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The General Pause and the Enjambment

Silence as Qualitative Modes of Music and Poetry

*Silence is the other side of sound.*¹

Taking the above quotation by Don Ihde as my point of departure here I wish to investigate and discuss silence as a qualitative element in music and poetry. Qualifying this aspect at a NorSound seminar in Denmark in June 2013, the French sociologist and expert on the role of sound in urban environments Jean Paul Thibaud stated: "Silence is not synonymous with lack of expression—it can be understood as a step from one qualitative mode to another."

On the basis of these two phenomenologically based assertions I wish to pursue and unfold the qualitative and aesthetic role of "the rest" in music and poetry through two specific examples, namely a vocal piece by Arvo Pärt and three short poems by the Finland-Swedish poet Gunnar Björling. This qualitative mode is investigated through the performative aspects of two concepts: the general pause in music and the enjambment in poetry. The general pause in music is discussed in continuation of its ability to create an interlude or hesitation, a break that can appear both metrical and non-metrical. The enjambment is investigated as a rest in a poem related to the caesura, which may have similar features. In free verse, though, the enjambment should be discussed as non-metrical. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben inspires the theoretical framing of the relation between hesitation and enjambment. His thoughts will function as an elaborating theoretical perspective later in the article.

The study of silence is an extensive and complex field that deals with a number of different research areas such as for instance literature,² music,³ musical improvisation and music therapy,⁴ and conversation studies. Concerning avant-garde music, the research

- 1 Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
- 2 Thomas Bjørnsten, *Værkets støj, værkets stilhed: Mediale passager i lydens, litteraturens og billedets æstetik* (Aarhus: Akademiet for Æstetikfaglig Forskeruddannelse Institut for Æstetik og Kommunikation, 2013); Sarah Dauncey: "The Uses of Silence: A Twentieth-Century Preoccupation in the Light of Fictional Examples, 1900–1950" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2003).
- 3 Thomas Clifton, "The Poetics of Musical Silence," *The Musical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1976); *Music as Heard* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Edwin Prevost, *No Sound is Innocent* (London: Copula, 1995).
- 4 Julie Sutton, "The Pause that Follows...: Silence, Improvised Music and Music Therapy," *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 11, no. 1 (2002).

seems to a wide extent to be inspired by John Cage's work, which deliberately stages and reflects on silence as a part of music.⁵ Both the artistic strategies of Cage and the theoretical ideas of Clifton observe how the listener can experience silence as anticipation or surprise, and how silence can be used deliberately as a means to creating musical tension. In the field of sound studies silence is studied in relation to, for instance, noise.⁶

The overall theoretical framing of the rest in this paper concerns its attention-creating force, its capacity for creating a qualitative, yet silent effect in relation to the listener or the reader, as also enhanced by Clifton.⁷ In this sense the rest is understood as an aesthetic, i.e. sensed, phenomenon that is perceived. Sound as well as the rest itself—silence—are experienced and, in this sense, perceived objects—referring to the French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne: "The aesthetic object is a perceived object."⁸ In continuation hereof, sound is often described as having special phenomenological potentials in relation to its ability to grasp our sensuous relation to our surroundings.

Sound is regularly accused of not being as precise as vision in differentiating impressions, as suggested by Steven Connor: "Where we are in a constant and a determinate position with regard to a visual object, we are usually in more than one position as regards sound."⁹ On the other hand, sound can communicate nuanced meaning concerning speed, size, material, etc.—as well as emotional nuances in music and tone of voice.¹⁰ We sense sounds not with one single sense, but through the body as such: "We may register the sound as vibration, through our feet, solar plexus and other portions of the body, and we get a spatial distribution as opposed to a spatial convergence."¹¹ This bodily perception may perhaps contribute to the fact that sound, despite its lack of semantic clarity, is effective in terms of aesthetic communication; note for instance the persuasive use of the sound of voices also in non-artistic fields such as commercials.

The aesthetic quality of sound could, I would suggest in continuation of my opening statements, also be applied to the other side of sound, namely silence, here exemplified through the general pause and the enjambment. The gaps in-between sounds—the silence of the rest—could thus be considered of substantial qualitative importance to the aesthetic effects and performative quality of music and poetic language itself; silence becomes a co-player in creating aesthetic quality in the listening/reading situation.

