

## **Spinoza and Musical Power**

**Marie Thompson**

### **Abstract**

In recent years there has been a growing body of scholarship that seeks to use Spinozist concepts to theorize musical experience. However, very little of Spinoza's work explicitly considers music. In one of the few places in which musical experience is discussed in Spinoza's *Ethics*, it is used as a means of exemplifying the ways in which an entity, in itself, is not 'good or evil': it is neither, or both, depending on the relations into which it enters with other bodies. Drawing upon Spinoza's remarks, in this article, I consider what a Spinozist theory of musical power might entail. I argue that the particular, immanent and materialist notions of 'good' and 'bad' that can be found in Spinoza's work and are exemplified via music, enable a departure from both 'aesthetic moralism' and 'aesthetic relativism'. With reference to contemporary discourses of musical violence, as well as Pauline Oliveros' praxis of Deep Listening, I assert that Spinoza makes space for music's ethico-affective ambivalence. Drawing attention to Spinoza's citation of deaf experiences of music, I also consider the extent to which a Spinozist model of musical power allows for 'auraldiversity'. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which musical experience might exemplify some of the key tenets of Spinoza's thought.

### **Biography**

Marie Thompson is a Senior Lecturer in the University of Lincoln's School of Film and Media. She is the author of *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (Bloomsbury, 2017) and the co-editor of *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (Bloomsbury 2013).

Power lies at the heart of Spinoza's work: it connects his ontology, ethics, politics, physics and epistemology. Just as the Spinozist God/Nature is power (potentia), the essence of the Spinozist mode (or body-mind) is a degree of God/Nature's infinite power (conatus). The Spinozist good life, which involves becoming closer to God, involves a maximization of the body-mind's powers for thought and action. Yet a mode's degree of power is in flux. Encounters with other entities may increase the power of a body and its mind or diminish its power, rendering it reactive. Power, for Spinoza, is thus both the essence of a mode and determined via its relations with other modes.

In this article, I use a framework developed from Spinoza's *Ethics* to pursue a particular understanding of musical power. To talk of the power of music risks evoking romantic imaginations of music's capacity to traverse cultural boundaries and to inexplicably move us. Contrary to many of these dominant tropes, the philosophy of Spinoza provides a way of understanding musical power that neither universalises music's benefits nor simply resorts to relativism. Musical power has also been commonly understood apropos of political institutions, as well as music's ability to transmit ideologies. While Spinoza does not necessarily require us to depart with such understandings of musical power, the materialist notion of power deployed here is primarily framed in relation to the body and its capacities.

I begin by distinguishing a particular Spinozist conception 'good and bad', which are descriptors of power relations between entities. I differentiate this from both the proscriptive imaginary of aesthetic moralism as well as an aesthetic relativism predicated on personal taste. Taking up a brief comment by Spinoza on music in *The Ethics* I aim to exemplify how Spinoza's notions of 'good' and 'bad' might be applied to musical experience. By reading Suzanne Cusick's account of musical torture via Spinoza's ontology, I outline a Spinozist notion of musical harm; and examine what good music and good listening might do in the context of Spinoza's ontological and ethical framework. Finally, insofar as Spinoza gestures towards deaf encounters with music, I ask how a Spinozist conception of musical power might allow for differences in aural capacities, considering the ways in which

Spinozist framework enables a departure from a model predicated on an ideal listener. In doing so, I hope to show how Spinoza's thought might be useful for understanding musical experience, while also showing how musical experience might exemplify Spinozist philosophy.

### **Spinoza and music**

As has been frequently noted, the fine arts gain little attention in Spinoza's work. In his essay 'Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics' James Morrison describes Spinoza's brief comments on art and beauty as having 'no great philosophical significance or originality' when taken separately, 'and taken together they can in no way be construed as having even the rudiments of an aesthetic theory.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Spinoza offers little that might be described as a thesis on music, certainly by comparison to his counterpart René Descartes. The earliest yet often overlooked work of Descartes is the *Musicae Compendium* of 1618. In this short treatise Descartes outlines a series of hypotheses on music, considering the relationship between physical and mental dimensions of sensory perception. The text is a reflection of the changing seventeenth-century perspectives on music, with the development of a scientific method of resonance, consonance and musical affect.

In spite of his lack of attention to music and artistic practices more generally, Spinoza has also come to be associated with music via secondary readings—perhaps most famously through the work Deleuze and Guattari. Moreover, with the growing body of Deleuzian music studies scholarship, Spinozist concepts have been brought into relationship with music, providing an alternative means to understand performing and listening bodies.<sup>2</sup> Amy Cimini, meanwhile, has utilised Spinoza's parallelism to critique the residual dualism of anti-Cartesian music studies and to provide an account of embodied musical ethics.<sup>3</sup> As this growing body of scholarship suggests, there is much in Spinoza's work that can be fruitfully applied to musical experience despite his status as a non- or anti-aesthetic thinker.

In one of the rare occasions in which Spinoza himself mentions music, it is used as a means of exemplifying the ways in which an entity, in itself, is not 'good or evil'.

