

Have we begun to listen to organisations?

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Abstract Most theories of organisation express themselves through only one sense: that of sight. Can we begin to listen to organisations? If we examine ourselves in this [i.e. When we try], we find that, above and beyond our comprehension, nudging it, there are elements related to listening such as: silence, background noise, atmosphere and *Stimmung*. For instance, in listening to baroque music – such as, the Goldberg Variations of Bach – organisation is in a different topology. Concepts enter in of folds and of world, of Ritornello and of rhythm, of counterpoint and of harmony.... all of which can help us to understand organisations, and thus to put forward new analyses. Can we think of life in its bosom?

Key words : Listening ; silence, *Stimmung*, folds, ritornello, counterpoint and harmony.

Introduction¹

"All knowledge settles
itself in the horizons opened
by perception" (M.
Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 251).

Even before it can be thought, an organisation has to be perceived. Perception is our access to organisation. What we call organisation, what we describe, theorise or model, results from what we have beforehand perceived. But we rarely ask ourselves about our manner of perception, in order to appreciate our senses of meaning and scope.² We almost never ask ourselves if it would be possible to perceive in another way.

The problem is that almost all of our

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2 "All the universe of science is built on the lived world, and if we want to think of science with rigour, to exactly appraise its meaning and scope, we need to first awaken this expression of the world from which science is only the secondary expression." (*idem*, p.9). All translation from French authors are ours.

theories of organisation come from one mode of perception. They are conveyed through the gaze. They are points of view, perspectives, or images. A theory, from the origin of the word, is a form of visual contemplation directed towards a spectacle, a worldview and a world seen through glasses. It is a way of seeing, never a way of listening. While seeing creates distance, listening is participation. Like Medusa's gaze, a view petrifies us; but music gives us the irrepressible need to move, even to dance. The ear puts our body into the world, and makes us want to dance with it. But the eye takes us out of the world --- taking our body out of the world. The I or eye does not want to dance with the world but only to watch it.

With music, with ears pricked-up, we don't see space any more with depth. In contact with music we cannot build theories or models. We are *inside* the space, immersed in it. Listening to music is to have access to what cannot be apprehended by the eyes --- such as atmosphere, tones, rhythms, vibes, tempos, harmonies and counterpoints, or the timbre of the voice. To listen is to attend to context, to everything that accompanies its processes. It is also to be loyal to a primary outing of sound or narrative – such as found in a good interview, or words genuinely exchanged. Listening requires not being overwhelmed by the noise

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of a factory, or the clatter of machinery. But it can include hearing the sounds of rhythms or cries, and sufferings, or managerial serenades to customers and shareholders and even battle songs for corporate missions. We may hear calls for autonomy or witness the improvisation of the very harshness of already written commands. Thus even before listening to something in particular, we are better off closing our eyes, blinding ourselves to visual categories and analyses, and trying to learn to listen. Then we may enter the organisational world with a new sensitivity and with the hope of finding other meanings.

Music and sound transport us into other tonalities. They play with our moods and make what we were feeling, but were unable to let surface, happen. We pluck our understandings of organization from the background murmur of 'white noise' [see Serres]. What is this power of the ear to hear the melodies, rhythms, euphonics and cacophonies of the world? Although our main access to organisation is often auditory (via research interviews), almost all knowledge has been translated into (textual) images. Have we barely begun to listen to organisation?

Listening starts with a 'Yes' and thus begins with hospitality. It is because we welcome it inside, that listening may become dangerous, transformational and may bring about becomings. Music enables encounters, unlike sight that only allows for approaches. The difficulty of listening to an organisation is that there are several voices, sounds and silences, all present/presented together in diverse places and temporalities. Organisations have many heads, several mouths, and a numerous ears.

This text doesn't try to listen to an organisation, although we would like to find the words to tell just such an event. We will only try, through listening to music, to bring some concepts forward, to contrast them with our usual ones, and to make audible the suggestion that there could be another way of encountering organisations. Although

listening to organisation could define a future research strategy, there is still enough preparatory work to do. However, before we begin any of this, we shall put ourselves in a position of rapt attention.