The rest in a broad perspective, concerning both music and poetry, thus establishes and unfolds a space in-between a number of concepts: The rest takes place in-between sound and silence, as a suspension of sound that both generates an interlude, but also presupposes the coming sound. The intentionality of a rest is directed to-

5 Magnus Andersson, *Elaborating Nothing: John Cage's Aesthetics of Silence* (Oslo: Norwegian Academy of Music, 2009); Jérôme Dokic, "Music, Noise, Silence: Some Reflections on John Cage," *Angelaki* 3, no. 2 (1998).

6 Bjørnsten, *Værkets støj*; Jean Paul Thibaud, "Silencing the city?" *Soundeffects* 3, no. 3 (2013).

7 Clifton, "Poetics of Musical Silence."

8 Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1973).

9 Steven Connor, "Ear Room" (presentation, Audio Forensics Symposium, Image-Text Gallery, London, November 30, 2008), <http://www.stevenconnor.com/earroom/earroom.pdf>.

10 Iben Have, *Lyt til TV* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2008).

11 Connor, "Ear Room."

ward the moment when the sound continues. As such, the rest involves both retrospection—conscious consideration of the sound that has just ended—but also always points toward the future sound—anticipation. In this tension in the relation between retrospection and anticipation an experienced hesitation emerges, and this specific moment, I argue, creates attention.

The general pause

Moving to a more specific analytical level I wish to investigate if and how the performance of the general pause in music tends to create hesitation? In this analytical process, however, it is of vital importance to underline two aspects: first, that my arguments concern the qualitative features of the general pause and, in continuation hereof, are primarily related to and based on the performed score—that is, the actual, sonic realization of a specific musical material. Second, concerning listening to music, my argument will depend on whether or not the listener has the score at hand, a detail which I will expand on in my analysis.

Consulting several music dictionaries, references to the general pause are relatively few. According to *Grove Music Online*, the general pause is “a rest for the whole orchestra, usually unexpected and sometimes marked with the letters ‘GP;’” while *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* is more taciturn: “rest or pause for all executants.” Finally, *On Music Dictionary* provides a bit more detail:

The general pause or the long pause serve the same function, and are identical in function to the fermata when used over a rest or barline. The function of these pauses is to create a silence for a period of time at the discretion of the performer (or conductor with an ensemble). As indicated in the name, these are intended to be pauses of longer duration than any of the others. They also interrupt the normal tempo of a composition.¹²

It is clear that the general pause is connected to the long pause, but also shares characteristics with the caesura: a short silence or a performative breath mark that is used in a similar manner as the general pause, though typically of a shorter duration. The general pause can appear both with and without fermatas, a sign that is crucial due to the micro-rhythmical feeling of delay or insecurity according to the musical pulse.

In using a formal description of a listener’s experience as a systematic musical idiom, I assume, to some degree, that it is possible to describe a musical syntax, but also that this musical syntax depends on the actual performance as well as the tuning of the single listener’s musical intuition. Like language, to some degree, music has a syntax that can be broken, violated, and challenged.¹³ However, the approach of this paper does not build on a formal musical semiotic basis, but instead wishes to unfold the idea of anticipation and syntax as experienced, aesthetic phenomena. The general

12 *On Music Dictionary*, s.v. “general pause,” <http://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/1566-generalpause>.

13 Fred Lehdahl and Ray Jackendorff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

pause is a rest in all parts in ensemble music and can, according to the dictionaries, be both metrical and non-metrical. Metrical, if the pause does not include a fermata. But although the general pause may be metrical due to the notated score, it is often used as a tool in the actual performance to create moments of attention—for instance, using rubato effects. In symphonies the general pause is known as a moment where both musicians and audience, together with the conductor, hold their breath and wait for the next releasing conducting impulse or “downbeat.” During the general pause, in silence, all senses are enhanced. A moment of both anticipation, attention, and hesitation occurs in the specific timing of the actual performative moment.

The effect and character of the rest in general depend very much on its metrical position in music—whether it is on a stressed beat or not, the general pause relies on silence in all parts of the music as well as a stressed part of a bar.

Pärt and general pause

In order to discuss the aesthetic effect of the general pause in relation to a specific choir piece I will continue by introducing the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. Since the late 1970s Arvo Pärt has worked in a minimalist style and is primarily known as a religious composer. Labels that have been applied to Pärt’s music are: minimalism, spiritualism, spiritual minimalism, and new simplism. After 1980 the majority of Pärt’s works are for chorus or small vocal ensembles, using for instance speech patterns to determine melodic contours.¹⁴ Pärt makes great use of general pauses, especially in his vocal music. In continuation hereof, the role of breath in his music is crucial. The organic feeling of breath—known from a more romanticized repertoire—is somehow suspended or challenged in Pärt’s use of general pauses. When listening to his music it is often hard to identify a clear pulse; the pulse seems continuously destabilized due to both rhythmic patterns, syntax, and actual performance, a feature which I wish to unfold in the coming analysis.

