

Listening Inside Out

Notes on an embodied analysis

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It is not often that a piece of music makes me cringe.

Yet this is precisely the reaction I have when I listen to Christof Migone's *Crackers*. It is not Migone's lack of compositional ability (far from it), any lack of originality, or any other perceived negative attribute of the piece that causes my reaction, but knowledge of the musical materials from which it derives. *Crackers*, as obliquely referred to in the title, is composed from the sounds made by cracking human joints. Migone alternates 'raw' recordings of joints cracking and interviews with the 'crackers' with tracks in which the materials have been processed and re-shaped into compositions which draw out and transform their latent musicality. The rub of bone against bone may seem a world away from the scrape of horse hair on string. Although perhaps it is not so far removed; the violin will not sound without the force of the human body to draw the bow across the strings, just as Migone's piece would fall silent without the sonic leakages of these various bodily articulations.

Later, I experienced a similar bodily reaction while listening to another piece: *Ground Techniques* by Neil Luck. This work, in contrast to *Crackers*, is composed mainly of 'untreated' sounds: recorded, but without further manipulation. The opening section comprises a series of breathing sounds (more specifically, the sounds of the inhalation of breath and the plosive sounds of the release of held breath), that are then imitated by instrumentalists. Listening to this, I found myself feeling tense, holding my own breath. Like *Crackers*, *Ground Techniques* explodes into sound when tension in the performing body can no longer be contained, spilling over the boundaries of the recording to touch the listening body.

I wanted to find a method of analysing these pieces that would allow me both to take into account the bodily origins of their sonic materials and my startling responses to them. While an ever increasing amount of work, especially in the fields of New Musicology and music psychology, has begun to untangle the involvement of the body in the production and reception of music, this concern does not seem to have been taken up to any great extent by music analysts. In this paper I hope to move towards a potential method for analysing such musical

works – one that is able to write back into the discourse surrounding the music both the bodies from which the sounds originate, and the body (my own) that is hearing (and writing about) it.

I take as my starting point an article by George Fisher and Judy Lochhead, published in 2002: 'Analyzing from the Body'. Fisher and Lochhead use their own experience of playing and observing performances of two notated works for clarinet to examine questions of musical meaning. Significantly, they use their own experiences of rehearsing and performing these pieces as a basis for their analysis; theirs is not research in which questionnaires are handed out to others.

Fisher and Lochhead's approach is similar to more traditional modes of music analysis in that it offers a close reading of the musical text. However, rather than focus on the score they turn their attention to embodied performance behaviours, shifting the balance away from the importance of notes on the page (although these are not entirely disregarded) in favour of music as a performative event. 'Within the specific focus of "analyzing from the body,"' they write, 'the analyst constructs arguments by treating the physical movements and sensations of embodied human beings involved in various sorts of music making as primary sources of musical evidence' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 44). Bodily movements, experiences and sensations that are outwardly visible, and those that are only felt by the performer or listener-analyst (in this case one and the same) can form the object of attention. Fisher and Lochhead also support 'the general project of studying music not only as an embodied activity but also *in an embodied way*' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 44. *Emphasis in original.*): the music is produced by an embodied subject and received by an embodied subject.

The particular notion of embodiment used as a basis for this methodology is Merleau-Ponty's idea of a dynamic body, in which 'bodily movement is creative and meaningful in and of itself' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 45). The particular identity or experiences of the listener are drawn into the findings of any analysis carried out in such a way, because these will shape both the movements of performers and how the listener-analyst understands or 'reads' them. Belonging to particular practitioner groups, such as those of performer or composer, will exert a strong influence on the potential interpretations that may be offered.

Fisher and Lochhead's approach is founded largely on gesture as the basic unit from which the performative act is built up and as 'the specific site where physical action and musical significance merge' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 47). Their analyses rely on two classes of gesture, one sonic and the other physical (bodily movement). The first is musical gesture, which they describe as 'a constellation of sounds combined in a distinctive way. In particular, it can be defined as a temporally extended event, separable from preceding and succeeding events, that has specifiable features of rhythm, pitch, timbre, texture, and dynamics' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 47). The second, performance gesture, 'entails the physical activities and experiences of people directly involved in the execution of a musical work' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 48). This might include 'the physical movements necessary for sound production, the coordinating and cuing activities of ensemble playing, other bodily motions of the performers associated

with musical expression, and the feelings or sensations of directed motion that performers experience during the course of performance' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 48); in other words, 'the physical means by which musical gestures are made manifest as sounding phenomena' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 48). Both types of gesture are considered to be mutually informative.

