Trauma and Temporality in Twentieth Century Music

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The connection between music and its temporal form has garnered much curiosity through the ages. Music’s fleeting presence has contributed to the opposing views that it is the lowest art form in that its temporality must be overcome, or that its temporality leads to greater emotional impact. Awareness of music’s temporality developed and gained relevance during the latter half of the 19th century and through the 20th century. The innovation that arose in the second half of the 19th century and that continued in the 20th disrupted the easy predictability of time. Innovation displaced one generation from the previous one. An awareness of time rose; the experience of listening to music became a reflection of this awareness. Music, rather than being static, suggested a process, and listening to it became much about a Becoming, or experiencing the past flowing into the present.¹

These changing views are reflected in the works of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Adorno, who show a steady pull away from objective to subjective time. Time does not exist in itself—it is not a law of the universe. Rather, it is an inherent attribute of subjectivity. An individual’s experience of events creates their perception of time.²

In trauma, the experience of time is halted. The defining element of trauma is that one cannot move on from the trauma, whether this manifests itself in dissociative identity disorder, where one alternate identity is rooted in the time of the trauma, or in a protective depression, which halts one’s perception of time. How might this be expressed in music? Could there be a subjective timelessness in music, which seems to be grounded in time?

The tension between these opposing ideas—a tendency towards narrative—and the subjective time of traumatic events—will be explored in my presentation. I will use Louis Andriessen’s piece, De Tijd (‘Time’ 1979-81), to discuss how timelessness and narrative may coexist in music. I will also discuss how the experience of time, as well as subjective time, is signified in music. Additionally, I will explore the effects of the experience of time in music and the comorbidity of time with other musical elements such as narrative and instrumentation.