Rather, Spinoza understands these terms as descriptions of a particular set of relations. In *The Ethics*, he writes:

As far as good and evil are concerned, they...indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf.<sup>4</sup>

In this brief passage, Spinoza outlines what might be described as a ‘functional’ description of music. For Spinoza, music is a technology of affective modulation that, in turn, may be described as good or as bad, depending on the disposition and resulting state of the affected listening mode. In this regard, judgements of good and bad, beauty and ugliness do not pertain to the innate qualities of aesthetic objects. Rather, they are a reflection of determinable and contextual effects. From the perspective of the listener experiencing melancholy, music is experienced as good; and yet, if melancholy turns to grief, this music might be experienced as bad. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ tell us nothing about the nature of the music itself, beyond its affective capacities situated within a particular set of relations. They do, however, tell us something about the affected listener.

In recognising the ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ of entities as a relational effect, Spinoza radically departs from Pythagorean and Platonic cosmologies, which understand music to offer an approximation of divine harmonic ratios. As Amy Cimini notes, Spinoza’s ontology of a divine nature results in a rejection of the European musical approaches that are likely to have dominated his historical moment, whereby musical virtuosity was recognised in relation to a transcendental order or an anthropomorphised god whose pleasure is analogous to our pleasure.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Spinoza warns against mistaking sensations of harmony and noise with the affirmation of a transcendental order, chastising ‘the ignorant’ for confusing their affections with ‘the chief attributes of things’:

The ignorant...believe all things to have been made for their sake, and call the nature of a thing good or bad, sound or rotten and corrupt as they are affected by it....Those which move the senses through the nose, they call pleasant,

smelling or stinking, through the tongue, sweet, bitter, tasty or tasteless, through touch, hard or soft, rough or smooth and the like; and finally, those which move the ears are said to produce noise, sound or harmony. Men have been so mad as to believe God is pleased by harmony. Indeed, there are philosophers who have persuaded themselves that the motions of the heavens produce harmony.<sup>6</sup>

The confusion that Spinoza identifies as arising between modal experiences of sonic pleasure or displeasure and the definitive properties of sound or music has been fundamental to what I have described elsewhere as ‘aesthetic moralism’. Aesthetic moralism is a proscriptive imaginary that organises the relationship between silence and noise, defining them as good and bad, wanted and unwanted, beneficial and harmful respectively. It involves the conflation of what is perceived as aesthetic virtue with moral virtue: sounds that are heard as desirable and pleasing are thought to have social and intellectual worth, whereas sonic qualities deemed ugly and unpleasant are considered markers of social and cultural decline and prohibited accordingly.<sup>7</sup> A similar aesthetic moralism can be understood to organise relationships between various forms of music, in conjunction with social and political hierarchies. Classical music, for instance, has been posited as having absolute and universal significance. The universality attributed to classical music has been reinforced by a popular imagination of classical music as a ‘civilizing’ force: classical music’s status as ‘great art’ make it socially and morally valuable, hence its inclusion in a number of education and outreach programmes.<sup>8</sup> In the field of popular music studies, meanwhile, the rock music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and other canonical figures have historically been considered aesthetically and morally virtuous by comparison to the insipid, feminized and ‘fake’ pop music: where the former is an ‘authentic’ mode of expression, the latter is often characterised derivative, unintellectual and disposable.

Spinoza’s remark about music’s capacity to be good and bad might be read as a reassertion of the oft-cited claim that music is ‘a matter of personal taste’. An aesthetic moralism is thus replaced with an aesthetic relativism: musical goodness and badness becomes an issue of individual preference. However, the particular notion of the individual or subject (or lack thereof) in Spinoza’s work complicates

such attempts to read his discussion of judgement as an affirmation of personal taste. In Part III of *The Ethics* Spinoza asserts that: ‘we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.’<sup>9</sup> It is reiterated that the judgement of an entity as good or bad is an effect not a cause. We do not strive for what is good; rather we label as good what we strive for. Likewise, to understand musical judgements as originating from personal taste – or to understand personal taste as being derived from the autonomous judgement and free will of an individual – reflects an inadequate understanding of causality. To identify personal taste and preference as the cause of pleasant and unpleasant experiences with music is to fail to recognise the ways in which ‘the individual’ and its encounters are situated within and determined by a myriad of past and present affective relations. For Spinoza, all material entities – including hearing humans and musical sounds – are modes pertaining to the same substance. What a human body can do and a sine wave can do radically differ and yet they are, ontologically speaking, part of the same whole. Spinoza’s parallelism, meanwhile, means that ‘a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one of the same thing, expressed in two ways’.<sup>10</sup> The body as a mode of Extension – a composite of relations of motion and rest with the capacity to affect and be affected – and mind as an idea of the body pertain to two attributes (extension and thought) of the same substance. They are finite manifestations of an infinite, immanent and monist God/nature. Consequently, in Spinoza’s work there is an irreducibly social conception of existence. A mode’s relations with other modes, as well as its history of encounters, are constitutive of its powers of thought, action and affection.

