

# Perilous Listening

## Early Music, Historically Informed Listening, and the Sacrosphere of Spaces<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This essay deals with a musical performance at the 20th Haapsalu Early Music Festival in 2013, when the viol ensemble Phantasm played a concert entitled “Perilous Polyphony” consisting of works by William Byrd, Elway Bevin, and other composers of Elizabethan Britain. After a cursory overview of Haapsalu’s characteristics, the programme and the programme notes of the concert in question are discussed with regard to potential perils in the music as they can be observed in some contrapuntal details of the compositions. While the Early Music Festival is centred on concerts that feature period instruments and historically informed performance practice, it is questionable whether the audience, even if historically informed itself, is able to perceive the music’s perils as the audience in Elizabethan Britain did. But since the very performance situation is entirely different, the heading “Perilous Polyphony” turns out to rather be an atmospheric label.

In as much as musicology reflects the challenges of cultural studies, it seems quite clear that the subject of musicology is to be understood as a complex network of different cultural practices rather than as an entity in itself. Christopher Small therefore coined the term “musicking” to make clear that “music is not a thing at all but an activity” (Small 1998: 2). Activities, however, may be understood not only as more or less unbiased actions, but also as practices that are both based on and establish certain meanings. Small defines it thus:

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing (Small 1998: 9).

This definition, as incomplete as it is, makes clear that “to music” is related to a complex network of interdependent communication practices. But since it is difficult to think of communication without thinking of meaning, I suggest to refer to musicking as a set of cultural practices that involve communication of meaning.

It is as courageous as it is risky to give a general definition of musicking that is suitable

to any musical performance, particularly since the term “musical performance” refers to music as a given matter, notwithstanding the fact that “to music” is just being defined. But beyond sophistries of this kind one has to admit that musicking also incorporates activities that are subject to potentially discursive processes, and thus to being made meaningful. The attempt to investigate these processes in general would be as presumptuous as it would be futile, but it seems promising to attempt to do this in a specific case study. The attempt that will be made here, however, is in the nature of a trial, and makes not claim to be representative at all. But it does appear to offer fruitful insights into how musical practices are made discursive and by whom. The subject of this essay is a musical performance that took place at the XX Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival (20th Haapsalu Early Music Festival) on 4 July 2013, when the viol ensemble Phantasm played a concert entitled “Perilous Polyphony” in the Haapsalu Dome church.

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The small town of Haapsalu, located on the western coast of Estonia, was famous from the early 19th century for its spa facilities. It was popular with

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1 This paper is based on research that I conducted at the XX Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival (20th Haapsalu Early Music Festival), 3–7 July 2013, especially on interviews held with Toomas Siitan and Laurence Dreyfus. I gratefully acknowledge that they shared their thoughts with me.

holiday makers, mainly from the Baltic region and from Saint Petersburg, who relied on the curative properties of the local mud that the doctor Carl Abraham Hunnius had discovered and described in his medical dissertation thesis submitted at the University of Tartu (Hunnus 1821). Like other spas of the Baltic region, Haapsalu attracted a more or less solvent public; spa facilities like the *kuursaal* reflected its sophisticated standing. After Estonia's first period of independence in 1918–1940, Haapsalu lost its status and became a military base. Since the Singing Revolution and Estonia's second independence in 1991, the town is slowly being rediscovered as a holiday resort. Today, architectural testimonies in Haapsalu remind one of both periods, so that Jonathan Bousfield can call Haapsalu "an endearing mixture of belle époque gentility and contemporary chic" (Bousfield 2004: 233). With around 12,000 inhabitants, Haapsalu is the centre of a rural region with quite a number of summer houses in which Estonians spend some weeks or months during the summer time.

With its first archival record dating from 1279, however, Haapsalu was already important as an episcopal see in the late Middle ages and Early Modern times, until the see was moved to Kuresaare on the nearby island Saaremaa in 1562 as a result of the breakdown of the Livonian confederation and the struggle for supremacy in the Baltic region between Denmark, Sweden and Russia (von zur Mühlen 1994: 175). The Haapsalu Dome church, which, as in other parts of the German-influenced Baltic region, is surrounded by a Bishop's castle, mirrors this former significance. Currently, the Lutheran church of Estonia uses this Dome church, Haapsalu being the see of the provost of the church district Haapsalu.