Fisher and Lochhead's analyses are, however, highly reliant on 'the strong visual clue' provided by the movement of the performing body, whether through being able to observe the performer or to understand implied movements from reading a score. *Crackers* and *Ground Techniques* differ from the pieces analysed by Lochhead and Fisher in that the listener cannot see the bodies producing the sound. A focus on the performer, rather than the listener, becomes impossible when there is no body standing on the stage: there are no longer directly visible physical gestures for the listener-analyst to map musical gestures onto. Additionally, the lack of a visible performer may turn the listener's attention back onto her own body. In an account of listening to a tape music concert, Linda Dusman writes: 'Without a performer there to instruct my listening via facial expressions, body movements, and the shaping of the sound itself – and then to smile at me at the end of the process – I have no idea whether I have successfully negotiated this sonic terrain' (Dusman 2000: 339). Dusman describes how the absence of a performing body causes her to become more aware of her own reaction and of her position as an embodied subject. The lack of the very gestures upon which Fisher and Lochhead base their analysis causes a displacement of embodied activity from performer to analyst. The absence of these gestures forces an awareness of the implicit embodied experience of listening. Thus, while aspects of Fisher and Lochhead's approach can prove revealing, on their own they prove insufficient for providing a full account of works encountered as recordings. In this sense a slight shift in focus of the method becomes necessary.

In 'Embodied Sound: Aural Architectures and the Body', Gascia Ouzounian offers an embodied approach to music without reference to a score or any other visual element. Ouzounian discusses two pieces, Marianne Amacher's *Sound Characters (Making the Third Ear)* and Bernhard Leitner's *Headscapes*, developing analyses strongly based in her embodied experience. This process of 'embodied listening' does not follow exactly the traditional priorities of music analysis, in that she does not attempt to offer 'a map of the works or descriptions of sounds or the relationships between sounds'. Instead she 'focuses on [her] situated and embodied experience of sounds as they inform the realization of [her] body in relation to itself and to other bodies – social, physical and imaginary ones – that make up complex and unpredictable networks of space and place' (Ouzounian 2006: 78).

Ouzounian positions her approach in opposition to the supposed neutrality of scientific methods, drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of an 'embodied objectivity', a situated position that 'challeng[es] the (normalised) neutral, disembodied and implicitly objective stance traditionally taken by historians and critics towards their subjects' (Ouzounian 2006: 70) and draws this embodied experience into writing, returning the body to the text. Ouzounian writes: 'By including the body in the reception and analysis of a work, authors (including myself) cannot avoid or avert self-representation. An embodied reception reveals the body's biases, tendencies

and aims – in other words, its history’ (Ouzounian 2006: 70). My reactions to *Crackers* and *Ground Techniques* tell stories about the pieces, and also about me.

However, while this seems to move away from the traditional focus – and empirical bias – of analysis there are some links between what can be observed in the score and its embodied reception. Studies such as that carried out by Grewe *et al.* (2007) suggest a link between formal elements of a work and the particular bodily experiences it may bring about. These bodily experiences may in turn affect the way the listener understands formal structures. Ouzounian describes how the physical experience of hearing Amacher’s piece affected her perception of its structural organisation: ‘Despite the many repetitions,’ she writes, ‘the sequence is impossible to hear as a linear chronology of tones because of the distribution of the pitches in a physical space, and because of the coupling of that space with the space of my body. I have little room for movement or even interpretation in my listening body, which is stunned by the sheer power of the sound, forced to submit to the authority of its pulse’ (Ouzounian 2006: 75).

