work. The amount of “open” listenings depends upon the analyst and the work. Each “open” listening is followed by a reflective description of that listening. This description reports in narrative form what was heard and the analyst's mode of orientation toward the work.

The next stage is to listen specifically for syntactical meanings. During this set of several listenings and descriptions, the analyst must attempt to bracket out semantic and ontological meanings that might come to mind while doing the syntactical section of the analysis. Syntactical listenings start at a more fundamental level than the level of musical form. Before one hears music intellectually as sound in form, one can hear sound as such. To do so requires a bracketing out of one's formal training. To hear sound as such is not unlike the suggestion by Roman Ingarden that one should attend to a literary work, at a fundamental level of syntax, as a series of pure “word sounds.”

In hearing words as unalloyed phonemes, one attempts to bracket out the semantic (or referential) meanings that usually mark the process of listening to or reading ordinary language. The unadulterated “word sounds” may give the literary critic a sense of the flowing quality or perhaps the jagged texture of a text that would not be so evident without such a hearing.

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In the case of a musical work, the results of such a listening for a fundamental level of syntax can be an astounding experience of hearing sound purely as such. This kind of listening heretofore may have been more privy to very highly trained and sensitive musicians. After all, great performers attend very carefully to the sound of their tone or to the texture of their sound, etc.

Remaining at the level of syntax, these musical sounds come together at higher levels of syntax as we note and attend to formal structures. At this point in the analysis, traditional methods could be implemented to support and embellish the phenomenological analysis of musical syntax. This would be especially warranted if the work being studied were a tonal piece. In this case, traditional procedures like those of Schenker, Jan LaRue, or others could be used to uncover and articulate elements of musical syntax and style that a phenomenological inquiry might miss. Of course, the reverse might be the case as well; phenomenology provides a method that may uncover dimensions of syntax not usually explicated in conventional approaches to musical analysis. This certainly strengthens the case for a synthesis of phenomenological description with other traditional forms of musical analysis.

The next section of the phenomenological procedure presented in this essay requires the analyst to report semantic meanings. Discussion of semantic (and in the next section, ontological) meanings may appear radical to many analysts in music. Nevertheless, many of the important dimensions of meaning in music lie outside of the context of musical syntax. After this section of listenings and descriptions of semantic meaning, the same process is followed for the uncovering of ontological meanings. It must be noted that semantic or ontological meanings may not be forthcoming in all musical works. More will be said of these dimensions of meaning below and specifically during the musical analysis.

After having described the specific levels of syntax, semantics, and ontology, the analyst again listens "openly" to the work. In the final "open" listenings (and subsequent descriptions) the syntactical, semantic, and ontological levels of meaning may stand out in a conceptual, contrapuntal design of meaning-dimensions. They do not appear as separate or linear foci but in a three-dimensional texture of meanings that embellish and amplify each other by their very distinctiveness yet organic bond as part of the same work.

When sounds are manipulated by a composer and finally brought
into a gestalt as a finished work, we have a context in which sounds may be heard purely as sounds. In fact, it is especially when a composer “sets” his ontological world that this opening of a world in the sounds seems also to open the sound as sound. For instance, in Heidegger’s example of an ancient Greek temple, the work materials that form the syntax are the stones that constitute the temple structure. If you passed by stones of the same material in the street you would kick them out of your way or hardly notice them at all. But when these stones form a great work of architecture and a world of an ancient Greek people has been set into them, we now come to see the stone for the first time as stone. We study and admire it as a result of its context. Syntactical meaning (“stoniness”) is thus enhanced by greater semantic and ontological meaning. The three are inseparably bound in the finished work. It follows that not only are the work materials (syntax) affected by the setting of an ontological world; Heidegger notes that the reverse is also true. To say that music can “ground history” is to point to the Heideggerian assertion that the ontological world of a historical era and its people is finite. As essential values, outlooks, decisions, potentials, and realities change, an ontological world changes. Thus, the sounds of some musical works enable the ontological world of a composer’s lived “time” to be grounded in those sounds. The musical work thus makes a “new space” in sound for the composer’s knowledge and experience of his or her world.