The conflation of Spinoza’s remarks on music with an aesthetic relativism is also problematic insofar as a particular Spinozist conception of good and bad can be distinguished from the ‘relativist’ good and bad of personal taste. For Spinoza, individuals tend to call good or bad that which they believe will be beneficial or harmful, pleasurable or unpleasant to themselves. Good and bad are thus ‘subjective and modal.’<sup>11</sup> However, these terms also act as descriptors of relations between modes – in this instance, between the resonant body of music and melancholic or grieving listener – that results in a modulation of bodily power. In this regard, good

and bad might not be ‘merely subjective’. Rather, in naming the fluctuations of the mode’s powers for action, thought and understanding, as determined by its relations with other entities, good and bad can be understood to have a ‘primary, objective meaning, but one that is relative and partial.’<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, music that is bad pertains to an encounter that diminishes the body’s power, whereas good music would entail an enhancement of a body’s powers.

To recognise that music’s ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ can be understood as relational and contextual is, of course, not a particularly remarkable observation. Simon Frith, for example, has argued that while it remains integral to musical aesthetics and notions of musical pleasure, ‘there is no such *thing* as bad music. Music only becomes bad in an evaluative context, as part of an argument.’<sup>13</sup> However, discussions of music’s relative merits and flaws tend to refer to music’s discursive and symbolic components; and its comparative successes and failures apropos of ideal models of musical practice. While a Spinozist approach does not necessarily require an abandonment of these perspectives, it begins from a different starting point in asking ‘what do musical bodies (and their ideas) do?’ By taking into consideration this definition of good and bad as referring to modulations in a mode’s power; and situating Spinoza’s comments about music in relation to his monist ontology and ethical project, a space opens up for a Spinozist understanding of musical power that is distinct from both aesthetic moralism and relativism in its approach. This rests on an understanding of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that is defined via music’s intervention in material relations. In order to further develop this, I draw upon the three different encounters with music that Spinoza identifies (good, bad, indifference). I outline a Spinozist account of ‘musical harm’, identifying music’s capacity to diminish a mode’s capacity for thought and action. I then discuss what good music and, by extension, good listening does from a Spinozist perspective. Finally, in light of Spinoza’s reference to deafness and his characterisation of deaf musical experiences, I evaluate how a Spinozist conception of musical experience and power might allow for ‘auraldiversity’.

## **Spinoza and musical harm**

In his essay on the tensions between Spinozist and aesthetic thought, James Morrison asserts that the arts, for Spinoza, have a ‘merely instrumental’ value, insofar as they serve to maintain the body. In Part IV of the Ethics, Spinoza lists music, alongside pleasant food and drink, sports, theatre, scents and the beauty of plants as means by which the wise can refresh and restore themselves.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Morrison’s assessment rests in part on his treatment of reason and passion in Spinoza as oppositional: as shall be discussed further in the following section, such a dualist reading obscures the complex interweaving of these components in Spinoza’s thought. For Morrison, the role afforded to the arts within a Spinozist paradigm is an ‘auxiliary one of maintaining bodily health.’<sup>15</sup> However, in using music as an exemplar by which good and bad indicate nothing with regards to the nature of an entity, Spinoza makes apparent the possibility for music (and indeed the arts more broadly) to not just maintain but also diminish bodily health or power. The potential for encounters with art to be harmful, however, remains largely absent from Morrison’s account.<sup>16</sup>

For Spinoza, a bad encounter is one that results in a diminishment of power for an affected body and its parallel mind; and is associated with the passion of sadness. Bad encounters prevent us from approaching our ‘nature’: they are a marker of incompatibility between bodies. Evil, illness and death all pertain to the incompatible relations between bodies, such as poisoning, intoxication and deterioration. By this reasoning, ‘bad’ music is that which diminishes the power of the body and its mind. Spinoza’s example – music is bad for the grieving listener – suggests that music is incompatible with a person in grief, further diminishing its capacity of action and thought and therefore resulting in sadness. If the grieving listener attempts to use music to alleviate their affective state, they do so without understanding the incompatibility between themselves and music.

The notion that music might be harmful, negative or damaging has a long history. Plato’s meditations on the uses of proper musical education, for example, involve identifying virtuous and dangerous musical attributes of rhythm and harmonic mode. For Plato, musical training is a ‘more potent instrument than any other,



because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful'.<sup>17</sup> Music's influence on the soul makes it both potentially beneficial and dangerous. In Book III of *The Republic*, it is stated that the harmonies expressive of sorrow – namely, the Lydian mode – were to be banished: 'even to women who have a character to maintain they are of no use, and much less to men. Certainly.'<sup>18</sup> Complex rhythms, scales and 'many-stringed curiously harmonised' instruments were not to be admitted into the State inasmuch as they are not expressions of a courageous and harmonious life, while the flute-makers and players were to be excluded for their composite use of harmony. As with Spinoza, then, Plato's music may have beneficial and diminishing effects on the individual and the composite body of the social. However, as has been already noted, Spinoza and Plato remain ontologically estranged from one another: Spinoza's ontology of immanence marks a significant departure from a Platonic cosmology. Furthermore, Plato and Spinoza's 'bad music' differ in light of their distinct conceptions of the body-mind relation. For Plato, music affects the soul, whereas for Spinoza, music's body and its idea affect the listener and its idea.