Silence, white noise, tonality, hearing: before comprehension

To listen to organization, one first needs silence. Not only silencing the noise that prevents comprehension – i.e. the parasitical sounds that drown out understanding. And we need silence to *really* hear what is there, rather than once again falling into habitual behaviour. We need to gag our informants, to postpone our research interviews, and to remember that validity does not come only from figures and discourses.³ "*That the said falls into silence and the gods descend*" (M. Serres, 1985, p.110). Michel Serres⁴ lets us hear how we are *ad-dic*-ted to the 'said'. It is as if only the said words could speak of organisations, and as if organisations have nothing else for us to hear. We forget to listen first, to immerse ourselves in silence and so we deprive ourselves from an incomparable form of access to the world. Words are already dead compared to hearing organisational life. Organisation is replaced in languaging by nouns, descriptions, representations, sequences of words, and sentences. The organisation has lost its living flame. And we don't listen to it any more.

But is the world we perceive just the one that can be said and is grounded in the seen? Let's silence words, abandon visual concepts, and let us listen. At first, just as when we arrive in a city, let us try to hear the 'white noise': an ambient noise, a noise of the atmosphere, the organisation's tone. Yet academic knowledge supposes a noiseless world. Causes, purposes, processes, act in academe without a parasite. They unfold, but do not scrape.

Alas, we hear noise, we cannot make any more as if existed only us and god in the world; complaints, cries, sobs... we thus have to compose music all the time, to survive, feel, participate to conversations... without this ground work which contains the background noise, nothing holds together, neither things in the world, nor anybody in the collective, nor the senses, nor the arts. (Serres, 1985, p. 162)

The organisation, to make things hold together, detaches itself from the background noise – or rather imposes music onto the ground. And this music sings, before the said, before the meant. This is this background music, which enables us to understand the meaning of the phrases, which are passed on. We need to walk down corridors for long time to start to hear this background music. Only then, will we understand that the words pronounced here in this organisation do not have the same meaning as the same words pronounced elsewhere. This is the music that the written report will have to play again --- replaying the assumed description of organisation to revive an initial atmosphere.

We inviolably believe that to think or to know consists in destroying, in undoing the links, in un-knotting, in dislocating, in explaining: here is the analysis. However the music is to be composed; if we analyse it, it fades away in keys and scattered pieces. (Serres, 1985, p. 173)

The ear is not a tool of analysis, but of integration. Everything perceived with ears is given altogether, immediately in the interference of the process, and bears the marks of encounters or juxtapositions. The eye often separates; the ear takes altogether.

The ear *comprehends*. Our benefit, gained from an opening to noise and polyphony, is a heightened sensitivity.

The most striking event with music, or sometimes with just noise, is that we get suddenly submerged in its sensitivity. Some bars of Chopin's *Nocturnes*, scansion of rap music or a melody from the Pink Floyd, and we are moved, perceptually, sensorially. All of a sudden we get sensitive, hypersensitive, to certain aspects of the heard, such as its melancholy or injustice. We gain the power to be affected. We become able to feel what we did not even suspect some seconds earlier.

The music embarks us in *Stimmung*,⁵ or rather makes us understand that we are always already in *Stimmung*. All that we perceive is not received as such, but within a *bain-marie* of fear, enjoyment, revolt... All that we understand is tinged by some emotional tone. This is no subjective sentimentality that we should get rid of before starting serious inquiry. This is what makes us sensitive, what enables us and urges us to understand. While an image or a theory gives us a way of seeing, and so determines what we understand; music, or the simple fact of being affected by an ambient noise, gifts us a *Stimmung*, a way of becoming particularly sensitive. And it also gives us the possibility of understanding what we wouldn't have been able to perceive otherwise. The *Stimmung* is our opening. And without such an opening, nothing can be comprehended.