In the relationship of syntax and ontological world, each carries itself further than either alone would have been able to go. The sound seems to be opened by the presence of an ontology, and the ontological world set into the sound is thereby grounded for future generations to intuit and to “preserve.” The direction from the first “open” listenings to the final “open” listenings is thus circular. Each set of “open” listenings brackets the specific sets of syntactical, semantic, and ontological listenings. The first “open” listenings are clearly peripheral to the potential meanings of the work. With each turn inward into the work—syntactical, semantic, and ontological—the analyst enters with increasing depth. Finally with the last “open” listenings (subsequent to the ontological listenings), the analysis is focused yet broad. The work stands as a living dynamic within the context of a clear and perhaps at times compelling gestalt.

16 Ibid., p. 49.
Analysis

Poème électronique by Edgard Varèse

Reflection 1: A description of listening "openly"

Poème électronique often borders on what might be termed "noise." No melodic design, teleological direction, or motivic development is evident. Form in the traditional sense does not appear to be present. Instead, there are manifold sounds of varying degrees of familiarity and strangeness: bells, sirens; drills, elevators; voices; tapping devices, electronically produced sounds; ticking clocks; and so on.

Reflection 2: A description of a second "open" listening

Distinctive moods in the piece have become apparent. There is a calm and unperturbed temper during the beginning of the piece (with the tolling of cathedral-like bells of deep, resonant tone). Later there is a section of frenzied activity marked by honking horns, crashes, sirens, and screeching whistles. This frantic mood is superseded by a cold and mechanistic disposition constituted of sounds that are produced by electronic devices. Afterward, a sense of floating, lost in an abyss, unfolds because of an "uga" emitted by zombie-like male voices. A mellifluent-sounding female voice subsequently becomes angular in intervallic dispensation. This latter development, at its highest pitches, almost screams out in a shrill tone. The work ends with an exciting restatement of sounds heard previously. This, along with the recurring three-note melodic fragment described in Reflection 1, points to a loose structure.

Reflection 3: A description of a third "open" listening

The amalgamation of textural variety and richness, sharp changes of mood, limited melodic repetition, and a restatement of earlier sounds at the end of the work now suggests definitive structural sections. These divisions were catalogued during listening to this Reflection 3 and are presented in Figure 1.

Reflection 4: A description of a listening for textural form (syntax)

The divisions presented in Figure 1 were the focus of this listening. Ten sections are distinctive. The formal results of this listening appear in Figure 1 and are delineated by the use of brackets and numbers added below the sections developed above (Reflection 3). Three divisions listed separately have been combined to form Section 2. Two divisions separately listed have been combined to form Section 4.
Bell toll
Drills
Three-note fragment
Electroni sounds
High-speed taped sounds

Honking horns
Sirens
Drum roll
Elevator

Ticking
Bell tolls
Heart beat
Sine waves
Taping device

Male voices
Crash
Birds in jungle
Chanting syncopation

Silence
Electronic sounds
Rhythms
Sine waves
Snare drum
Airplane

Female voice
Broken organ
Forced air

Three-note fragment
Electronic sounds
Airplane
Crashes
Elevator
Explosions
Siren
Timpani
Airplane

Figure 1.
Reflection 5: A description of listening for syntactical meaning

Listening for syntactical meaning alone was a difficult task because of the often obvious semantic meanings to which the sounds referred. It was not possible to bracket out semantic meaning altogether, although at several points during this listening it was startling to hear the sounds purely as such. There seems to be a rich syntax here, the depth of which was not as overt as in earlier listenings. The ticking of a clock emerged as a recurrent metallic tapping without conscious reference to a clock. The haunting, eerie quality of male voices was smooth, hollow, and airy. Still, the ability to "bracket out" a semantic was inconsistent.

Reflections 6, 7, and 8: A combined description of three listenings for syntactical meaning

Utilizing the structural analysis presented in Figure 1, it was possible to articulate the following syntactical elements. The ten sections below correlate to the ten sections listed in Figure 1. A conscious attempt to bracket out "semantic" meanings was made.