In Arvo Pärt’s recent piece *The Deer’s Cry* (2008) general pauses are almost as frequent as the sounding music itself. I will focus my analytical discussion on the first 12 bars of the choir piece, performed by the Danish vocal ensemble Ars Nova, conducted by Paul Hillier.

According to the score, the rests appear to be metrical, as they contain no fermatas. However, listening to the Ars Nova performance this sense of metrics is challenged. In spite of this metrical notation of rests, the concrete performance nevertheless *generates* hesitation in the singular experience of the general pauses in the music.

The general pauses are rhythmical rather than strictly performed, however slightly delayed. The rests within the musical phrases, for instance between bar one and two, are also performed slightly displaced, which is pushing the sense of pulse. The general pauses are thus performatively stretched. The rests are both composed and performed in a way that creates micro-rhythmical displacements according to rhythmical stresses.

14 Oxford Music Online, s.v. “general pause,” http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20964?q=P*RT&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

$\text{♩} = 72 \text{ ca}$

8 **4** G.P.

Soprano

Alto *p*
Christ _ with me, Christ with me, _

Tenore *p*
Christ _ with me, Christ with me, _

Basso *p*
Christ _ with me, Christ with me, _

8 **2** G.P.

S

A
Christ _ with me, Christ with me, _

T
Christ _ with me, Christ with me, _

B
Christ _ with me, Christ with me, _

6 *mp* **8**

S
Christ _ be - fore me, _

A *(p)*
Christ with me, Christ with me, _ Christ _ with me,

T *(p)*
Christ with me, Christ with me, _ Christ _ with me,

B *(p)*
Christ with me, Christ with me, _ Christ _ with me,

10 **2** G.P. **6**

S
Christ _ be - hind me, _

A
Christ with me, _ Christ with me, Christ with me, _

T
Christ with me, _ Christ with me, Christ with me, _

B
Christ with me, _ Christ with me, Christ with me, _

The sounding (possibly micro-rhythmical) elements of rhythm could be described as follows:

It is important to distinguish between levels of pulses within such a theoretical framework and what is actually heard, between quarters as a reference structure and quarters as a sounding rhythmic gesture [...] Hence the need for explicating a paradigmatic premise for the analytical work that follows, namely that rhythm is conceived as an interaction of something sounding and something not sounding [...] The latter is always at work *in* the music, and to me it is impossible to understand rhythm without taking it into consideration.¹⁵

The sense of a micro-rhythmic gesture or displacement thus seems more closely linked to the way rhythm is performed and perceived than to the metrical characteristics of the pulse. In the Pärt example both the changing duration of bars (shifting between six and eight beats per bar) and the changing of stresses within the musical phrases contribute hereto. Instability in the ground pulse emerges, and from here a hesitant feeling is created in the performance. However, this feeling very much depends on whether or not the score is visually present during the listening.

Micro-rhythmic gestures are thus closely related to the aesthetic experience of a piece of music, and therefore it is appropriate here to go on to introduce phenomenological tools in the analysis. This approach is supported by the positions of Clifton and Connor, mentioned in the introduction. To support the experienced perspective when analyzing rhythm C. F. Hasty states:

Central to our understanding of rhythm is the notion of regular repetition. Any phenomenon that exhibits periodicity can be called rhythmic, regardless of whether evidence of this periodicity is accessible to our sense perception [...] To many, rhythm in music is above all else the repetition of pulse or beat. [...] At the same time, we can use the word rhythm to characterize phenomena in which periodicity is not apparent: a fluid gesture of the hand, [...] the "shape" of a musical phrase. Such applications necessarily rely on human sensory perception [...] This second meaning relies on aesthetic judgment and admits of degrees.¹⁶

The musical phrases from bars one–two and four–five could syntactically be understood as one coherent phrase. However, the rest in-between the bars acts as a caesura or may even be named an enjambment. The rest creates an interlude in the middle of a phrase that would otherwise be understood as a syntactically coherent statement. Due to the relatively extended general pause a hesitant feeling arises. In this process of displaced stresses it seems that our expectation or anticipation is confused, and here hesitation as an aesthetic *feeling* emerges, based on qualitative shifts of silence—the aesthetic object appears as a perceived object. The expressive power of the rest is thus

15 Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 46–47.

16 Christopher F. Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

connected to the performance level of musical enunciation and hereby becomes part of the aesthetic experience in the listener's perception.