In our research studies, we starve for understanding. And yet, understanding is only a modality of hearing. Explaining is also a modality of hearing. For Martin Heidegger (1927),⁶ understanding doesn't come only from the gaze, but also, indeed above all, from hearing. The *Stimmung* and the listening come together to call us to understand. They 5 A *Stimmung* is a mood, a tonality, an emotional disposition. M. Heidegger (1927) puts it at the origin of the understanding of Being.

6 See especially § 29, 31 and 40.

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come before, upstream, and they direct comprehension. To take the philosopher's example: when we are affected by the tonality of anguish, we can hear our situation with new clarity. Here we are as being-in-the-world, facing all the possibles that appear graspable, and discovering at the same time the burden of all those we haven't seized. Anguish and hearing make present what we did not see. We can then re-understand ourselves authentically, for example as facing our death that will come. Anguish and hearing come before understanding and they hold nothing of the power of the gaze. This is a mode of understanding, more original than simple theory, which music throws us into. Indeed, music does not speak to us with words or visions; it expresses *Stimmungen*, urging us to hear with extra clarity.

Folds and worlds

It's time to begin to listen, rather than to merely align words. Let's start with the older Glenn Gould looking again at Goldberg Variations of J.S. Bach, from which he garnered in his youth worldwide fame. In doing this, he reprised,⁷ in a very different way, his youthful success, which was itself a personal interpretation of the work of Bach. Once again, this work consists of variations, some of which are canons, repeating always the same melody, while still continuing the same bass line, and thus restarting the original musical and spiritual quest of the composer ...

We may recognize in this abyss-like structure, the baroque figure of the groundless, where each once-seeming ground, turns out to be another repetition. Each level is a fold, with its own organisation, based on another fold and in turn opening up on a third fold. The boundless world of the baroque stands out and makes remarkable, even outstanding, the hierarchical and neatly

⁷ We first listen to it on a CD, which itself gives a further level of repetition. However, even though each playing of the disc produces the same number of sounds, each playing is more of an iteration than a repetition (if we take Deleuze's (1967) concept of

arranged space that we usually envisage as organisation⁸. We are indeed far away from the structures with which (in organizational studies) we describe organization. At once we feel that listening does not and cannot deliver any more metaphors for organization. Instead, it unravels an alternative topology. Languaged metaphors transport properties of a frame to another frame, whereas with musical topology, the frame itself is twisted. It is a journey into other forms of space, of structures, of logics to which we are invited.⁹ Music transports us to other worlds; for instance, here, a baroque world.

What we find so difficult to spontaneously visualise, is how music with a few keys brings us to a new world. It manages to do so because it fills our body, taking up the whole of our experience. For a world where we are immersed in transparency, exchange, and communication, a universe is substituted, that is formed by worlds, monads and elementary particles and in which horizons fold (in) on themselves. It is windowless. Within this world exchanges occur only through direct encounters.

For Deleuze (1988), the baroque is recognizable principally from a singular feature: the fold. Folding entails entering the indentation of a world (Deleuze, 1988, p.13). We are used to overarching theories, which see and explain everything in one uniform way. However, it is not what we feel. Imagining ourselves in a universe made of folds accords better with our experiences. When I write on my desk or table, I am taken in by the fold of my work and I ignore everything that takes place elsewhere, even in the next room. I can imagine what is taking place somewhere else, as happening in

⁸ The very image of repetition, where each level repeats – while affirming a difference – the same structure, is valuable for our studies. We propose, drawing on Deleuze (1967), that we can find here a way to argue the case for the external validity of our

⁹ We would of course get very different topologies with other music: consider, for example contemporaneous, waltz, African...

another world, with its own unfoldings, independent from mine. Folds run on different logics, with other stories and happenings (becomings) occasionally and exceptionally intersecting with mine. Our brains are reluctant to imagine us in a universe made of worlds folded in on themselves; nevertheless it may be how our experiences (really) look like.