Embodied analysis as I begin to envisage it here, is a two-fold process; there are two (or more) bodies at play. The body being referred to by the term ‘embodied’ may shift between that of the listener or those contained or depicted within the recording, such as the performers in *Ground Techniques* or Migone’s group of joint crackers. In order to listen more deeply to how all of these elements are combined I need to juxtapose the approaches offered by both Fisher and Lochhead and Ouzounian. Although they do not apply their method to non score-based pieces, Fisher and Lochhead suggest that such an approach may be possible, particularly due to their co-option of Peggy Phelan’s concept of performativity for musical production and reception: they argue that all ‘hearing entails a bodily enactment of musical meaning that links listeners, performers, and creators in the same musical enterprise’ (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 46)

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Composer Neil Luck describes *Ground Techniques* as ‘primarily an attempt to document a type of compositional strategy that [he had] been exploring throughout the year’. He says, ‘I was interested in directly exploiting the inherent physicality of performance practice, either through asking the players to follow physical (as opposed to musical) trajectories during a piece of music, or more prominently here, using my own body as a kind of “score”’ (Luck, personal correspondence, 23 January 2010). *Ground Techniques* is formed from thirteen small units or modules built up around a physical process. Here I focus on the first section of the piece (0.00 to 0.38), comprising six consecutive, overlaid held breaths imitated by instrumentalists who hear them via dictaphones during the recording of the work and react in real time.

Before I became familiar with Luck’s compositional technique, I wondered whether this breath was being held through shock, fear or relief.¹ Even now as I listen to this section I feel what it would be like to be the person holding her breath, experiencing a sensation of release when I could hold it no longer.² However, it is not only the breathing sounds of *Ground Techniques* that I experience bodily; the instrumental imitations are also highly visceral. In an analysis of Boulez’s

Sur Incises, Vincent Meelburg coins the term 'sonic strokes' to describe instrumental tones that resonate within the body (Meelberg 2008: 61). Taking listening to involve both body and brain, Meelberg considers the physical experience of musical affect to be the primary means of understanding contemporary atonal music (Meelberg 2008: 72). Similar bodily sensations shape my understanding of this opening section of *Ground Techniques*: I'm continually aware of Luck's decision to use the body to create, direct and determine the musical sounds, and my sense of musical phrasing is disrupted by this physical sensation, shaping my understanding of the structural features of the piece.

Crackers moves me yet another step further away from the pieces analysed by Fisher and Lochhead, in that it involves no kind of traditional instrumental gesture. It also offers a peculiar scenario: the physical actions that led to the production of its sonic materials are no longer visible, but are still contained in the sound. Migone states:

a crack is the locale where bones articulate a tension. They cannot be ignored, either you crack them or they crack themselves. Once a joint cracks, there's no turning back. Crackers and joints themselves are compulsive about the release of that tension. I am crackable everywhere ... to obtain some cracks, I contort into impossible geometries, my body's sole purpose becomes the emission of the crack.

(Migone 1999: 92)

Is this momentum, the build up and release of tension, echoed in sonic gesture? As Fisher and Lochhead suggest, 'the metaphors of musical movement, the directionality of that movement, and the notion of tension and release achieve their significance from bodily experiences of moving, of spatial orientation, and of muscular feeling' (Fisher and Lochhead 2002: 41). Is it possible to trace the physical gestures that were once performed in order to produce this piece? And how do these gestures impact on my embodied reception of the work? What happens when the metaphors of musical movement are turned back on the listening body?

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You tell me which areas you crack and I'll try to place my mic the best I can ... I'll do my fingers first, those are easy ... for the toes I have to stand ... those were good cracks ... I can sometimes do my back but I won't be able to do it today because it's in pain.

(Migone 1999: 89)

A lack of sound, the absence of a particular crack, betrays a fallible body, which through illness or pain is unable to perform, unable to contribute a particular sound to the music. The composer's attention (via his microphone) is focused on specific areas of the body. The body parts that participants choose – or are able – to crack produce different sounds. One 'cracker' reports:

try my neck ... you have to get closer ... that was a good one! I tried not to do it all day ... knuckles ... one at a time? ... that might be it for the knuckles ... let's try my elbow, you might get a little tiny one, that's usually a crunchy one ... see I told [you] that's a crunchy one!

(Migone 1999: 89)

'In the case of crackers,' writes Migone, 'there's a lexicon of cracks, an endless vocabulary of tearing apart' (Migone 1999: 91–2). This vocabulary of cracks and tears: is it like musical syntax, or does it become one?