Since 1994 Haapsalu has been home to the Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival, which was held in 2013 for the twentieth time. The festival was founded by Toomas Siitan who, with support of local and governmental sponsors such as the Estonian Ministry of Culture, the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, the Haapsalu town authorities and others, has managed to invite top-flight international Early Music ensembles

and artists to Haapsalu, where a number of concerts take place in the Dome church and other venues over several days in July; almost half of the concerts feature international artists, while the other half are performed by Estonian artists and ensembles specializing on Early Music.

This information sets the context for the following reflections, which have as their starting point the second concert of the XX Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival on 4 July 2013. This concert was given by the Viol consort Phantasm consisting of Mikko Perkola, Markku Luolajan-Mikkola and Laurence Dreyfus, the artistic director of the ensemble, and it was entitled as "Perilous Polyphony".<sup>2</sup> In the festival brochure, Dreyfus explains

the idea behind this programme: rather than listen to the many voices of polyphonic music merely for the beautiful sonorous effect they make, it is exciting and worthwhile to focus on the perils of writing polyphony that takes very seriously both the integrity of each part as well as the striking ways in which each can be combined and counterposed with others. All the composers whose works we are representing this evening take some fascinating contrapuntal risks in their compositions – risks understood not only in the technical sense of audacious harmonies, peculiar melodies, and unsettling rhythms but also in the more global sense of endangering conventional ideas of musical character and styles, even sometimes threatening musical coherence itself (Dreyfus 2013: 21).

This text focuses in a remarkable manner on the listeners, who are advised to listen to the contrapuntal structure of the pieces, to the details of the parts and their respective interdependencies, rather than to the sounding whole, in order to discover the perils of the compositions – perils that have the potential even to affect musical coherence itself. Wordings like these may be regarded as overstatements, but they certainly catch one's attention. Perils of this kind appeared, for example, in the second piece of the programme, Elway Bevin's *Browning*,

<sup>2</sup> The Estonian title in the festival brochure "XX Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival" (2013), p. 17, reads "Kaelamurdev polüfoonia", meaning rather "Breakneck" or "Hazardous Polyphony". However, Laurence Dreyfus has given the English title.

**Example 1.** *The Leaves Be Green*. Traditional Song.

The leaves be green, the nuts \_\_\_ be brown, they

hang so high, they will not \_\_\_ come down

a piece that is quite popular among viol players, though neither the piece itself nor the composer are of major interest to either performers or scholars beyond this repertoire. Almost nothing is known of Bevin's life (1554–1638) besides his being organist at Bristol cathedral from 1589 to 1637/8 (Koch 1999: 1534). In 1631 he published *A Briefe and Short Instruction to the Art of Musicke* (Bevin 1631; Collins 2007); of his compositions only some ten pieces are preserved in manuscripts in libraries in Great Britain. His *Browning* is one of only four instrumental pieces (Koch 1999: 1534–1535).

Bevin's *Browning* is closely related to the five-part viol piece of the same title by William Byrd (ca. 1540–1623). Both compositions are undated; however, as Byrd was the older of the two composers, it is quite likely that his composition predates Bevin's, although there is no actual

evidence of this. In any case the scores of both pieces clearly reveal that they refer to each other in a very dense way. Both works are based on the first two lines of a folk song, which serve as the musical material for the composition (Ex. 1).

Byrd contrasts these lines with two other *soggetti* right from the first bars. The composition then consists largely of contrapuntal interplay between the three *soggetti*, which are combined with each other in a wide variety of ways, including transpositions. In the course of the composition the *soggetti* recede more and more into the background and some new musical material is introduced, creating different contrapuntal and rhythmical challenges, e.g. a section with triple metre at the beginning and end of which Byrd sets regular quavers and triplet quavers against each other (Ex. 2).