There are few baroque theories of organizations. Most theories look for unity, or at least a single principle that supposedly is driving organization. Some assume contradictions between two or more groups or even, like Mintzberg, suggest configurations. The baroque organization would rather be multiple, folded through in several ways (Deleuze, 1988, p.5). To study an organization as a territory of folds forces us to acknowledge that we know no more than the few folds we access and have no chance of accounting for the totality. It would also drive us to consider our own research as creating a fold in which we create events (such as interviews) governed by their own logic, which is only partially co-existent with that of the organization.

The fold offers another way of thinking of organizations. The fold is not the system; it is not the network. It stresses all that which is not connected, is invisible, is inaudible, all that which we usually label as non-existent. It also shows that connections and proximity sometimes occur by chance; just as when we fold a map and two distant places suddenly get superimposed. To be in a fold is not to know, not to be able to see what lies beyond. It means to acknowledge our imprisonment in a perspective episteme – maybe that's why we sometimes prefer to listen. By contrast, to form or to enter a fold is an event; it is to taste, to touch, and to try out a world. A proposition of a world --- with landscapes, people and faces, entails the beginning of a history. A world is livelier and more symbolic than a network or a system, more communicative than a language game, less bounded and structured than a field, less belligerent than an arena. Folds and worlds

are to be preferred to organizational charts, centres, groups and classes.

First, however, there are folds of thought.¹⁰ We always hit the same folds without realising it – repeating the same passages, the same correspondences – as if we are incapable of seeing beyond these folds, or by other curvatures. Our models, our theories, our beliefs, our postulates, our metaphors, even the structure of our narratives are all folds that our usual thought doesn't manage to un-fold. And we then stutter. Believing we are finding a new thought, we repeat it again – even marking the fold with more strength. However, with music we lose our folds of thought. From this comes a feeling of vertigo. This feeling of dislocation dissolves when we let ourselves be transported and when we accept to lose our marks, our folds. However, if our folds are erased, can we and do we, still know how to think? That is why music seems thoughtless at first, and probably why it has hardly ever been the source or base for thought. Nevertheless music, this "noise that thinks" in Victor Hugo's words, it could let us think, provided we take its concepts seriously.

Ritornello

All performers¹¹ insist on independence, in form and in mood, of the performance of the thirty variations of the
¹⁰ This expression "fold of thought", "fold of reason", is borrowed from F. Jullien (1996). He eloquently (and at some length) shows how Western thought, when compared to Chinese thought, has since antiquity formed such folds that every new thinker repeats without being able to by-pass.

¹¹ See for example G. Gould (1955), B. Lagacé, (1996) or F. Filiatrault (1997). B. Lagacé, after having quoted the forms of canon, dance, fughetta, two-voices variations for crossed hands... qualifies the various variations with very different interpretations such as "a metaphysical and existential question about the meaning of life", "an eloquent affirmation of will and of the splendour of life", with other darker, even pathetic, qualifications.

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aria. They are simply not the same. But merely recognizing scattered, *windowless*, pieces would be avoiding the question of organisation, or at least the way the question is posed here. Why is Goldberg Variations one opus and not a collection of exercises? What organisation can hold these worlds together?

Goldberg Variations are not variations on a theme.¹² What is taken from one variation to the other is merely the progression of a repeated bass line, as the underlying rhythm that remains with us, even through our passing moods. Such a tonal backdrop serves as a signature of (our) soul, which we keep all through our experiences and encounters.

This personal mark, this musical trace, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1980): (1) we repeat all around us to get ourselves reassured; (2) is a wall of sound limiting us to a place where we feel alright– i.e. in our territory; and/or (3) is that from which we find the courage to improvise and to open up to the world. Deleuze and Guattari call such a mark or trace a *ritornello*. The *ritornello* takes its strength and meanings from sound, but extends to our look, our style, to every case where we re-imprint our mark in order to familiarize a territory and vibrate with it.

In the Goldberg Variations, *ritornello* drives the bass line, some motifs, and naturally the final *quodlibet*, which reprises two popular *ritornelli* from the composer's

time.¹³ The two tunes are surfing on the bass, as though yearning towards another departure, outside of the cycle. This passage makes us feel that the *ritornello* is what frees us from the system. Even though this last variation is followed by the resumption of the initial aria.

