

Thoreau's Sound Reasoning

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And now I see the beauty and full meaning of that word sound. Nature always possesses a certain sonorousness, as in the hum of insects – the booming of ice – the crowing of cocks in the morning and the barking of dogs in the night – which indicates her sound state. (Thoreau, *Journal*, 3 March 1841)

The contact of sound with a human ear whose hearing is pure and unimpaired is coincident with an ecstasy. (Thoreau, *Journal*, 31 December 1853)

On 12 June 1851, Henry David Thoreau penned a pithy imperative into his *Journal*: “Listen to music religiously as if it were the last strain you might hear” (3:259). The sentiment expressed certainly fits with the figure of a man who devoted an entire chapter of his 1854 masterpiece, *Walden*, to a careful and loving analysis of the “Sounds” he observed in his rustic retreat by the pond. Yet less than two months later he recorded in his *Journal* an invective against his neighbors who were off to a local concert. “One will lose no music by not attending the oratorios & operas,” declared Thoreau. “I am convinced that for instrumental music All Vienna cannot serve me more than the Italian boy who seeks my door with his organ” (359-60).

The latter passage comes across as strangely naïve. Was Thoreau being serious? Did the same author who attempted to cultivate an apocalyptically intense appreciation of music really believe that Mozart and Beethoven were no better than organ grinders? Thoreau’s attitude toward music baffled the

critics who sought to champion the reclusive New Englander as a canonical genius of the nineteenth-century American Renaissance. Thoreau devoted considerable space in his writings to what his contemporaries called the “music of nature” – the chirping of crickets, the warbling of birds, the crackling of ice, etc. He was especially enamored of the hum of the telegraph cable, which became the subject of multiple impassioned *Journal* entries. F.O. Matthiessen, addressing Thoreau’s rapturous accounts of the telegraph wire vibrations, reflected on “the odd balance between the poverty of the materials of his experience and the fertility of his resource.” Matthiessen concluded that Thoreau “is never really talking about the art of music, of which he knew next to nothing, but about this close co-ordination, which alone made him feel that his pulse was beating in unison with the pulse of nature and that he could therefore reproduce it in words” (89, 91-92). Other mid-century critics were less generous in their assessment of Thoreau’s sonic sensibility; Matthiessen’s Harvard colleague Perry Miller, for example, bluntly asserted that Thoreau’s “musical illiteracy” was “pathetic” (146).

Matthiessen was of course right that Thoreau knew little of “the art of music” (or music theory). So what, then, did he mean when he wrote of music? A satisfactory answer to this question requires two investigations. First, how did citizens of antebellum America approach music? And second, what were Thoreau’s own personal attitudes toward aural aesthetics? While Thoreau evinced little admiration for famous European composers, his musical knowledge was better than total ignorance, and it was arguably above average for his milieu. Furthermore, he was developing a sonic ontology as advanced as any offered by intellectuals of his day. For Thoreau, sound itself was an incredibly rich, complex, and misunderstood physical and sensory property that revealed to him deeper notions of his own identity. The act of listening placed Thoreau in a “sound state” – a seemingly empty pun that nevertheless gestured to a profound truth about the nature of his being.¹

To his friends and neighbors, Thoreau was known not as a tuneless philistine but as a proficient flautist. “Oh, how sweetly he played upon his flute!” recalled Ellery Channing (34). Edward Emerson (the sage’s

son) went even further, insisting that Thoreau was "a master of the flute" and that to him "music was an early and life-long friend" (88). At his death in 1862, Louisa May Alcott was inspired to write a poem titled "Thoreau's Flute" (published in the *Atlantic Monthly* the following year), declaring that he gave to the world "wood-notes ever sweet and strong" (280-81). None commented on his ignorance of German composers. He was simply, to his contemporaries, a man of poetic temperament who enjoyed both popular songs and nature's noises.²

