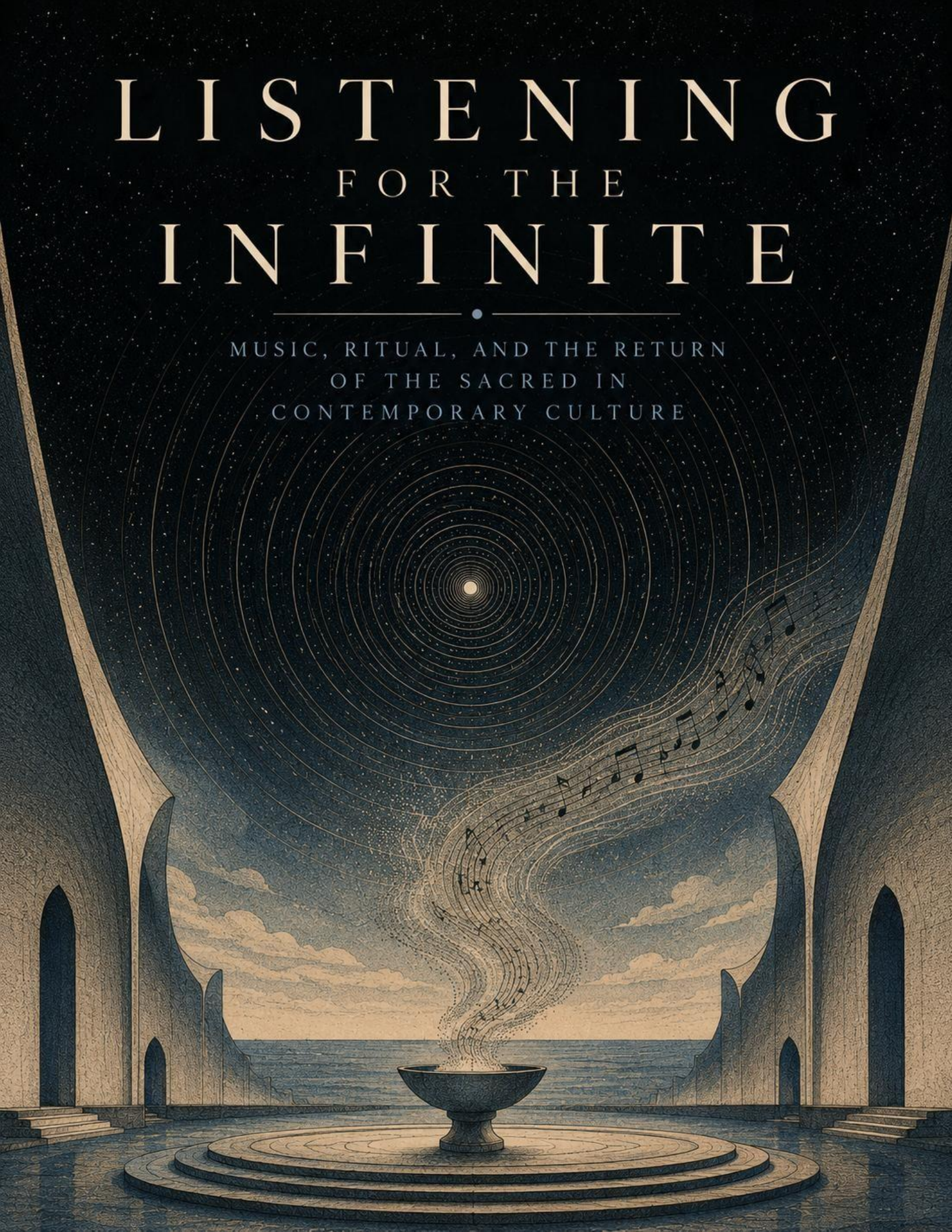


LISTENING FOR THE INFINITE

MUSIC, RITUAL, AND THE RETURN
OF THE SACRED IN
CONTEMPORARY CULTURE



Listening for the Infinite: *Music, Ritual, and the Return of the Sacred in Contemporary Culture*