**Example 2.** William Byrd. *Browning*. Ed. Ulrich Alpers, bars 1–4.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <[http://hz.imsip.info/files/imglnks/usimg/c/c9/IMSLP139042-WIMA.7568-the\\_leaves\\_be\\_green.pdf](http://hz.imsip.info/files/imglnks/usimg/c/c9/IMSLP139042-WIMA.7568-the_leaves_be_green.pdf)> (21 January 2019).

**Example 3.** Elvin Bevin. *Browning*. Ed. Ulrich Alpers, bars 1–11.<sup>4</sup>

Bevin, in his turn, bases his entire composition upon the two given lines from the song, which alternate consistently in the three parts beginning and ending with the Tenor voice and followed in a regular manner by the Treble voice and the Bass (Ex. 3).

Only one exception can be observed: in bar 44 the Treble voice reads *f'-e'* where – according to the song – it ought to read *f'-d'-e'*; without this change, however, this would have caused parallel fifths with the bass line (Ex. 4).

**Example 4.** Bevin. *Browning*, bars 43–45.

It would be quite easy to fill numerous pages with detailed analyses of the contrapuntal refinements in both pieces. Dreyfus's programme notes, however, suggest analysing the listening perception – and thus the discursive attribution of meaning to Bevin's *Browning* – as is suggested by entitling the Haapsalu concert "Perilous Polyphony", as well as by the references to the perils of writing polyphony in Dreyfus's own programme notes. To understand these perils, which are thought to be capable even of "threatening musical coherence itself" (Dreyfus 2013: 21) it is necessary to define musical coherence as Bevin may have understood it. As a heuristic approach, I suggest basing this definition on Bevin's *Briefe and Short Instruction*. Even if this *Instruction* is mainly about writing canons of all kinds, it has the advantage of dealing with compositions "upon the Plain-song" (Bevin 1631: title) – a possible reference to his *Browning*. Moreover, the *Instruction* enables us to investigate – at least to some degree – Bevin's understanding of music as being based on contrapuntal rules:

<sup>4</sup> <<http://hz.imsip.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/a4/IMSLP117332-WIMA.7417-browning.pdf>> (21 January 2019).

rules, however, that are hardly explained, but rather exemplified in a number of canons that proceed from simple two-part note-against-note settings to complex five-part canons, and finally puzzle canons and polymorphic canons of up to 63 voices (Collins 2007: 40–42). At the beginning of his *Instruction*, Bevin lists the concords Unison, Third, Fifth and Sixth, and the discords Second, Fourth and Seventh, and explains that “[t]he Discords [---] which being sometimes mixt with Concords, make best musicke, being orderly taken” (Bevin 1631: vi). What he means with “orderly”, however, has to be deduced from the detail of his canons.

Two examples from Bevin’s *Browning* will suffice to illustrate where the musical coherence is potentially threatened. The first one has already been quoted: the altering of the song line in bar 44 to avoid parallel fifths. Indeed, though Bevin never refers to this rule in his *Instruction*, he rigorously avoids writing parallels of perfect concords in his canons, though he also never alters the plain-song melody, which consists of only seven notes in his examples. It seems here as if the octave line in the Bass part (bars 43–44) is contrapuntally superior to the Treble part, forcing the latter to alter the song line, and thus affecting the given material. The second example comes from the clausula in bars 26–27 (Ex. 5).

**Example 5.** Bevin. *Browning*, bars 25–27.

Even inexperienced listeners will notice the opposition of *c* sharp in the Treble part against *c* natural in the Tenor part. Both notes are justified: *c* sharp is the necessary leading note in the upper voice, building the *paenultima* together with the *e* in the Bass part and leading to the perfect concord *d* in both voices. In the Tenor voice, the *c* natural is preceded and followed by a *b* flat, so that *c* natural

has to be written in order to avoid an augmented Second in the line. Again, Bevin does not refer to this rule in his *Instruction* but rigorously avoids writing augmented intervals of any kind in the canons. Even though there are no examples of simultaneous oppositions of leading notes with natural tones, false relations do occur occasionally in the *paenultima* of some of the canons (Bevin 1631: 20), making it clear that to Bevin the linear coherence of each voice is superior to the tonal coherence of the polyphonic whole. As harsh as the clausula may unexpectedly sound, in Bevin’s understanding, I assume, musical coherence is not affected here, and above all not endangered.