The Modernist music scene of the twentieth century changed literary critics' understanding of Thoreau's ear – and created the conundrum of a masterful listener who disdained symphonic brilliance. In an era characterized by the construction of lavish concert halls housing philharmonic societies, dedicated both to regular recitals from a classical repertory and to debut performances of radically powerful works by composers such as Stravinsky and Mahler, Thoreau's failure to embrace a rich musical tradition seemed disappointingly provincial if not deplorably primitive. His case was pitiable; if only he had had more opportunities to hear those great Viennese compositions! Perhaps he would have been the ideal concert-goer had he been born later – for what the modern composer seeks from an auditor, observed Aaron Copland in 1939, is "to become as completely conscious and wide awake a listener as can possibly be developed" (Copland viii). Thoreau, an avid proponent of wakefulness, would have sympathized. "To be awake is to be alive," he declares in *Walden* (90). Certainly Thoreau's ability to listen carefully was not deficient. As Charles Ives remarked in 1920, "Thoreau's susceptibility to natural sounds was probably greater than that of many practical musicians" (53).

Yet more recently, as the American concert music scene shifted from the modern to the postmodern, critics have begun to characterize Thoreau as a musicological visionary who both anticipated and influenced the work of John Cage. Scholars such as Christopher Shultis, Branka Arsić, and Jeff Todd Titon have maintained that Thoreau understood noise or sound itself as fundamentally musical. In connecting

him to Cage and arguing that he re-theorized music to include a larger sphere of sounds (that he was indeed a philosopher of sound), such scholarship has vindicated Thoreau's ear, but it has not accounted for his bizarre rejection of the professional concert music that grew increasingly popular among his New England neighbors.

Such recent critiques rescue Thoreau's intellectual reputation without really overturning the mid-century charge that Thoreau lacked the abilities or opportunities to appreciate orchestral compositions. How could someone so proficient in the practices of listening and so attuned to the aural qualities of life simply brush aside Haydn's symphonies or Schubert's sonatas? This essay addresses the issue in two steps. First, it offers an examination of Thoreau's Concord context. How accessible, to a person like Thoreau, would have been the great works of the Western musical tradition? What did it mean to appreciate music in the New England of the 1840s? Second, this essay attends to Thoreau's own carefully cultivated habits of listening. How did Thoreau theorize sound? How did he orient himself within his sonic environment? These inquiries clarify the status of Thoreau's relationship to the sound and the music of the nineteenth century.

Musical Appreciation in Concord

In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), Thoreau describes encountering telegraph wires near the railroad tracks in Plaistow, New Hampshire. The "vibrating cord" was "singing," he wrote, and it hinted at "absolute truth and beauty" (176-77). Thoreau would continue his paeans to the musical hum of the wires, first strung through his own hometown in the fall of 1851, in multiple *Journal* passages in the coming years. "The telegraph harp has sounded loudly," he announced weeks after the Concord cable had begun operating (and a month after he had condemned the instrumental music of Vienna). "The sound proceeds from near the posts where the vibration is apparently more rapid. I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music, labored with the strain – as if every fibre was affected

and being rearranged according to a new & more harmonious law" (4:89, 90). Thoreau periodically returned to what he called the "Telegraph Harp" over the next several years, describing in hyperbolic language its vibratory power to shock him into a new consciousness. "It stings my ear with everlasting truth," he later declared (5:437).

Telegraphy was a powerful technological innovation that rightly should have inspired awe. Messages were being sent at prodigious speeds across the country via electronic signaling. Nothing quite like it had ever been seen – or in Thoreau's case, heard. The fact that Thoreau treated it solely as a form of music (he never, for example, recorded gazing in amazement at the work of operators in a Western Union office), occasionally embracing the telegraph pole in an ontological reverie, has struck his readers as an awkward celebration of sonic phenomena. More compassionately than many other mid-century critics, Alfred Kazin characterized Thoreau as a frustrated aesthete and wrote that one of the most "moving refrains" in the *Journal* was Thoreau's "hunger for music." Kazin noted in 1951 that, "though it is the fashion these days to exaggerate Concord's hospitality to the arts, it is made clear by the *Journal* that if Thoreau made so much of the music in the telegraph wires, [...] it was because there was not much other music to listen to" (190).³ But just how poor was Concord's "hospitality to the arts"? How meager were Thoreau's opportunities to hear powerful orchestral performances?