In spite of this long history, scholars have at times struggled to account for music's capacity to harm. Investments in music (and indeed art more broadly) as a virtuous medium – as, for example, an expression of exceptional human creativity, fundamental to the wellbeing of the individual and society – can also inhibit evaluations of music's detrimental affects and effects. In their work on popular music and violence, Martin Cloonan and Bruce Johnson note that there is often a 'tacit assumption that...music is inevitably personally and socially therapeutic.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly, considering the use of music as a mechanism of torture within American detention camps during the 'War on Terror', Suzanne Cusick notes how the powerful fiction of music's innate moral worth is called into question:

'We in the so-called West have long since come to mean by the word 'music' an acoustical medium that expresses the human creativity, intelligence and emotional depth that, we think, almost lifts our animal selves to equality with the gods. When we contemplate how 'music'

has been used in the detention camps of contemporary wars, we find this meaning stripped away. We are forced, instead, to contemplate ‘music’ as an acoustical medium for evil. The thing we have revered for an ineffability to which we attribute moral and ethical value is revealed as morally and ethically neutral – as just another tool in human beings’ blood-stained hands.’<sup>20</sup>

Where music studies and philosophy alike have often celebrated music as beneficial for both the individual mind and the social collective, the use of music as a means of diminishing the power of detainees is revelatory of music’s capacity for harm. Cusick highlights how pop music and the music from children’s television shows has been weaponized to torture detainees in Abu Ghriab and Guantanamo in order to diminish a captive’s subjectivity and sense of self. Combined with other ‘no-touch’ torture practices, the use of music as acoustic bombardment provided a means of overpowering and rendering passive the listening body and its mind.

For Cusick, such practices reveal the ethical neutrality of music. Following Spinoza, however, enables an alternative assessment. Music is not ethically neutral; rather, the nature of relations determines its ethical status. However, it is important to ask what precisely is meant by music in such contexts. As has already been noted, from a Spinozist perspective, is no substantial specificity to sonic or musical materialities. Where different bodies have different capacities, Spinoza’s monism means that the arts cannot be distinguished ontologically from any other mode. Furthermore, just as affect is never ‘just affect’, insofar as it is entangled with ideas, imaginations and sensations; and a body’s power is never just ‘its’ power, insofar as it is at least partly defined by its relations with other bodies; music is never ‘just music’, insofar as it pertains to ordered sounds. Music or musical events might be best understood as complex bodies, consisting of, amongst other things, sounds and sound-making devices, resonant spaces, mediating technologies and ideologies. Music’s affective capacity and thus, by extension, its capacity to be good or bad depends on the nature of these component relations. In the detention centres of the ‘War on Terror’, musical torture is reported to take place in highly reverberant shipping containers at high volumes and played at inconsistent period. In this regard, ‘bad’ music is determined as such not only through the relation between

sonic materials and listening body: rather, a whole host of social, political, material and ideal forces mediate this relation. Indeed, one aspect of these practices that have drawn frequent comment from Cusick and popular commentators has been the curatorial decisions made in these contexts. If, as former detainees have remarked, it ‘doesn’t sound like music at all?’ then why are particular types of music – often feminized pop and children’s music – used?<sup>21</sup>

It would appear that these musical choices serve to reinforce social fictions that organise relations of ‘us’ and ‘them’, that is, complex bodies of affects and ideas that are real but imagined. These social fictions, which present the racialised body of ‘the enemy’ as simultaneously primitive, childlike, effeminate and misogynistic, can be understood to both underline and be reinforced by the curatorial decisions made by military personnel.<sup>22</sup> As Cusick notes: ‘A false sense of self-possession comes to compound a series of racial and cultural prejudices that reinforce the otherness of the victim, leading to a false feeling of enhanced masculinity (“I can take it and they can’t”) or enhanced modernity.’<sup>23</sup> Thus while music in such contexts might be experienced by the diminished body-mind of the detainee as sheer and blunt physical force, it nonetheless remains entangled with questions of socio-musical identities and their histories.

The use of music as torture can be understood as one, albeit ‘extreme’, manifestation of Spinozist bad music. Yet in more ‘mundane’ contexts, too, music’s capacity to diminish a body’s power can be exemplified. This might include experiences of ‘aural fatigue’ from unending music in the workplace, with which listeners may become uncomfortable, tired and distracted; the aggravation of tinnitus through particular musical frequencies might diminish the capacity of the body of the ear; or the use of classical music as an irritating audio-affective deterrent in order to prevent ‘undesirable’ composite social bodies from loitering.<sup>24</sup> It might even include the ways in which music, via increasingly personalised distribution technologies, serves to reinforce imaginations of neoliberal subjectivity and its investments in individual freedom, autonomy and self-improvement. While the use of music as torture refutes common narratives around the medium’s universal virtue, these seemingly more quotidian examples also matter inasmuch as

they inhibit dismissals of music's diminishment of a mode's power as an exception to the norm. *Contra* the positivity of music studies' discourse, they suggest negative encounters with music are far from uncommon: they are, instead, part of 'the everyday'.

### **What does good music (and listening) do?**

By comparison to 'bad' music, 'good' music might appear somewhat more difficult to identify. Indeed, for Spinoza, many encounters are destined to be bad – to diminish a body's power and to result in confused ideas. Yet Spinoza's brief remark on music's lack of inherent value clearly gestures toward the capacity for music to be 'good'. For Morrison, this 'goodness' can only be interpreted as referring to art's therapeutic capacity: art's alignment with the passions means that it is excluded from the development of a reasoned good life.