Section 1: Five low-pitched sounds push and then dissipate through space with high-pitched overtones cascading down above the dominating low-pitched surge. Each sound starts with a hard metallic impact and then rounds out as it disperses. The pulse is slow but syncopated. The volume is moderately full in sound.

Section 2: This section begins with the juxtaposition of hard percussive sounds and a squeezy tone that gyrates through a series of pitches. The texture of this counterpoint is marked by a rich echo and an erratic rhythm in the percussive sounds. This is contrasted with the slurring up and down in pitch of the squeezy tones heard earlier. Then, loud, sizzling sounds seem to be shot through space, followed by soft, frictionless sounds in regular rhythm. Suddenly, sustained, high-pitched tones crescendo to a climax of volume. A short silence occurs, only to be supplanted by a new counterpoint between round, rippling, bubbly tones and shrill, piercing, high friction sounds. Scratchy, creaking sounds commence. A slurred, connective three-note motive becomes the center of focal awareness. This motive recurs three times in a regular rhythm on the notes F, F♯, G. The piercing and sizzling sounds resume with an abrupt swelling of midrange, metallic tones. Less shrill sounds enter, crescendo, and ascend in pitch to a climax. Assorted popping, guttural
sounds occur at varying pitch levels. The rhythm is erratic. The three-note, slurred, chromatic pattern emerges once again only to give way to high-frequency sounds with a considerable amount of echo. The latter becomes squeeky, increasing in speed and pitch.

Section 3: The texture is thicker with increased contrapuntal activity. A variety of (1) sustained tones, (2) hard wooden sounds, (3) sizzling sounds, (4) crashes, and (5) high squealing sounds establishes a condensed texture with a driving, excited and at times frantic rhythmic movement.

Section 4: A recurring tapping in a regular, moderate rhythm initiates this section. The tone has a substantial amount of echo but as these sounds travel through space they seem to flatten out. The echo consequently becomes less distinguishable. Three deep, sonorous tones, then resonant in overtones, emanate from an initial hit and diffuse into space. Pure, nonvibrato sounds follow in irregular rhythms and on changing pitches. These pure sounds are replaced with low-pitched, open sounds. These round, deep tones occur eight times in the following rhythmic pattern: \( \frac{\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots}{\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots} \). Immediately after the last pulse, pure tones crescendo to become dinsome, high-pitched nonvibrato sounds. These blaring tones are displaced by sustained, very low-pitched sounds. The low sounds also reach a culmination in volume and intensity ending the section.

Section 5: A rattling sound opens this section and is immediately followed by a hollow, wooden sound with an abundance of echo. The two contrasting sounds continue to be placed side by side, increasing in their speed of recurrence. The rattling sound now becomes resounding and frequent, causing the hollow, wooden sounds to seem embossed in the rattling sounds. Gliding, drifting, sustained sounds on "oo" and "ah" vowels bring a new texture. These open sounds, colored with heavy echo, are interrupted by a piercing tone and short, hollow, wooden sounds. The piercing tone has little echo; the hollow, wooden sounds have much more. This contrasts well as a contrapuntal design. The gliding vowel sounds return in a slow, sustained rhythm. This return conveys a rich, rhythmic contrast with the interrupting, piercing sounds which are emitted in a quick, irregular rhythm.

Section 6: A loud, cutting, metallic sound ushers in this section. Background sounds in a loose rhythm start on consonants and then
for a short time are sustained on a more open “eh” sound. Crisp, percussive impacts capture the foreground. The section is now marked by increased rhythmic complexity grounded in a syncopated rhythmic pattern. A hard, crashing sound occurs with great volume. This is succeeded by a steady, rubbing, scranching sound that becomes a continuous undercurrent. Above this are flurries of short, erratic sounds of varying pitch levels. Low, sustained sounds that are garbled or muffled fill out this unusual texture. Finally, quick tapping sounds along with the scranching sounds diminish to a silence.