It should first be acknowledged that Thoreau was not the only writer to have his senses enchanted by the buzz of the telegraph cables. Fellow New England Transcendentalist Christopher Pearse Cranch was equally charmed by the whirring wires suddenly threading the countryside in the 1850s. In an 1858 article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Cranch describes climbing a tree in a mesmeric trance and musing upon the telegraph cables passing between the branches. He entertains a vision of the whole land as a "great guitar" with the iron wires acting as the strings: "The spirits are singing, perhaps, with their heads up there in the sweet heavens and the rosy clouds, – and this vibration of the wires is a sort of loose jangling accompaniment of their unpractised hands on earth." For Cranch, perched in the crotch of the tree,

the telegraph cable generates pleasing varieties of tone and timbre. At one time it begins “to ring like a horn, and in the merriest of strains”; this note is followed by “a strain of perfect jubilation [...] like the flying song of the bobolink over tracks of blowing clover and apple-blossoms” (“An Evening” 490-91, 492).⁴ In light of such praise, Thoreau’s ecstatic adorations no longer appear so exceptional or so provincial. Cranch was a cosmopolitan artist who occasionally authored magazine articles on music. An accomplished poet, painter, and essayist, he was also an amateur flautist and an early champion of Schubert’s *Lieder*. By 1858, when the telegraph article appeared, Cranch had spent eight years living in Rome and Paris, enjoying operas and symphonies in Europe’s capital cities. And yet even this widely traveled connoisseur found a melodic beauty in the telegraph wire.

Cranch’s substantial musical education had begun well before he first sailed for Europe; Americans enjoyed a flourishing of the musical arts in the 1840s.⁵ Thoreau and his contemporaries inhabited a moment that was awakening to the powerful strains ringing out from continental composers, and writers were taking note. Walt Whitman, for example, was becoming an aficionado of Italian opera. “But for the opera,” he later claimed, “I could never have written *Leaves of Grass*” (Trowbridge 166). In 1842, Cranch raved to a friend about the wonderful concerts he had been attending in Boston (“the sublimest of choral and orchestral harmony”), singling out performances by the visiting German cellist George Knapp (Scott 78). The Boston Musical Academy, founded in 1833, had begun offering a series of concerts in 1840 that introduced Beethoven’s symphonies to New England. Margaret Fuller (who occasionally wrote music criticism for both *The Dial* and *The New York Tribune*) attended and expressed gushing admiration for Beethoven’s Fifth. “When I heard this symphony I said I will triumph more and more above the deepenin[g] abysses,” she wrote in a letter to her brother-in-law (and Thoreau’s close friend) Ellery Channing. “The life is large which can receive a Beethoven. I lived that hour” (qtd Marshall 154).

Beethoven (who had died in 1827) especially began making a mark on America in the 1840s. Even Thoreau suggested the desirability of a powerful

music "[such] as a Beethoven now utters at rare intervals from a distance" (*Reform Papers* 10). Beethoven's chief American herald was the Transcendentalist John Sullivan Dwight, one of the republic's first significant music critics, who published essays in *The Dial* (to which Thoreau was a contributing editor) and later founded and edited a long-lasting periodical called *Dwight's Journal of Music* (1852-1881). An active member of the utopian Brook Farm community, Dwight saw a direct connection between musical and social harmony, and he praised the symphonies of Beethoven for their transcendent beauty and elevating effects.⁶ He expressed his own impressions with a fairly Thoreauvian magniloquence: "The impression which Beethoven always leaves upon us is that there is *more, more!* A boundless striving to pronounce the unutterable, to embrace the infinite, is the sentiment of all his music; and the hearer, spell-bound, must follow the heaven-storming Titan, as far as his strength holds out" ("Academy" 59).

Yet despite such burgeoning appreciation in the 1840s, the antebellum American music scene was never robust – a fact that even the most prominent promoters acknowledged. "We cannot flatter ourselves for a moment that we of Boston are, or shall be for years to come, a musical people," admitted Dwight in the inaugural issue of *The Dial*, alluding to the Puritanical scorn toward the ornamental arts that persisted into the nineteenth century ("Concerts" 124). "We are in fact barely beginning to wake up, as from a lethargy, and join in sympathy with the great musical culture on the other side of the Atlantic," added Cranch a few years later ("Address" 109). During Thoreau's lifetime, the average American's knowledge of music was generally quite weak, rarely extending beyond church hymns for a choir and parlor tunes for a piano. Even Boston, which briefly rivalled New York as the musical capital of the United States during this era, never promoted concert music on a grand scale. While the city's Handel and Haydn Society was formed as early as 1815, its repertoire and schedule were limited, consisting primarily of annual performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*.⁷ The Boston Music Hall only opened in 1852; in 1850, Bostonians had been embarrassed when the Swedish celebrity vocalist