For Spinoza, however, there are different forms of good encounter that need to be taken into consideration. Good encounters determine a shift from a position of lesser to greater power. This is associated with joy. However, joy can be passive, or reactive, insofar as it is determined by 'chance' encounters and external forces that are not properly understood; but it can also be 'active', insofar as it marks the shift from inadequate toward more adequate ideas. As Michael Hardt notes, the Spinozist ethical question falls in two parts: How can we come to produce active affections? But first of all, how can we come to experience a maximum of joyful passions?<sup>25</sup>

Where Morrison sees art as excluded from this process, becoming active is not achieved through avoiding or minimizing the passions but through understanding them: through becoming aware of the body, and what it can do, the ways in which it affects and is affected via its relations with other bodies: how the body and its mind are part of a composite body. In other words, becoming active involves knowing the body and its determining relations. Moreover, becoming increasingly active – or becoming increasingly 'self-aware' as Genevive Lloyd defines it – requires a recognition that the individual mode does not exist in isolation as a self-contained and autonomous whole.<sup>26</sup>

Becoming aware of the body and its relations is common to much musical practice. Indeed, for many performers it is all too clear how the notion of the free-willing musicking subject versus the passive musical object inadequately reflects the practice and process of music making. To effectively perform requires an understanding not only of one's own body and its capacities (of motion, breath, duration) as partly determined by its relationship with other bodies (for example, flute, microphone, laptop) but also an understanding of the influence of the wider milieu. The oboist's tuning and timbre, for example, is determined in part by atmospheric pressure and architectural factors – how an 'A' reverberates in one space is not the same as how it reverberates elsewhere and so the player must learn how to adapt to different environments. In addition to this 'physical' basis of practice, there is the embodiment of histories and conventions of performance that partly determine how instruments are held, engaged with and, by extension, subverted. Through understanding the relationships that constitute the musical event – between performing bodies, instruments, environments, sounds and histories – performers can move toward a reasoned practice. Musicianship might thus be thought of as resting on the development of bodily awareness – of not only the capacity of the body and what it can and cannot do; but also what it can and cannot do in composition with other bodies. This knowledge shapes and is shaped by future practice.

Where musical performance requires self-awareness of the body, its powers and its limits, it remains pertinent to ask how musical listening might also facilitate a move toward self-awareness, toward activity, toward joy. As Amy Cimini has demonstrated, a Spinozist paradigm can offer an opportunity through which to rethink common characterisations of listening as 'passive'. Where dominant imaginations of the ear's 'openness' lead to descriptions of sonic experience in terms of passivity and immersion, 'Spinoza's univocal conception of activity and passivity unsettles the historically normative allocation of passivity to the ear in both musical and ethical domains. The Spinozistic body does not arrive, a priori, with zones of activity and passivity distributed across its materiality.'<sup>27</sup> In this regard, the composer Pauline Oliveros' program of Deep Listening might provide one means of 'becoming active' in listening. While grounded in a rather different

set of philosophical questions, some complementary resonances can be traced between Oliveros' practice and the Spinozist pursuit of joyous bodily-awareness.

Oliveros' work centres on developing the art of listening, recognising this as an often side-lined but nonetheless integral component of both musical engagement and social transformation. For Oliveros, Deep Listening marks an attempt to move beyond the habits of listening and knowing. The Deep Listening Institute describes the practice as an exploration of the differences between 'involuntary' hearing and 'voluntary' listening, and the 'selective nature – exclusive and inclusive – of listening.' It includes techniques such as 'bodywork, sonic meditations, interactive performance, listening to the sounds of daily life, nature, one's own thoughts, imaginations and dreams, and listening to listening itself' with the aim of cultivating 'a heightened of and movement between these awareness of the sonic environment.'<sup>28</sup> In drawing attention to listening as body-mind capacity, as well as, for example, the ideas and affects associated with sounds via various exercises, Deep Listening aims to facilitate a greater understanding of the relations between the ear, the body, the physicality of sound, its perception and environment. Oliveros describes it as a process of 'exploring the relationships among any and all sounds whether natural or technological, intended or unintended, real, remembered, or imaginary. Thought is included.'<sup>29</sup> Deep Listening aims to develop balance between 'focal listening', which concentrates on the specificities of particular sounds and 'global listening' which diverts attention to the broader, composite field of sound. By placing focal listening in relation to global listening; and by placing the specificities of an individual sound in relation to a broader context, Deep Listening can be understood as fostering a move from inadequate to adequate ideas: from a reflection on how sounds appear to us, towards understanding sounds are determined by and situated within a broader network of relations. Rather than figuring it as a passive and homogenous sense, Oliveros practice thus reveals listening as multiple, complex and variable.