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Despite the above considerations, the perilous nature of both examples can only be perceived by learned listeners or connoisseurs familiar with the rules of counterpoint and the compositional strategies that Bevin pursued in this piece. Since the Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival is devoted to Early Music to be played on period instruments, one could describe the audience as consisting of “historically informed listeners”. And yet it is impossible that even historically informed listening can reconstitute a contemporary audience to the condition of listeners in Elizabethan Britain, since postmodern modes of listening to music are entirely different from the premodern consciousness; and besides, the Haapsalu audience has not been subject to any empirical investigation and thus has to be understood as an abstract entity. To the extent that listening is regarded as a cultural practice, we cannot avoid the fact that a contemporary audience encounters Bevin’s *Browning* on an entirely different plane of understanding, which can only rudimentarily be deduced from secondary sources such as drawings or writings that are themselves subject to discursive processes. Shai Burstyn stresses this by relating the notion of the “period ear” (Burstyn 1997: 692) – a term inspired by Michael Baxandall’s discussion of “the period eye” (Baxandall 1972: 38) – to a general perspective framed by Bruno Nettl:

The way in which musicians think musically, the ways in which they, as it were, “think” their music, depends in large measure on ways in which they think of their world at large (Nettl 1994: 179; cf. Burstyn 1997: 695).

Even if this perspective raises a number of issues, it makes it clear that “thinking of music” is not based on persistent notions but on relative consciousness. And even if Nettl is to be followed in this respect, it should not be forgotten that “thinking of the world at large” is tantamount to thinking of meanings caused by discursive processes: meanings that are by no means irrevocable.

Burstyn tries to adopt Nettl’s perspective by opening the historical, social, intellectual and cultural contexts of listening to music. In doing so, however, he comes to the following conclusion:

Considering the objective obstacles standing in the way of scholars attempting to reconstruct the period ear of past listeners, the undertaking is nothing if not audacious. It is circumscribed by the same constraints that delimit, and to an extent hinder, any historical investigation which seeks to reach beyond the external evidence of the deeds of past humans to the mental structures which caused them to comprehend, feel and create in the ways they have (Burstyn 1997: 700).

The historical dilemma that Burstyn points out here does not apply only to a discipline that Christopher Pages calls “listening practice” (Page 1997: 591), but also – and indeed principally – to the above-mentioned “performance practice”, one of the key concepts of the Early Music movement. The often-stressed quest for authenticity in the performance of Early Music (Kenyon 1988) incorporates the choice of period instruments as well as various parameters of musical interpretation such as tempo, phrasing, articulation, ornamentation, and so on, where historical treatises often serve as a point of reference for modern performers. Even if a historically informed interpretation of these treatises can be fruitful, however, numerous questions remain. These include questions of historical evidence such as *where* the music was played and how the acoustics of a certain space influenced the parameters of musical interpretation. At the same time, these affect questions that reach beyond historical evidence, such as how the perception of the music was related to the consciousness of past listeners. In a way, the experience of modernity blocks the approach to the period ear, as can be seen in

the above analyses of the two examples from Bevin’s *Browning*. These are based on a concept of structural listening that is thought to derive from the concept of musical modernity originating with Arnold Schoenberg and Theodor Adorno (dell’Antonio 2004: 1–2), a concept that neglects the different modes of bodily experience and cultural identity, let alone the question of whether a piece for viol consort is intended to be listened to by an audience beyond the players themselves at all. According to Annette Otterstedt, the viol consort, like the later string quartet, was in the first instance a private enjoyment, a fact that she emphasizes by quoting a poem by Ned Ward, written around 1700 (Otterstedt 1990: 160):

Lead away Mr. Prim  
Sir do you follow him:  
How the party sweetly Chime?  
Mr. Clod mind your Time;  
‘Tis a wonderful Tune tho’ it’s plain:  
What a Cadence is there!  
How it tickles the Ear!  
You’re too fast Sir forbear;  
We are all out I swear  
Since ‘tis good let’s begin it again.