Jenny Lind visited on a tour and had to perform in a train station (the Fitchburg Depot) for want of a larger venue.⁸ The Boston Symphony Orchestra was not established until 1881. “The musical history of Boston before the middle of the nineteenth century is a somewhat barren field of study,” concluded one early historian (Howe 2).

Furthermore, music criticism published during Thoreau’s life was hampered by the absence of sound-recording technology. Prior to Edison’s invention of phonography in 1877, all music was essentially performative and ephemeral. An audience rarely heard the same piece more than once.⁹ For some, sheet music for the piano could provide an approximation for an orchestral performance. But for most, a piece of music was a personal experience rather than a public document. The very meaning of a musical composition a century and a half ago was necessarily different than what it is today, and the inability to listen to recordings generally hindered the emergence of a critical mode attentive to issues of structure, form, and technique.¹⁰ The music boxes and street organs that Thoreau enjoyed then played a more significant role, providing rare opportunities for repetitive listening to a uniform strain of music.

Music criticism at that time thus generally avoided analysis in favor of biography. Readers could more easily consult Stendhal’s pseudonymous account of Haydn’s life than they could find a critical review of Haydn’s symphonies.¹¹ Popular works such as George Hogarth’s *Musical History* (1835) consisted primarily of profiles of notable figures. Margaret Fuller’s 1841 *Dial* article “Lives of the Great Composers” is typical; a review of biographies of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, Fuller’s long essay praises the individual geniuses while saying little about the compositions themselves.¹² Indeed, while Bach’s biography might have been available to American readers, his music was barely known in the United States before the Civil War (Clark 337-51).

Thoreau might be chastised for his cultural insularity (despite Concord’s close proximity, he rarely visited Boston), but knowledge of classical music was generally so scarce in the United States that his scant familiarity with German composers was not notably inferior to the

wisdom of his countrymen. His very association with *The Dial*, which offered occasional essays on music, practically placed him in the intellectual vanguard of the concert crowd. And given the notoriously poor technical skills of American musicians in that era – very unlike the extreme professionalism of today's philharmonics – his preference for music boxes over concert halls is perhaps understandable. Thoreau, in other words, can easily be forgiven for not becoming an early champion of Beethoven. Furthermore, his own carefully honed listening skills were tremendously impressive, even if they were more frequently applied to crickets and sparrows. But for Thoreau, aesthetic appreciation never stood alone; it was always connected to a deeply considered ontology.

Of Sound, Mind, and Body

Largely because music was so ephemeral prior to the advent of recording technology, the concepts of *music* and of *sound* itself were generally closer during Thoreau's life than they are today (Hui xvi). "There is no sound that is not music," declared Nathaniel Parker Willis in an oft-reprinted 1829 essay. "There is no accident of nature's causing which can bring in discord" (5, 6).¹³ In fact, the subject of *sound* arguably received more attention with the emergence and maturation of the science of acoustics in the early nineteenth century. In contrast to the philosophers of the previous era, who had studied sound by attending to its specific sources (such as musical instruments and human voices), the theorists of Thoreau's day understood sound as essentially a "species of vibration" and strove to examine its effects on the human ear – thus ushering in "a new sonic regime" (Sterne 33, 44).

For the pioneers of acoustical science, sound was merely vibrating air; it became music (or speech, or noise) inside the ear. The young Thoreau was especially attuned to this process of aural becoming. As early as 1835, while he was a student at Harvard, he copied into his notebook a passage from Longfellow's newly published *Outre-Mer* observing that "there is no sound where there is no ear to receive the impulses and vibrations of the air."¹⁴ He continued to learn from books like David Brewster's *Letters on Natural*

Magic (1836) that airwaves conduct “all sound into my inmost being and it becomes music” (Thoreau, *Journal* 1:199). He realized that such vibrations only accrued meaning through the transformative processes of the auditory senses: “The least sound pervades and subdues all space to it as long as it fills my ear” (1:248-49).