The poetic rest—enjambment and Björling

In the present article the enjambment is discussed as a break of a syntactic unit at the end of a line in poetry. Both the caesura and the enjambment in free verse seem to produce a silence that is non-metrical, and hereby possibly create hesitation in the reading of the rhythmical structure of the stanzas.

The enjambment is in itself affected by a contradiction in terms. The line visually ends, whereas the semantic or syntactic meaning continues on to the next line. In a way, the enjambment produces a tremor in-between sound and silence. Following the argument of the role of the score in the Pärt example above, where the experience of confusion in the pulse seemed to be stronger when the score was visually present, the opposite seems to be the case concerning the enjambment. The hesitant effect of the enjambment in the poem seems to be stronger when the break of the line on the written page of the book is visible to the reader than when he listens to the poem be performed. When the poem is read aloud one would often prefer to accentuate the syntactic and semantic formation of the text.

I will follow this line of thought by presenting three selected late poems by the Finland-Swedish poet Gunnar Björling. Björling is known for his radical poetic syntax, through which he creates a delicate rhythmic tension, especially underpinned by the poems' use of enjambments.

Fredrik Hertzberg introduces Björling as follows: "Gunnar Björling (1887–1960) was arguably the most radical Finland-Swedish modernist poet, yet he was also, in some ways, the one who adhered most to the poetic tradition."¹⁷ Björling's production moves from poems inspired by nature in the debut, *Vilande dag* (Resting Day, 1922), toward the Christian, mythology-inspired manifest *Kiri-Ra* (1930). From *Solgrönt* (Sungreen, 1933) onward his poetic style becomes more confident and consistent, and Björling's late poems are characterized by a stringent, simple, though intense language use. Björling developed a poetic practice sometimes referred to as "leaving out parts of sentences" or "breaking up the syntax."¹⁸ In a 1949 introduction to Björling's poetry Bengt Holmqvist states:

On the whole, it seems as if Björling's sensitivity for words is mainly of a different kind than that which is achieved by a style based on effects created by images. He has realized this himself, when over the years he has increasingly restricted his images and instead directed his efforts at liberating the syntax itself from the schemes of everyday language. In this lies his great and innovative achievement.¹⁹

17 Fredrik Hertzberg, "Gunnar Björling: Poetics and Poetry," *boundary 2*, no. 1 (2002), http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Bjorling-Gunnar_poems.html.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

Besides the liberating syntax, Björling is famous for his use of small words which play a main role in relation to the enjambments—for example “if,” “and,” “as,” “that,” “like,” “you,” “the” etc. Small words are not usually accentuated in poetic language use, counting both universal, common words and a frequent use of deixis marks. “That these small words can be seen as meaningful, as poetic, means that they are not neutral vessels: they reveal the fabric of language. This is because they carry so little obvious meaning.”²⁰

Björling’s poems thus seem to establish their aesthetic strategy in-between language, understood as a referential, semantic system of meaning and a physical, concrete, and expressive materiality, especially emphasizing the latter. In Björling’s oeuvre rethinking the materiality and the syntax of the poetic language as well as the role of enjambment seems to be of great poetic importance.

The rest in free verse is never metrical, as it depends either on an inner or a sonic scan—a concrete articulation or silent reading situation. The enjambment in combination with this specific syntax seems to increase the expressive poetic potential—the enjambment functioning as a sort of magnet for attention.

I use Hertzberg’s English translations of the poems, which he himself debates due to the difficulty hereof.

From the 1946 collection of poems *Luft är och ljus* (*Air is and light*):

It is hymn
it is word
without word
it is eyes and the hand
air is and light

The present poem establishes a rhythmical feeling through its enumerating character. The enjambments occupy different positions, since the meaning of the words in more than one occasion only seems to be carried on to the next stanza. This special use of syntax and the practice of leaving out words in some instances—“it is eyes and the hand / air is and light”—actually seem to suspend the creation of meaning across the lines that normally characterize the enjambment. However, in the line break between “it is word / without word” the enjambment seems to function as a regular enjambment, whereas the break between “it is hymn / it is word” represents a caesura. In this sense hesitation establishes a semantically open space of interpretation, where the rhythm and tone of the words or their materiality seem to take over the control of the poem, becoming a ruling principle, prior to semantics.