There are numerous *ritornelli* in our organizations. The *ritornello* is no mere routine or frozen process. It may be the sentences that we repeat every day, the same colleagues that we greet, the actions and decisions we reproduce again and again to feel reassured. Just as a child sings in the dark, it is a gesture that we repeat to avert the difficult and the threatening in the organisation. It is a way of living and of passing over the milieu's (un)foldings. But it is also what gives courage to open up to others. It signals our acting out of a position, of transforming foreign lands into our territory. It humanises offices and machines, granting them our image. It makes from an organization a fold, or our place.

If we try to think of *ritornelli* and organizations,¹⁴ we might also come to see a more disturbing, even frightening, side. The *ritornello* can be, perhaps, the foundation of the organization of natural and human life, of civilization and of the cosmos. Deleuze and Guattari wonder: why the privilege of the ear? (*idem*, p.429). Sound invades us, moves

¹³ *Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben und Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g'west.*

¹⁴ As well as their analysis of *ritornello*, we may follow Deleuze and Guattari where they try to replace, or supplement, concepts of behaviour by first ones of lay-out, then of machine. We may also see the parallel drawn by M. Antonioli (2003, p. 221 et s.) between *ritornello* and cliché, where poor use of the *ritornello* "*opens up to no outside and give raise to no encounter, but which on the contrary impoverishes our power to exist, to think, to see, to listen*" (p. 223).

¹² "One might justifiably expect that in view of the constancy the harmonic foundation of the principal pursuit of the variations would be the illumination of motivic facets within the melodic complex of the Aria theme. However, such is not the case, for the thematic substance, a docile but richly embellished soprano line, possesses an intrinsic homogeneity which bequeathes nothing to posterity and which, so far as motivic representation is concerned, is totally forgotten during the 30 variations." G. Gould (1955, p.16)

us, surrounds us, and passes through us. It has a power stronger than that of colour to "de-territorialise" us, to move us towards the cosmos, as well as towards chaos. The power of sound makes people move; the clarion call, the *Marseillaise*, the *Partisans' song*, all seize us. They are machines that can take on everything – body, head and heart. "Music is potential fascism" (p. 430). Some leaders, greedy for control and starved of motivation tools, are tempted to manipulate this power of sound.

Rhythms, counterpoints, harmony

When we listen to the two versions of Goldberg Variations, one after the other, we are immediately struck by the difference of tempo. We are brought from the incredible virtuosity of the young Glenn to the serene and thoughtful wisdom of the older Gould. But this is not the only change. Another, less immediately perceived, difference holds in the variation of the links between measures, in the sensitivity, in the moods, in the silences – in brief, mostly in a difference of rhythm.

The notion of rhythm was present until the 1950s in the social sciences through, for example, Durkheim, de Tarde, Simmel, Mauss, Evans-Pritchard and Freud, and in philosophy via Bergson, Bachelard and Adorno (Michon, 2005). But it was totally eclipsed when we began to speak of systems and structures and has only begun to reappear today. Inside firms and public services, work organisations, from Taylorism to present telematic interactivity has dramatically changed activity and its rhythms (*idem*). As rhythms pass across bodies, they impose or propose new modes of subjectivity. We need to recover our sense of rhythm, for rhythm still has a lot to say about organisations. Organisational changes are often resisted because of a lack of awareness about the rhythm differences between the evolution of discourses, tools, representations and culture. Process management is about, if it is about anything, finding the rhythm to couple

the functional activities.

Yet rhythm is often confused with tempo --- always going faster, running after deadlines, or with measure --- time dictated by the budgets and accounting periods. Measure is the beat that drives the regularity of the activity, which is given by metronome or production line cadence. Rhythm, by contrast, plays between the changes of activity, between two milieus or two atmospheres.

The measure is dogmatic, but the rhythm is critic, it ties up critical moments, or is formed in the passage of a milieu to another. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p.385).