Section 7: Pure, midrange sound waves open this section and quickly begin a crescendo of volume. Hollow, wooden sounds forming complex rhythms remind the listener of the syncopated rhythmic patterns in Section 6. The texture of these wooden sounds is close to those described in Section 5. However, they combine hollowness and a deeper timbre with a higher and harder wooden sound described in Section 3. Also, after several hits, a stringed instrument supports a few of the last strikes to produce a complex combination of string plucking and a hollow, wooden impact that issues sounds from the lowest timbre to very high. These characteristics are amplified by the rich use of echo and heavy overtones. Long, sustained sounds emerge with no vibrato, embellished by rapidly hitting percussive sounds. The pure sounds reach a climax of volume. Quick tapping is now heard, this texture having a familiar wooden timbre. The texture, though, is noticeably less hollow than the timbres in Sections 5 and 3. There is some echo, but the woodiness is more condensed. Short, airy sounds follow in a regular rhythm. The pitches of these sounds are structured in perfect fourths, B, F♯, C♯, and then to B again. Four ringing, metallic sounds, rich in overtones, repeat the quartal sequence forming a symmetrical phrase with the airy sounds previously heard.

Section 8: This brief and unique section is composed completely of an unaccompanied melody line. A moderately high-pitched “ah” vowel with vibrato becomes very angular as it ascends in increasing intervals to a very high pitch. The line is always sustained but syncopated. The syncopation gives interest and movement to the sustained, legato, melodic line.

Section 9: Open fifths and fourths on an “ah” vowel establish the
inception of this section. The sounds are sustained and feature slightly syncopated rhythmic activity. The texture varies from two- to four-part harmony. The pitch activity on this “ah” vowel is mostly stepwise. This gives way to cutting, highly pressured, forced-air sounds in a syncopated and irregular rhythm. Less biting sounds emerge with a syncopated and angular six-note melody (see Figure 2, first measure). The six-note melodic line is regularly fragmented and is reduced to a repetition of its first two notes (see the subsequent four measures in Figure 2). Underneath the fragmentation are fast, thumping sounds that enter and stop intermittently. Just before the last fragmentation of the six-note melody line in Figure 2, high-pitched tapping sounds of a vitreous timbre augment the texture and are repeated four times in the same pattern but in increasing tempos. The pitch of this repeating triplet figure remains the same. The triplet rhythm contrasts well with the abrupt two-note melodic motive at the end of the fragmentation of the six-note melodic line. A smearing, descending cluster of sound of the same timbre as the six-note melody ends this section.

Section 10: This section is marked by a clear recapitulation of the three-note motive, now one whole step higher (G, G#, A) than when heard in Section 2. This motive sounds twice. A sustained, cutting and piercing sound is now juxtaposed with a lower, sustained tone. A new ascending sound enters and becomes the dominant focus of attention as it rises and then descends in pitch. While it is making a final and biting rise, syncopated, bursting sounds emerge erratically at lower pitches. Most of these sounds were heard earlier in the work. The effect of this quick succession of restated sounds is of a quasi stretto. This provides both a climax in sound and form for the work.

Reflection 9: A description of listening for semantic meaning

There are at least two semantic levels of meaning in Poème électronique. This Reflection deals with the first, the obvious level. An expedient procedure for presenting what many of the sounds
represent is to list those semantic meanings section by section as correlated with the structure presented in Figure 1.

Section 1: bell tolling
Section 2: drills and an elevator
Section 3: honking car horns, sirens, an elevator (becoming) a siren
Section 4: clock ticking and bell tolling
Section 5: men's voices
Section 6: chewing, animals roaring in a jungle, and sounds made by birds of the jungle
Section 7: airplane
Section 8: woman's voice
Section 9: men's voices and broken organ
Section 10: elevator (becomes) a siren (then becomes) an airplane

Reflections 10 and 11: A combined description of two listenings for semantic content
Two reflections are combined here that deal specifically with a second level of semantic meaning. What has become clear is that every sound in the piece has a semantic content at this level. Once again, the structural form presented in Figure 1 will be utilized. The fundamental referents of these meanings will be in italics.