It might be tempting to read Oliveros as advocating the mind gaining control over the body and the sensations, inasmuch as her aforementioned distinction between 'hearing' and 'listening' would appear to reproduce a Cartesian dualism: where

hearing involves the physical and unconscious dimensions of perception, listening pertains to its psychological and conscious components and its social and cultural attachments. This tension is not easily resolved. However, it is notable that Deep Listening does not pertain to a mastering of listening via consciousness.<sup>30</sup> Rather, it is about understanding and experimenting with the listener's own sensuous capacity in relation to its environment, of which it is a part. Oliveros writes about her development of her practice as such:

'I noticed that many musicians were not listening to what they were performing! There was good hand eye co-ordination in reading music, but listening was not necessarily part of the performance. The musician was of course hearing but listening all over or attention to the space/time continuum (global) was not happening. There was disconnection from the environment that included the audience as the music was played.... I began with myself. I started to sing and play long tones, and to listen and observe how these tones affected me mentally and physically. I noticed that I could change my emotional state by concentrating my attention on a tone. I noticed that I could feel my body responding with relaxation or tension. Prolonged practice brought about a heightened state of awareness that gave me a sense of well-being.'<sup>31</sup>

Oliveros' comments on Deep listening resonate with Lloyd's observation that self-awareness is not about directing attention to an external intellectual object, independent of sensory and corporeal experience. Rather, it is a refining of the sensory awareness of the body. For Oliveros, the body and its affections are integral to the process of Deep Listening, insofar as they serve to situate knowledge and understanding: change relies not just on words but on 'a full body response that has total presence and impact. That does not mean that words are not effective... Without engagement of the body though, words are literally disembodied and become more and more abstract.'<sup>32</sup>

If the 'good' in Spinoza involves developing an awareness and understanding of what a body can and cannot do via its relations with other bodies, then Oliveros' experimental practice of deep listening can be thought of as seeking empowerment through generating awareness of the affective and ideational

relations between listening body, its mind and sound. It requires listeners to recognise themselves not as disconnected actors but as part of a broader whole, within which we can become knowing and thus active in our engagements. Indeed, it is pertinent that Oliveros recognises Deep Listening as an ethical project, arising from ‘feeling that people needed connections, interconnections, rather than separation in order to play together well for one thing (as musicians), but also to be together well as human beings on a planet that is shared by all...I recognized that being heard was a step toward being understood. Being understood is a step toward being healed. Understanding is a step toward building community.’<sup>33</sup> For Oliveros, the understanding fostered by Deep Listening of the self and its relations has the potential to help generate peace: ‘The more deep listeners we have, the better chance of having a peaceful society. Deep listening is part of a personal, and now communal, quest for peace.’<sup>34</sup> Through playful experimentation with and a refinement of the body and its minds’ power to listen, Deep Listening can be understood to pursue a shared and reasoned joy.

### **Spinozist auraldiversity**

Oliveros’ practice seeks to distribute sonic experience across the body and bodies, expanding the realm of listening to include, for example, the feet and eyebrows.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, Deep Listening, and the ethical project embedded within it, tends to rely upon a body’s capacity for hearing. Consequently, the enrichment and refinement of social, musical and ethical listening rests, in part, on a body’s capacity to be aurally affected. If a complex network of relations constitutes music’s affective and ideational power, then it remains to be asked how the capacities of listening bodies, alongside, for example, musical materials, social contexts and distribution technologies determine these powers. In other words, how does a Spinozist account of musical power take into account ‘auraldiversity’? This term has been used by John leVack Drever to refer to a ‘variety of (often less than ideal hearing that we experience throughout a normal day and throughout our lives albeit to varying degrees (from the trifling experience of a temporary threshold shift or transient ear noise to intolerable pain from hyperacusis).’<sup>36</sup> To consider auraldiversity is to recognise that capacities for hearing varies not only between



different individuals but also the same individual might experience different hearing capacities at different stages of their life.

The differences between listening bodies are central to Spinoza's remark on music. Where the bodily and ideational states of grief and melancholy condition music's affective power, the deaf body, for Spinoza remains unaffected: music is neither good nor bad inasmuch as the deaf listener is assumed to not have the capacity to perceive it. While his characterization of deaf musical experience is rather reductive, Spinoza's acknowledgement of deafness as one of a number of bodily states that inform perceptions of music is nonetheless striking. As has already noted, different bodies have different powers. What a melancholic body can and cannot do, what a grieving body can and cannot do and what a deaf body can and cannot do are different. However, the comparisons of different body's powers tell us nothing about their ontology. In the preface to Part IV of *The Ethics*, immediately prior to his remark on music, Spinoza argues that perfection and imperfection are only 'modes of thinking', that is, 'notions we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another.' Similarly, changes in a body's capacity to hear do not mark a change in a body's perfection. When experiencing a heavy cold, a virus diminishes my body's power for thought and action. One consequence of this bad encounter is that my capacity for hearing is diminished by comparison to the week prior. And yet it is only by comparison to my previous experiences that I might describe my hearing as 'imperfect'. The 'imperfection' of my hearing arises from an idea of my own hearing, rather than any imperfection of my body. In other words, a deaf body's 'diminished' capacity for hearing music is only judged as such relative to an ideal or norm. This is not to deny that such ideals or norms can be powerful; nor that deaf bodies are negatively affected by audism or other discriminatory structures. However, as bodies and their minds are modes of one substance that is God/Nature, no body is more or less perfect than any other.