Human relations, conflicts, projects, organisational changes, authority, speeches and narratives, are a matter of rhythm rather than of measure. We need a sense of rhythm to feel the echoes and resonances, the ruptures and pauses, which confer rhythm to the dance of the organisation. They are not visible, but audible, just like unison and dissonance.

However the idea of rhythm seems still too unitarian and does not reflect the complexity of organisations. Deleuze and Guattari point to the importance of counterpoint: "*There is counterpoint every time a melody intervenes as "motif" for another melody*" (1990, p.176). For instance, drink and sandwich salesmen take the rhythm of participants' flows, during a demonstration. And compose their own melodies, produced by the distances and competitions between them. The security forces do much the same thing. With counterpoints, several motifs are composed by oneself and with others. The polyphony of voices is expressed when a group captures another's rhythm, composing its action while drawing the other towards a spontaneous symphony. In this manner a 'lively insight' can be conferred to the

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composition of organisation.¹⁵

But there is the question of the possible harmony arising from various rhythms, motifs and counterpoints. We can hear the Goldberg Variations as so many fugues and canons, responding to each other and forming, through distant accords and evident nods and winks, a whole harmony. This is the wager of the baroque.¹⁶ It reappears, for example in Karl Weick's never-ending dream where despite loose-couplings and accidents, the creation of sense-making results in an improbable harmony. But we can also imagine how these counterpoints can form divergent series, without a cosmic symphony catching up with them. The atmosphere here will be neo-baroque or *polyphonic*. How many of our organisational models are polyphonic, and not dreaming of harmony?

Conclusion

After the Goldberg Variations – "superessential" music, to use the mystic's jargon – we close our eyes and abandon ourselves in the echo we aroused. Nothing exists any longer but a plenitude without contents, which is indeed the only way to get by the Supreme. Cioran¹⁷

¹⁵ G. Gould confesses, in the above-mentioned interview, that he is only interested in contrapuntal music rather than where the same rhythm is maintained.

¹⁶ See Deleuze (1988, chap. 6). Here, however, the distinction baroque/neo-baroque is rather oversimplified.

¹⁷ In *Confessions and anathemas*, quoted by Filiatrault (1997). (My translation.)

To start to listen to organizations, we will first need to know how to silence our usual concepts, the ones that are too focused on sight. Silence, is what Lilian Kulain (N. Huston's 1981 heroine) imposes on her thirty guests, while she plays the Goldberg Variations on her piano. She has gathered them together, and then she demands that they keep silent, so that they silence spontaneous words and begin to really listen. But internal chatter is swiftly resurgent – silence doesn't last inside. And yet some words spring from this musical bath. These have a different tone. The guests try to feel and understand what is happening this evening. Understanding, which, instead of rushing out in a flow of words and images, first soaks in listening, gaining a matchless depth – as if the whole of being was prepared to welcome and exchange.

We don't listen to organisations because this doesn't seem to lead to valid knowledge for our academic papers. Music doesn't speak to the intellect --- or, at least, when it does, only with another inclination. And yet... And yet... We could perhaps gain a vocabulary to describe more, different aspects, of our experience. This may give us the chance, still to come to listen to other stories rather than simply staring at the same old over-familiar ones. Proposed is to iron out some of our folds of thought, so that we get a different means of access to organisations. Of course, this will require us to open up other sensitivities and build other concepts. Can we speak to ears rather than write for eyes? This is written in the hope of getting, perhaps, other forms of knowledge about organisations, and other ways of understanding them. This may still be with our academic ritornelli. Or perhaps more authentically, with texts singing out the joy, the horror and the tragedy of organisational life.

And if there is an art of research, an art to field work, than let us place our wagers that this art is, at least in part, an art of listening. And if research gets anything from art, it will not be assessable by the velocity its

completion. Let's listen again to Glenn Gould¹⁸ :

The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline but rather the gradual, life-long construction of a state of wonder and serenity.

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¹⁸ Quotation drawn from the booklet of the CD: Glenn Gould, *A State of Wonder, The Complete Goldberg Variations 1955 & 1981*, 2002, Sony Music Entertainment.

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