Section 1: The bell tolling symbolizes time.
Section 2: All of the electronically produced sounds symbolize technology.
Section 3: The sirens, elevators, and honking horns symbolize technology. The general movement might symbolize a street scene in a city.
Section 4: The clock ticking and the tolling of the bells symbolize time. The heart beat also symbolizes time but in an existential setting. When the heart beat stops, the temporality of human existence is symbolized. The sine waves symbolize technology.
Section 5: The men's voices symbolize human existence. The electronic sounds symbolize technology.
Section 6: All of the sounds generally present a jungle scene. The chewing symbolizes a primitive or primordial act and the scranching symbolizes eating, again a primordial act. The syncopated drumlike rhythms, like the chanting, require a human element and symbolize a primitive people.
Section 7: The electronic sounds, sine waves, and airplane symbolize technology.
Section 8: The woman’s voice symbolizes human existence.
Section 9: The men’s voices (singing a quasi Gregorian chant) combined with the broken organ symbolize the church and more broadly, religion.
Section 10: The electronic sounds, airplane, elevator, and siren all symbolize technology.

**Reflection 12:** A description of a listening for ontological meaning

It is important to note that the concepts “time,” “technology,” “human existence,” “primitivism,” and “religion” that are referred to in *Poème électronique* grow out of the syntactical sounds themselves. In intuiting a gestalt of this piece, at the syntactical level the work functions like a textural collage of sounds thrown or shot into space. At the semantic level it functions like a conceptual collage. A fundamental insight into both of these levels (syntactical and semantic) can be clarified at the ontological level.

During an earlier listening to the work, I found myself randomly cataloguing concepts on a sheet of paper (see Fig. 3). This quasi conceptual collage points to the work’s ontological meaning. *Poème électronique* crystallizes what it means to be in the modern era. In our actual lives, technology (computers, automobiles, or electric can openers) surrounds our existence.

![Figure 3](image-url)
In this piece, the sounds of technology penetrate, permeate, and surround all other sounds. Human existence, presented by the men’s voices and the woman soloist, is marked in this work by disorientation, alienation, and fear. The concept of “time” ticking away or a heartbeat stopping underscores the importance of temporality in human being. The primitivism symbolized by the sounds of the jungle may be one or both of two respective Freudian and Darwinian realities. Within a Freudian context the jungle symbolized in Poème électronique is the id, that is, the jungle in man. This section of the work captures that unconscious potential in man to be primitive in the most primordial sense. Within a Darwinian context the sounds of eating (chewing and scranching) and the evolutionary step backwards to a primitive context might symbolize the fact that man exists (on one level) as a physical system. Finally, the sporadic and disconcerting sounds of a quasi Gregorian chant as well as those of a broken organ depict (for the composer) a decaying religion that surrounds late twentieth-century human existence.

We have a glimpse, thus, at what it is to be a modern man. It is only a glimpse and moreover only one perspective. Not all human existence is disoriented and fearful and surrounded by technology (one can live on a mountaintop). Surely many would disagree with religion characterized as in the process of decay. Nevertheless, all of these ontological meanings grow out of the reality of being human. Technology does surround most people, time marks our existence, many have turned away from religion in the traditional sense, many people accept that man can be a primitivistic organism: whether as a physical system or as a Nazi general.

Poème électronique articulates in a nondiscursive form a sense of human existence (at least in the West) in the modern era. It captures a being there in the world. Listening to this work becomes a conceptualization of a lived experience. It is not factical life itself, but a crystallization of human existence viewed as a complex scheme of ontological meanings. Interestingly, the work does not present these concepts in an ABA form or in any traditional structural design. The intuition in our actual lives of the meaning of technology, time, primitivism, and religion also does not occur in 4/4 time, theme and variation form, or four-part harmony. It comes in and out of our conscious awareness freely, sporadically, and almost randomly. Nor do these fundamental realities of human existence appear to our conscious awareness in a series or in systematic order. They permeate
our existence in no regular order, often together, embellishing, dominating, and altering each other and affecting our existence. And so in this music we hear a collage of textural sounds that appears to be thrown out at us without any vivid cogency or logic. It is only after moving into the work and being moved by it that we understand the structure. The changing syntactical textures along with their semantic and ontological referents are freely and sporadically placed throughout the work. This is closer to the reality of the manner in which they come to our conscious and unconscious awareness in our actual life. Thus, by being moved by Poème électronique we let the world of this epoch we live in be through this musical work.