The following poem also shifts between a more classical use of enjambments and installing caesuras:

One time
but none really
and no one knows

20 Fredrik Hertzberg, *Moving Materialities* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2002), 56.

I have a name
 and name have
 just that
 oh that a
 name²¹

The suspension of meaning across the enjambment seems even more evident in this poem—for instance between “and name have / just that,” whereas in the last line, “oh that a / name,” the enjambment is used in a traditional way. In the third line, “and no one knows / I have a name,” I would argue that we can observe a doubling, in the sense that the break can work both as a caesura and as an enjambment. The poem is characterized by a very distinct use of the small words “that” and “and,” which are performed primarily as material or rhythmic enunciations. These small words contribute to the overall feeling—that it seems to be the rhythmic feeling rather than the enjambment that is the controlling or decisive principle of the poem. The materiality of language seems pivotal, but the tension between sound and sense is what makes the poetic space quiver.

In the last poetic example, the enjambment establishes and underlines a silence, in the sense that it both performs and becomes a silence:

That shadows
 wordlessness
 Till that is
 and silence²²

The semantic space of the poem is wordless as well as without sound; it is silent. A silence or hesitation emerges between the stanzas: “Till that is / and silence,” as it performs a muting movement. Hesitation seems not only to be present as a rhythmic figure, but also, in a semantic manner, to create a silencing gesture. The poetic space of Björling is wide and open in a way that makes the rhythmic silence, the rest, point to a semantic or even existential silence as well. The emptiness of the poetic semantic space seems, however, to be replaced by the touch of the materiality of language, which creates a sense of presence.

Björling’s use of the enjambment thus challenges the enjambment as a figure that covers the relation between sound and meaning. General to the enjambment is that meaning must straddle the joint of the line. In Björling’s case, this meaning often remains absent. Thus, the enjambment, understood as a figure that functions in the relation between sound and meaning, form and content, is challenged or extended. The enjambment is connected to the caesura or the breath—it produces muteness—a disruption of meaning that almost makes it stronger than hesitation.

21 Gunnar Björling, *Du går de ord* [You go the words] (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1955).

22 Ibid.

Enjambment, Agamben, and concluding remarks

Giorgio Agamben states in *The Idea of Prose*: “No definition of verse is perfectly satisfying unless it asserts an identity for poetry against prose through the possibility of enjambment.”²³ For Agamben, the enjambment points to a fundamental difference between verse and prose. In *The End of the Poem* Agamben thus argues that the enjambment is the “opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause,” a point which supports the analytical ideas of this article.²⁴

To Agamben, poetry is a practice where the opposition between sound and meaning is made visible, whereas the opposition between the semiotic and semantic events cannot occur in prose. One of Agamben’s most significant statements in this line of thought is, referring back to the French poet Paul Valery, “This sublime hesitation between meaning and sound is the poetic inheritance with which thought must come to terms.”²⁵ This “sublime hesitation” is the moment when poetry moves toward pure materiality, a strategy that seems present in Björling’s poetry. The enjambment in Björling’s poems becomes an almost physical gesture of language, acting as material, tone, and rhythm. However, the strange thing about this materiality is that it, at the same time, performs a muting gesture, a silent hesitation.

The article has focused on unfolding the hesitation between sound and silence, sound and meaning, and on how this is realized in Björling’s use of the enjambment and in Pärt’s use of the general pause. The general pause as well as the enjambment appeared as a hesitation between sound and silence and possibly between sound and meaning. In continuation of this analytical draft the examples should be discussed in more detail due to their medial differences. Listing a number of formal differences between the general pause and the enjambment one could, for instance, point to the following distinctions.

First, music consists of sound, and poems, when read in silence, consist of metaphorical sound. Second, the rest in music consists of a relation between sound and the suspension of sound—that is, silence—whereas in the case of the poem, the enjambment furthermore creates a hesitation between (metaphorical) sound and meaning. Third, the notated general pause is a graphical sign in a musical score as well as an audible difference between sound and silence in the musical performance, whereas the enjambment is the graphical and spatial break or shift at the end of the line on a printed page. The hesitation is only “heard” or experienced in the reading situation; besides, it is visible in the printed text. However, both, regardless of medial differences, become expressive impulses of the artwork. Thus, the role of anticipation as an aesthetic effect in both examples seems crucial—independent of the present basic or qualified aspects of media.²⁶

23 Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 39.

24 Giorgio Agamben, “The End of the Poem,” in *The End of the Poem* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 109.

25 Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, 41.

26 Lars Elleström, “The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations,” in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

The general pause and the enjambment are both silences and not synonymous with a lack of expression, building on Jean Paul Thibaud. Sound may be suspended, but the rest creates an impulse that leads to hesitation. This hesitation and its aesthetic effect emerge on the basis of a shift from one qualitative mode to another.