Thoreau was most actively theorizing sound and music in his early years as a writer, and the initial volumes of his *Journal* are filled with ruminations on resonance and silence. His 1840 essay “The Service,” submitted to *The Dial* but rejected by Margaret Fuller, features a central section titled “What Music Shall We Have?” that explains Thoreau’s own cultivated habits of listening. The section begins with a few lines of verse:

Each more melodious note I hear
Brings this reproach to me,
That I alone afford the ear,
Who would the music be.

This desire to become music itself is not just an empty poetic conceit. Thoreau goes on to suggest that music was anciently valued because “the soul delighted still to hear the echo of her own voice” (*Reform* 9). In other words, music is an echo of the soul – which implies that the soul itself is essentially sonic or sonorous. Thoreau buttresses this claim by noting that Plato believed the gods to have given music to humankind as a means of self-maintenance. The “beauteous fabric of the soul,” he writes, occasionally “breaks forth into many extravagances and excesses”; music compels such “discordant parts” of the soul to be “sweetly recalled and artfully wound up to their former consent and agreement” (*Reform* 10).¹⁵ As a whole, “The Service” is primarily concerned with resonance. “Music” is generally an echo heard from a distance, and its role is not to excite but to recall.

According to William Gardiner’s popular 1832 book *The Music of Nature*, “The sublimest operations in nature, which strike us with awe and wonder, are to be referred to the sound of distant echoes” (290). Distant echoes constitute a significant recurring theme in Thoreau’s writing.¹⁶ When recording his impressions of sounds into his *Journal*, he frequently focused

on the musical qualities of faraway noises carried to him by the wind. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he memorably explains how he and his brother were enchanted by the nighttime noise of a distant drummer: "This stray sound from a far-off sphere came to our ears from time to time, far, sweet, and significant, and we listened with such an unprejudiced sense as if for the first time we heard at all" (173). Thoreau rarely describes listening directly to a source; rather, he catches notes and tones, chirpings and tinklings, snatches of song and snippets of melody, the beating of drums and the ringing of bells, as conveyed over meadows and along hillsides. "Music in proportion as it is pure is distant," he wrote in 1840. "The strains I now hear seem at an inconceivable distance, yet remotely within me" (*Journal* 1:199).

His choice of residence at Walden Pond may even have owed something to the region's resonant properties. Edward Emerson recalled that Thoreau taught the boys of Concord "how, at still midnight, in the middle of Walden, to strike the boat with an oar, – and, in another minute, the hills around awoke, cried out, one after another with incredible and startling crash" (7). As Emerson notes, Thoreau found the greatest echoic effect "at still midnight." While he no doubt gleaned such knowledge from first-hand experience, he would also have it confirmed by his reading. One of his favorite authors, Alexander Humboldt, had mused that a more uniform distribution of heat at night allowed for the smoother propagation of "sonorous undulations" (Humboldt 2:265).¹⁷ Thus on one of his evening walks outside of Concord, Thoreau waits until the "coolness of evening comes to condense the haze of noon & make the air transparent" and then declares, "Every sound is music now" (*Journal* 4:23).

Thoreau's consideration of echoic transmission and musical transformation became more nuanced over time. Attention to the reverberation of soundwaves is the guiding force in his famous chapter on "Sounds" in *Walden*. The following passage might be taken as representative:

As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons,

flying by twos and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white-pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air [...] and for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country. (*Walden* 114)