Reflection 13: A description of listening “openly”

Throughout this last listening I consistently knew exactly where I was in the piece in terms of the whole. This is different from knowing, for example, that you are in measure 52 of piece X. There was an intuitive sense of the whole that made each section appear in a larger perspective. Yet, by having listened specifically many times for syntactical meaning earlier, the sounds were always fresh and seemed to emerge into the whole. The form now seems easily identifiable but not in any traditional setting. Certainly Poème électronique is different; its form is free. Textures are placed in anything but an implacable manner. For example, Section 3 could have been placed after Section 8 without disturbing any of the dimensions of meaning. Also, there is no strong teleological direction. The sounds do not move toward the stretto-like climax in Section 10; the stretto just happens. Yet, no section could be deleted from the work without seriously affecting the gestalt. While there is no strict form or teleological impulse, concomitantly there is a definite sense that all the sections are organic and vital to the work.

The character of each section as an amalgam of syntactical, semantic, and ontological meanings became more easily discernible in this listening. The men’s voices and the woman’s voice seem to be more human. This living quality made ever more poignant the contrast between the human element and that of a cold, lifeless technology that consistently surrounded it. One passage in particular stands out reflectively concerning that contrast. When the heartbeat stopped, technological sine waves responded with a loud, shrill series of sounds. It was an unfeeling reaction of the machine to human temporality.
Many more than thirteen listenings and descriptions could be carried out to uncover more meanings. However, at this point, having sufficiently studied the piece, it is possible to present several conclusions.

The syntactical manipulation of materials in this work is marked by great control, creativity, complexity and simplicity, contrast and variety, and innovation. Notable semantic and substantive ontological meanings emerged. Of equal consequence is that all three—syntax, semantics, and ontology—grow out of each other and are organically linked. That connection is not a placid marriage however. A tension results from hearing the syntactical sounds purely as such and interpreting the semantic and ontological meanings. That pull or tension was made more apparent because of the listenings and reflections that dealt specifically and respectively with either syntax, semantics, or ontology. During these listenings and reflections each dimension of meaning became vivid and, to a degree, autonomous. During the last listening and reflection, the contrapuntal design of the three distinct but organic levels functioned as a gestalt. Each amplified and carried the other into a greater whole than the three separate dimensions could have added up to.

Within a Heideggerian context, perhaps most significant is that this piece grounds history. This work captures a glimpse of human existence in this quarter of the century; a sense that cannot be articulated the same way in discursive form. A listener hearing this work five hundred years from now might intuit a sense of our ontological existence that no history text could similarly articulate. Through the knowledge and sensitivity of the composer, our ontohistorical existence is grounded in the work and may be "preserved" by the listener of the future.

Meta-critique

A criterion for evaluating musical analysis is that the analysis is grounded in the work. The rootedness in a work entails a growing out of the soil that enables the analyst to be transported into the work. One possesses the work as he is possessed by its unfolding message. The work and the analysis may both function at high levels of metaphor. Each is metaphorical in the sense that their respective meanings are not congenerically contained, but radiate outward to something other. The analysis and the work being studied are thus
not two separate entities, closed in some definite space of finite meanings. Rather, each emits and resonates meanings that intersect in an ideational space. There is no quantitative correlation of correspondence truth between them; the "correctness" of the analysis cannot be measured against the work. There is a bond of organicity which grounds the analysis in the work and which is articulated by the intersection of meanings that the work projects and the analysis records.

Given this organic bond between the work and its analysis, certainly the inherent laws of the work must carry through and rule the evaluation of the analysis. If the work functions at levels of meaning other than syntax, then so must the analysis. Musical analysis must not be limited to a discussion of formal elements. Phenomenological analysis provides a systematic and cogent method for describing the multidimensional thrust of meanings (syntax, semantics, and ontology) that often emanate from a great work of music.