Just as an individual's capacity for hearing may vary over the course of a day, week or lifetime, what deaf bodies can or cannot do in relation to sonic bodies varies. In assuming deaf bodies remain unaffected by music – which is to say, music has no

power in relation to them – Spinoza’s comment can be understood to reiterate a dominant imagination or ‘ideal type’ of deafness that downplays the continuums between and multiplicities of sensory capacities.<sup>37</sup> This imagination of deaf experience in relation to sound and music has been challenged by a variety of practitioners: American artist Christine Sun Kim has sought to reconfigure limited conceptions of sonic experience, deafness and hearing in her work. Sun Kim, who is pre-linguistically deaf, does not consider herself a musician and although sound is her primary medium, her practice draws upon a number of mediums, including painting, writing, performance and video installation. However, in doing so, it raises questions about the boundaries of the aural in relation to different ‘sonic’ practices, including music. Sun Kim has described her practice as being motivated by ‘unlearning sound etiquette.’<sup>38</sup> Her work interrogates the conventions through which hearing people perceive and react to sound, as well as her own learnt responses to sound. She describes her art as ‘exploring what is possible and what is not, pushing and redefining boundaries.’<sup>39</sup> In Sun Kim’s *face opera ii*, for instance, deaf participants ‘sing’ via facial expressions and visual nuances. Drawing inspiration from the integral role of body movement in American Sign Language communication, the performance makes apparent processes of bodily translation, with the ‘choir’ responding to a conductor. Likewise, Sun Kim’s use of musical notation in her drawings makes apparent the ways in which visual media can communicate sonic information. In drawing attention to processes of mediation and translation, Sun Kim’s work not only unsettles the boundaries between ‘hearing culture’ and ‘deaf culture’ but also aural and the visual. In the context of Sun Kim’s work, the complexity of musical bodies comes to the fore: music’s affects – as a ‘sonic’ medium - concern not just sound but movement, visuals and haptic vibration. Different listening bodies, meanwhile, might be affected by some, if not all, of these components.

In spite of his reassertion of deafness as an ideal type, Spinoza’s acknowledgement of deaf encounters with music and his monist ontology offers a possible departure from a model of musical power predicated on an ‘ideal listener’. This ideal listener has been integral to what was previously described as aesthetic moralism. Analyses of music in both music studies and philosophy tend to assume a particular type of

engagement with music: it is often posited as the sole or primary point of focus to an attentive listener, who is, in turn, positively affected. The often-implicit assertion of an ideal listener results in a marginalisation of everyday, ‘inattentive’ and negative encounters with music. Moreover, this ideal listener also tends to fail to account for aural diverse encounters with music, which to greater or lesser degrees may be affected by music as a sonic medium. Spinoza’s remark on music, however, makes apparent the simple yet important point that different bodies are differently affected: the nature of their affection and the degree to which they are affected emerges in situ. To acknowledge this does not require a return to relativism, whereby music’s effects are entirely subjective. Indeed, as has already been noted, Spinoza’s work allows for an alternative trajectory inasmuch as a body and its powers exist within a nexus of relations. Nor does it necessarily require a departure from generalisations about sonic experience: for most hearing human bodies, for example, the deployment of music at high volumes at indeterminate intervals and for long durations while being held at a detention camp would be a deeply unpleasant and diminishing experience, irrespective of ethnicity, religion and personal taste. Yet Spinoza’s ontology, in asserting that no mode is more or less perfect than another mode; and asserting that what a body and its mind can do cannot be known in advance, means that conceptualisations of musical experience predicated on generalisations of affective and ideational responses need to remain open to revision. They are partial, relative and situated.

### **Conclusion: from aesthetic moralism to ethical ambivalence**

Spinoza offers little by way of comment on musical experience. Indeed, for Spinoza, there is nothing ‘special’ about music: it cannot be substantially distinguished from any other entity. In this regard, speaking of musical power, or sonic materiality is, ontologically speaking, meaningless. For many musicologists, the lack of ‘specialness’ afforded to music might be a cause for concern, inasmuch as music studies tends to assume that music *is* special and qualitatively different from other artforms and activities. In spite of this, there is much in Spinoza’s work that resonates with contemporary music studies. The Spinozist emphasis on bodies, affects, powers and relations provide useful tools for conceptualising encounters with music - as listeners, performers, producers, communities or otherwise.

A Spinozist account of musical power recognises music's affects and effects to emerge in situ. Where music studies has often framed 'the power of music' in positive terms – for instance, its capacity to provide emotional comfort, intellectual stimulus, or friendship – A Spinozist framework allows space for musical experiences to be mundane, negative and damaging. Music might result in reasoned joy by aiding 'self-awareness' of the body and its mind's power. However, it can also result in a diminishment or limitation of power – be it by causing physical and psychological harm, or by reinforcing dominant social imaginations. Furthermore, where music studies and philosophy have often based their assessments of music on an 'ideal listener', a Spinozist ontology offers a means of departing from such models: the simple yet important point that is made apparent by his brief comment on music is that different bodies have different capacities to be affected – aurally or otherwise. Spinoza thus makes space for music's ethico-affective ambivalence, *contra* dominant musicological fictions and their underlying 'aesthetic moralisms'.