As Thoreau explains, either from collective flying or from restless perching, the pigeons' tantivy "gives voice to the air"; the air, not the pigeons, is speaking. *Tantivy* is an unusual if not quite obsolete word, and its reference here is somewhat ambiguous; the word can signify either a rapid gallop or the sound such a gallop makes. (The *motion* of the pigeons can give a voice to the air, or the *sound* of the pigeons can give a voice to the air.) *Tantivy*'s etymological origins are obscure, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that it is essentially "echoic, representing the sound of a horse's feet." Shortly thereafter, Thoreau returns to the locomotive to stipulate that what he hears is "the iron horse mak[ing] the hills echo with his snort" (*Walden* 116). The second tantivy is thus the galloping of the train – and again, the sound is heard not directly from the engine but as an echo of the hills. Like the beat of a partridge's wings, the rattle of the railroad cars registers as an atmospheric perturbation, an undulatory crescendo and decrescendo. Thoreau continues to describe sounds as echoic throughout the chapter and breaks down the distinction between original and reproduction when he hears bells pealing from afar: "The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it" (*Walden* 123).¹⁸ Thoreau, in other words, is interested less in the outburst of a specific source than in the agitation of all the air surrounding him – a vibrant soundscape that consists of a series of reverberations – circling, restless, dying away and reviving – a sequence of echoes rather than a solitary knell.¹⁹

Thoreau's interest in sound was ultimately metaphysical, the echo awakening the soul to a knowledge of its own sonic essence. Listening was thus simultaneously an aesthetic and an ontological activity. Thoreau came to understand selfhood as a sonorous property. In John Bernhard Stallo's then-popular *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature*

(1848), he had read that "sound is the conflict between the energy of the material Universal and the energy of the Individual, the vibrating alternation between them." "In sound," claimed Stallo, "universal and individual life are blended; sound is the thrill of momentary fusion with the Universe" (75, 76). Thoreau's transcendent moments accordingly tended to come through his inner ear rather than his inner eye.²⁰ In 1851 he recorded a powerful dream in which his body had literally become a musical instrument conducting the music of his – and of the universe's – soul: "My body was the organ and channel of melody as a flute is of the music that is breathed through it. My flesh sounded and vibrated still to the strain – & my nerves were the chords of the lyre" (*Journal* 4:155).²¹ This harmonic communion is not a simple expression of indivisible, independent selfhood. Thoreau rather understood his own essence relationally, as a tone defined by mystic chords. He is a vessel through which the vibrations of the universe become music.

Thoreau's sonic experiences are always moments of potential transformation. Active listening opens the self, allowing "external materiality – actual sonorous vibrations – literally or physically [to enter] the perceiver's interiority," notes Branka Arsić. "Listening can inherently subdue the perceiver to the point of turning him into the perceived, annulling the difference between external and internal" (*Bird Relics* 45). Thoreau's meditations on sound were remarkably advanced for their time, eventually echoed by continental philosophers a hundred years later. A man "inhabited and possessed" by music, remarked Vladimir Jankélévitch, "is no longer himself: he has become nothing more than a vibrating string, a sounding pipe" (1). Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy observes, "To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within." For Nancy, sound by definition "resounds"; it always refers to itself, and thus the act of listening opens up an approach to the self as an "infinite referral" – the discovery of identity in resonant movement (14, 9). Thoreau says much the same thing more straightforwardly soon after moving to the woods in 1845: "I would only hear myself as I would hear my echo" (*Journal* 2:167).

Thoreau understood his very being as both sonic and echoic, a harmonic oscillation in tune with nature. As Sherman Paul long ago perceived, sound carried Thoreau not out of himself but rather “into a state of identity” (526). This identity was not a fixed, possessive subjectivity but rather a fluid vibration. “The ideal listener is both inside and outside the music at the same moment,” insisted Aaron Copland (23). This mid-century intellectual captured it brilliantly: Thoreau was the ideal listener. “When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop,” he observed in his bean field at Walden. “It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans; and I remembered with as much pity as pride, if I remembered at all, my acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the oratorios” (*Walden* 159). With the tinkling sound echoing into the air, the distinction between the “I” that is hoeing and the “beans” that are hoed disappears. The result is an immeasurable, ideal identity.

Thoreau’s invective against concert music did not reflect a profound conviction. In the morning he could insist that his business was “to attend all the oratorios – the operas in nature,” while in the evening he could declare that “the singing of men is something far grander than any natural sound” – as he did on 7 September 1851 (*Journal* 4:55, 56). Ultimately his goal was never to cast aspersions on classical composers and their fans but rather to become attuned to the rich fund of sounds continually surrounding him. This attention – this attunement – is key. For Thoreau, listening opened up a sense of self in harmony with the universe.

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Notes

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¹ Alan Hodder notes that this was Thoreau’s “favorite auditory pun” (76).