Imagining this viol consort playing Bevin’s *Browning* is quite easy – and not only because of the reference to the ear-tickling cadence that reminds us of the clausula in bar 26–27. But in so doing it also becomes clear that playing, listening and exchanging views about the music are inextricably interwoven.

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At first glance, a contemporary concert situation such as the one described at the Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival is entirely different. The musicians are playing in the presbytery of the Dome church while the audience is sitting and listening in the nave. Rules of etiquette apply, including one that prohibits both the musicians and the audience from talking during the concert. If there is communication going on – and there certainly is –, it is non-verbal communication.

The concert situation, however, is embedded in a dense network of discursive relations that all play a part in the notional communication during the concert. Dreyfus’s programme notes have an

important role here, since they evoke the notion of perilous polyphony. The space where the concert takes place, however, is perhaps even more important in this respect. The Dome church is a sanctuary, and whether the listeners are sympathetic to the Christian faith or not, they have to accept that the provost, Tiit Salumäe,<sup>5</sup> opens each concert in the Dome church, whatever its programme, with a short devotion and a prayer. In doing so, he declares a concert with perilous polyphony as sort of a divine act.

This is part of framing both the concert itself and the Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival as a whole in a reality in which two of the main venues are churches; these provide a sacred space for the concerts – a space that is ideally suited to a performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Mass in b minor* – the concluding concert of the 20th Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival – but not equally to a concert with "perilous polyphony". The festival as a whole is thus surrounded by or embedded in a "sacrosphere", a sphere of uncertain range that is discursively constructed by framing musicking in the context of the religious. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the term "sacrosphere" was coined by the Polish art historians Dawid

Korolczuk and Jaroslaw Szewczyk (Korolczuk, Szewczyk 2006) to describe the specific existence of endemic religious artefacts in the ancient region of the Białystok Uplands in the north-east of Poland; but the basic concept can also be adopted for the Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival. In this sense a sacrosphere comprises literally everything in a certain sphere that is made religiously meaningful, and is not restricted to artefacts alone. A sacrosphere is immersive and therefore affects and alters all kinds of sensual perception. And therefore, finally, the quest for historically informed listening – a quest that turns out to be potentially perilous when listening to perilous polyphony – is a vain endeavour. Nevertheless, in the end this should turn out to be a benefit, since in this way listening to music is embedded in a more holistic concept of sensual perception, just as the notion of musicking is a more holistic concept of what we like to call music. As a result, this holistic concept of sensual perception – less exclusive in comparison with the concept of a historically-informed audience – grants what might be termed low-threshold access to the music.

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<sup>5</sup> Bishop since 2015.

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## Kaelamurdev kuulamine

### Varane muusika, ajastuteadlik kuulamine ja konstrueeritud sakraalruum

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Kultuuriuuringute (*cultural studies*) väljakutsed tähendavad muusikateaduse jaoks, et uuritavat ei tuleks defineerida mitte staatilise objektina, vaid pigem erinevate kultuuripraktikate keeruka võrgustikuna. Christopher Small võtab selle kokku – küll poleemiliselt liialdades – tõdemusena, et „muusika“ ei eksisteeri mitte nimisõnana, vaid verbina (*musicking*), kusjuures see tegevus, „musicking“, asetub sõltumatute kommunikatsiooniprotsesside võrgustikku (Small 1998: 2, 9). Kuid kommunikatsioon eeldab tähendust, ja nii teen ettepaneku defineerida „musicking“ kultuuripraktikate hulgana, mille eesmärk on vahendada tähendust.

Neid mõtteid konkretiseerin gambaansambli Phantasm kontserdi näitel, mille koosseisus on Mikko Perkola, Markku Luolajan-Mikkola ja ansambli kunstiline juht Laurence Dreyfus. Kontsert toimus XX Haapsalu vanamuusikafestivali raames 4. juulil 2013 Haapsalu toomkirikus ja selle pealkirjaks oli „Kaelamurdev polüfoonia“. Dreyfus selgitab kava ideed festivalibrošüüris:

selle asemel, et kuulata polüfoonilise muusika mitut häält lihtsalt nende kõlaefekti pärast, on põnev märgata ohtusid polüfoonilises kirjaviisis, mis süveneb nii iga hääle terviklikkusse kui ka nende ühendamise ja vastandamise üllatavissevõttesse (Dreyfus 2013: 19).