---

<sup>1</sup> James Morrison 'Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol.47/1 (1989), pp.359-365, p.359.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Milla Tiainen 'Corporeal Voices, Sexual Differentiations: New Materialist Perspectives on Music, Singing and Subjectivity' in Sylvia Mieszkowski, Joy Smith and Marijke de Valck (ed.) *Sonic Interventions*. (Amsterdam, New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2007), pp. 147-168. Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010). Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson. *Discographies: Dance, Music, Culture and the politics of Sound*. (London: Routledge, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> See Amy Cimini, *Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies*. PhD Thesis. (New York: New York University, 2011). See also Amy Cimini 'The Secret History of Musical Spinozism' in Beth Lord (ed.) *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp.87-108.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics* trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996). Part IV, Preface.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Cimini 'The Secret History of Musical Spinozism', p.92-94.

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza *Ethics*, Part I, Appendix.

<sup>7</sup> Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism*. (New York, Bloomsbury, 2017).

- 
- <sup>8</sup> See Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Anna Bull, *The Musical Body: How Gender and Class are Reproduced Amongst Young People Playing Classical Music in England*. PhD thesis. (London: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2015).
- <sup>9</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics* Part III, Scholium to Proposition 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. Part II, Proposition 7, scholium.
- <sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Trans. Robert Hurley. (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988) p.22
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Simon Frith 'What is bad music?' in Christopher Washbourne and Malken Derno (ed.) *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) pp.15-36, p.19.
- <sup>14</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics* Part IV, Proposition 45, Scholium to corollary 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Morrison, 'Why Spinoza had no aesthetics' p.363
- <sup>16</sup> Morrison does associate the arts with the emotions, senses and imagination and therefore concludes that, inasmuch as the emotions are sources of unhappiness, unfreedom and vice, the arts remain excluded from Spinoza's notion of the good life. For Morrison, the good life requires the mastery of such emotions. However, as I have already noted, Morrison's assessment rests on a dualist treatment of reason and emotion in Spinoza's work. This oppositional treatment has been called into question by Moira Gatens and Genevive Lloyd, amongst others. For example, see Moira Gatens and Genevive Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>17</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (Auckland: The floating Press, 2009) Book III, p.209
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 201.
- <sup>19</sup> Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009) p. 1.
- <sup>20</sup> Susanne Cusick, 'Musicology, torture, repair. *Radical Musicology*. Vol 3. (2008) para 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Susanne G. Cusick and Brandon W. Joseph 'Across an invisible line: A Conversation about Music and Torture'. *Grey Room*. Vol. 42 (2011), pp.6-21, p.18.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> For more on this see Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*; Lily Hirsch, *Music in American Crime Prevention and Punishment*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

- 
- <sup>25</sup> Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*. (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p.95
- <sup>26</sup> Genevive Lloyd, *Part of Nature: Self Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.18.
- <sup>27</sup> Cimini 'Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music: Toward a New Practice of Theorizing Musical Bodies' p.216-217.
- <sup>28</sup> Deep Listening Institute 'The History of the Deep Listening Institute', *Deep Listening Institute* <http://deeplisting.org/site/content/about> [accessed 20th April 2018].
- <sup>29</sup> Pauline Oliveros 'Quantum listening: from practice to theory, to practice practice'. In *Sounding the Margins: Collected Writings 1992-2009*. (Kingston, New York: Deep Listening Publications, 2010), p.78
- <sup>30</sup> Oliveros describes consciousness as 'acting with awareness, presence and memory. What is learned is retained and retrievable. Information, knowledge of events, feelings and experiences can be brought forward from the past to the present. In this way one has self recognition.' In this regard, Oliveros' notion of consciousness might be understood to have complementary resonances with Spinoza's notion of 'becoming active'. See Pauline Oliveros (2005) *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* New York: iUniverse, Inc. xxi.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, xvii
- <sup>32</sup> Pauline Oliveros 'My "American Music": Soundscape, politics, technology, Community' In *Sounding the Margins: Collected Writings 1992-2009*. (Kingston, New York: Deep Listening Publications, 2010), p.233.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.232
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 242.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Christine Sun Kim Interviews Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Field*. <http://sonicfield.org/2014/05/christine-sun-kim-interviews-pauline-oliveros/> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018].
- <sup>36</sup> John levack Drever, 'The case for auraldiversity in acoustic regulations and practice: the hand dryer noise story' *International Congress on Sound and Vibration*. (2017). <http://research.gold.ac.uk/20814/6/The%20Case%20for%20Auraldiversity%20in%20Acoustic%20Regulations%20and%20Practice-%20The%20Hand%20Dryer%20Noise%20Story%20Drever%201stAug2017%20%281%209.pdf> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2018] p.6.
- <sup>37</sup> Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich 'Sound studies meets deaf studies', *Senses and Society* vol.7/1 (2012) pp.72-86, 74.

---

<sup>38</sup> Alice Hughes, 'Unlearning sound: Christine Sun Kim', *Rooms Magazine* 14 August 2014. <https://www.carrollfletcher.com/usr/library/documents/christine-sun-kim-press/alice-hughes-unlearning-sound-christine-sun-kim-rooms-magazine-14-august-2014.pdf> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.