I have chosen to focus on an approximately four-minute excerpt from the piece given on a compilation of Migone's works (LaBelle 2005). This is preceded by a shorter track, in which one of the participants describes how he produces the cracking sounds. The cracking sounds can also be heard 'untreated', and there is a surprisingly large variation in the sounds produced. Interestingly, the 'cracker' describes the movements he makes in order to produce the sounds – perhaps analogous to Fisher and Lochhead's performance gestures – enabling me to envisage them. Hearing this leaves me with little choice but to hear the sounds in the following excerpt as exactly what they are. Their extra-musical significance spills over into my listening.

Strangely though, they do not sound quite as I expect: they are much higher pitched and buzz around my head. I experience a strange sensation, almost as if the pops and crackles are inside my mouth – as if I'm eating popping candy. There are also high pitched sounds that resonate in my ears. Then there's my lingering feeling of discomfort at knowing what the sonic materials are. I feel myself tense, waiting for a pain in my joints that isn't going to come.

While the track does not have a steady beat in the traditional sense, the momentum and rhythmic qualities of the cracks drive it forwards. As Migone writes: 'I crack because otherwise I can't move.' (Migone 1999: 92). So does the music. Rhythmic figures emerge; one sounds very much like a quaver followed by a crotchet, repeating to form a motif. This almost-rhythm is embodied: not only does it derive from an embodied action – physical gesture – but it is experienced bodily by the listener. I tap my foot, but any attempts to keep in time are broken off before they really get going. As such, rhythm provides a link between listening body and music, 'simultaneously dissolving their solid organisations and re-modelling their fluid exchanges' (Portanova 2005). In a discussion of musical rhythm and dance, Stamatia Portanova attempts to break free from the Platonic concept of rhythm as a series of distinct units, and conceives it instead as flow. She examines both its ontological status and its physical and material manifestation, especially within or through the dancing body. In doing so, Portanova reconfigures rhythm as a virus, operating at a cellular level. As I listen to *Crackers* I feel myself catching something. This contagion – a lack of control over the body and an inability to police its boundaries – ironically comes about because of Migone's *control* of bodily sound, his precise arrangements of the sounds of the body into (almost) regular rhythm.

At the same time, the track is remarkably static. There is no real development of the ways in which the sounds are used (at least on a superficial level). The clicks and cracks move too fast to project them mimetically, onto an imagined live performing body. If these were performance gestures, they would signify perhaps a lack of direction or an excess of movement; a body so intent on releasing its own tensions that it is incapable of moving forwards.

Towards the end of the excerpt the texture becomes less dense; the rate at which the cracks occur decreases, and they begin to sound more like the familiar sound of someone cracking their knuckles. I can't resist positioning myself as some kind of audio detective, trying to guess which crack emanates from which part of the body. 'A crack is incontinent. A cracker too,' says Migone (1999: 92); it is my listening body that soaks up the leak. *Crackers* is always referring outside of itself; the unfamiliarity of its materials as music, combined with their familiarity, also making for a strange combination.

What I offer here are preliminary sketches – the bare bones – of a way of listening and analysing that begins to unravel the relationship between my unexpected bodily response and the forming of my musical understanding. My bodily border skirmishes suggest ways in which the music constitutes my experience of embodiment as a listening subject, an experience that could then be situated within socio-cultural discourse. Moreover, this insight into an aspect of my own embodiment continues and grows beyond my analysis. Discovering *Crackers*, and beginning to question my reaction to it, has had a subtle influence on my day-to-day life. Either I've just begun to crack my own joints – my wrists in particular – or I've just begun to notice it.

1. In *Sounding New Media*, Frances Dyson suggests: 'obvious inhalation and exhalation of the breath signifies shock ... or fear' and physical/emotional states such as terror or joy that 'can be expressed only through a non-linguistic, nonvocal exhalation' (Dyson 2009: 113).

2. In 'The Mimetic Hypothesis and Embodied Musical Meaning', Arnie Cox draws on aspects of music psychology to argue that listeners use their own past experience of producing the same or similar sounds in order to relate mimetically, either implicitly or explicitly, to the musical sounds they are hearing (Cox 2001). Andrew Mead describes a similar reaction. He reports finding himself in intense pain when listening to a live performance of an oboe concerto. He found he had been breathing along with the soloist, who, unknown to Mead, had been employing circular breathing techniques. Mead uses this anecdote to consider how the sound of music is 'an embodiment of [its] making, and that hearing that making in the sound had much to do with [his] understanding of the music' (Mead 1999: 2).

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