See tekst on suunatud märkimisväärsel viisil publikule, keda ärgitatakse tähele panema pigem polüfoonia detaile kui muusika terviklikku kõla. Neist detailidest võivat näha, kuidas heliloojad võtavad polüfoonilisi riske, mille eesmärgiks pole mitte ainult erilised meloodiakäänud või harmooniaefektid, vaid mis seavad ohtu lausa muusikalise sidususe. Sedasorti ohtusid võib avastada näiteks Elway Bevini (1554–1638) palas „Browning“, mida tunnevad üsna hästi gambamängijad, mis aga nagu ka helilooja ise pole muusikateadlastes seni erilist huvi äratanud. „Browning“ on rahvalik viis tekstiga „The Leaves be Green“ (noodinäide 1), millele on loodud mitmeid töötlusi; esimese tegi arvatavasti William Byrd (ca. 1540–1623) (noodinäide 2). Sella kui Byrd aga on lisanud meloodiale kontrapunktis kaks uut motiivi ehk *sogetto*'t, kasutab Bevin ainult meloodiat, viies seda regulaarselt läbi kompositsiooni kolme hääle (noodinäide 3). Sealjuures tekivad kontrapunktis mõned konfliktid, mille tõttu tuleb meloodiat muuta (noodinäide 4), vältimaks vigu kontrapunktitehnikas. Pealegi äratav kõlaliselt tähelepanu eriti *clausula*, milles kõlavad samaaegselt *cis* ülemises hääles ja *c* tenorihääles, kusjuures mõlemad helid on omaette võttes kontrapunktiliselt õigustatud. Analüüsi heuristilise raamina saab siin kasutada Bevini „Briefe and Short Instruction“ („Lühike ja napp juhendus“, 1631). See käsitlus mainib küll vaid väheseid üldisi reegleid ja toob esmajoones näitena terve rea kaanoneid, neist selgub aga, et Bevini jaoks on üksikhääle lineaarne sidus tähtsam kui kontrapunkti tonaalne sidus.

On selge, et neid kontrapunkti detaile suudab tajuda vaid publik, kes on kontrapunkti reeglitega kursis. Ka selline „ajastuteadlik publik“, nagu seda on varasele muusikale ja ajastuteadlikule esituspraktikale pühendunud festivali oma, pole siiski iialgi võimeline ületama põhjanevaid erinevusi muusikakuulamise postmodernsete tingimuste ja Elizabethi ajastu Inglismaa eelmodernse teadvuse vahel. See kehtib seda enam, et juba ainuüksi kontserdisituatsioon on sellele muusikale võõras: teos gambaansamblile polnud Elizabethi ajastu Inglismaal mõeldudki publikule suunatud muusikana, vaid seda kuul(a)sid ennekõike esitajad ise.

Small'i „musicking“ ideed rakendades kujutab tänapäevane kontserdisituatsioon endast omavahel mitmel tasandil seotud tähenduste edasiandmist. See kommunikatsioon raamib nii üksikkontserti kui ka Haapsalu vanamuusikafestivali tervikuna, kusjuures osa sellest kommunikatsioonist määrab asjaolu, et enamik kontserte toimub ühes kahest Haapsalu kirikust, niisiis vaimulikult määratletud ruumis. Kogu festival on seega paigutatud „sakraalsfääri“, mis tekib seeläbi, et „musicking“ raamitakse religiooni sfääriga. See sakraalsfäär määrab meelelise taju ja seega ka kontsertide kuulamise viisi, millest saab taas kord selgeks, et püüd kuulata ajastuteadlikult jääb asjatuks. See omakorda peaks siiski osutama eeliseks, sest

kuulamine on sel moel integreeritud meelelise taju terviklikku kontseptsiooni, nagu on ka „musicking’i” idee selle terviklik kontseptsioon, mida muidu mõistetakse asjastatult muusikana. Ühtlasi pöörduakse nii publiku poole madalamalt lävendilt ja vähem eksklusiivsel moel.

Tõlkinud Anu Schaper