² Two essays of the 1970s stressed that Thoreau leaned toward music that was simple and popular. Kenneth W. Rhoads characterized

Thoreau's sympathies as "aroused by a music essentially primitive and uncultivated" (317). Caroline Moseley somewhat more generously characterized Thoreau's musical taste as "plebeian" (626).

³ Perry Miller echoed Kazin's assumption, asserting that what Thoreau could learn of music "was only what he might hear through the windows of some burgher's house wherein a daughter of respectability was practicing her piano lessons" (146).

⁴ For an analysis of Cranch's "transcendental reverie," see Hanlon 135.

⁵ According to Richard Crawford, "The 1840s represent a watershed in the history of American musical performance" (80). Daniel Cavicchi attributes this watershed to the recovery from the Panic of 1837 (30). See also Bechtold 448.

⁶ "There is no other communion of so intimate a nature possible, as that which operates through music," claimed Dwight ("Music" 29). See also Saloman, *Beethoven's Symphonies and J.S. Dwight*.

⁷ John S. Dwight and Charles C. Perkins, *History of the Handel and Haydn Society, of Boston, Massachusetts* (Boston, MA: Alfred Mudge and Son, 1883-1893). See also Broyles 41-77.

⁸ Lind was not pleased with the arrangements. See Ware and Lockard 38-39.

⁹ Recognizing the difficulty of developing musical taste without the ability to reconsider individual works, Margaret Fuller urged concert organizers to offer repeat performances (Saloman, *Listening Well* 143).

¹⁰ "Music, as a science, is but little understood," began one prominent American essay on the topic in 1842 (Watson 285).

¹¹ L.A.C. Bombet, *The Life of Haydn, in a Series of Letters Written at Vienna*, 1817; Boston, Wilkins and Carter, 1839. Other popular biographies include Anton Schindler's *Life of Beethoven* (London, Colburn, 1841) and Edward Holmes' *Life of Mozart* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1845).

¹² Fuller breezily dismisses her own critical shortcomings by asserting that "a very slight knowledge of music makes it the best means of interpretation" (151). In 1842, Thoreau entered some slightly derogatory

remarks on “lives of the great composers” into his *Journal*, indicating his belief that such historical information is of little relevance to the music itself (1:369-70).

¹³ “All nature may be said to be full of music,” wrote George Hogarth. “The disagreeable and discordant sounds being (as in artificial music,) in such proportion only as to heighten the pleasure derived from those which are agreeable” (13).

¹⁴ MSS 6345, “Papers of Henry David Thoreau,” Clifton Walter Barrett Library, Small Collection, Harrison Institute, University of Virginia. I am thankful for the Lillian Gary Taylor Visiting Fellowship that led me to this source.

¹⁵ Thoreau repeats these quotations in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (175).

¹⁶ Hodder argues that echoes “had a numinous character for Thoreau” (78).

¹⁷ For Thoreau’s personal sources, see Sattelmeyer. On his reading Humboldt on sound, see Wulf 305.

¹⁸ Thoreau elaborates in his 1851 *Journal* source-passage: “It is by no means the sound of the bell as heard near at hand, and which at this distance I can plainly distinguish – but its vibrating echoes that portion of the sound which the elements take up and modulate. A sound which is very much much [*sic*] modified sifted and refined before it reaches my ear. The echo is to some extent an independent sound – and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of my voice – but it is in some measure the voice of the wood” (*Journal* 4:142-43).

¹⁹ Titon suggests that Thoreau should be understood as practicing a “soundscape ecology” (144). “Thoreau conceived the whole of nature [...] as matter through which sonorous motions roam,” similarly observes Branka Arsić. “All nature is for him acoustic and rhythmic” (*Bird Relics* 45).

²⁰ “If we think of Emerson as a transparent eyeball, we might think of Thoreau as a vibrating body” (Titon 145).

²¹ Peter Coviello declares that “this exquisite carnal ravishment by sound is as graphic a scene of sex as we get in Thoreau’s writing. For sound in

Thoreau – not hearing, precisely, but the flesh-vibrating modulations of sound – induces a sensual responsiveness to the outer world that works abrupt and sweeping changes in the very organization of the corporeal self" (44).

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