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First Edition

The Problem of Listening

Music has occupied an uneasy position within modern discussions of religion. It is central to nearly every historical religious tradition, yet it frequently exceeds the institutions that employ it. Hymns survive long after congregations disappear. Pilgrimage songs become concert repertoire. Sacred chant is performed in secular concert halls, while contemporary listeners often describe experiences at festivals, minimalist performances, or ambient concerts using language associated with contemplation, awe, or transcendence. None of these developments necessarily indicates the persistence of religion, but they complicate the assumption that the decline of religious institutions has been accompanied by a corresponding decline in experiences people describe as spiritually significant.¹

The relationship between music and the sacred has therefore become increasingly difficult to characterize. Earlier scholarship often treated music as one element within broader systems of ritual or belief. Anthropologists emphasized its role in ceremony and social cohesion, while ethnomusicologists demonstrated that musical meaning cannot be separated from the cultural worlds in which it is produced.² More recent work has expanded the conversation. Philosophers have reconsidered the nature of aesthetic experience, cognitive scientists have investigated the neurological foundations of musical perception, and scholars of sound studies have shifted attention from musical works themselves toward listening as a cultural practice. These approaches differ considerably in their methods and assumptions, but each raises the same underlying question: why does organized sound continue to occupy such a privileged place in experiences that people understand as transformative?

That question has acquired additional significance within debates surrounding secularization. Classical secularization theory proposed that modernization would gradually diminish the public authority of religion as scientific explanation, bureaucratic organization, and technological development reshaped social life. Bryan Wilson and, later, Steve Bruce argued that this historical trajectory remained visible across much of Western Europe despite local variation.³ Their work continues to provide an essential framework for understanding the changing place of religious institutions in modern society.

The difficulty is that institutional decline does not fully account for contemporary patterns of musical life. Practices associated with contemplation, pilgrimage, collective singing, immersive listening, and ritualized performance continue to flourish, often outside conventional religious settings. Charles Taylor argues that modern societies inhabit an "immanent frame" in which belief and unbelief coexist as viable interpretations of experience rather than mutually exclusive worlds.⁴ Music occupies a distinctive position within that framework because it rarely requires agreement about doctrine. Listeners who disagree profoundly about metaphysics often describe remarkably similar experiences of stillness, presence, emotional intensity, or communal connection.

None of this demonstrates that music has replaced religion. Nor does it justify treating every emotionally powerful musical experience as evidence of the sacred. Steve Bruce has cautioned against expanding religious categories until they lose analytical precision, while Pascal Boyer explains many experiences commonly described as spiritual through ordinary cognitive processes.⁵ Those criticisms deserve to be taken seriously. They also clarify the problem this essay addresses.

Instead of asking whether music is religious, this essay asks what music consistently does across cultures and historical periods. Drawing on ethnomusicology, ritual theory, philosophy, neuroscience, and sound studies, it examines the ways organized sound structures attention, memory, embodiment, and communal life. The argument is not that music preserves religion in secular form. It is that listening remains one of the principal ways human beings organize experiences of meaning, whether those experiences are interpreted as theological, aesthetic, psychological, or ecological.

The discussion begins with ritual because ritual provides the historical context within which music first acquired many of the social functions it continues to perform today. From there, the essay follows listening through comparative musical traditions, contemporary composition, cognitive science, and acoustic ecology before returning to the broader question of why music remains such a persistent medium for experiences of transcendence in the modern world.

Ritual, Sound, and the Origins of Transcendence

Archaeological evidence suggests that music entered human life long before written language or organized theology. Bone flutes dating to the Upper Paleolithic, resonant percussion instruments, and traces of coordinated movement indicate that sound occupied an important place in prehistoric communities, although its precise meanings remain beyond historical recovery.¹ What can be said with greater confidence is that music rarely appears in isolation. Wherever evidence survives, it is closely associated with ceremony, collective participation, and moments of social consequence. This relationship has shaped anthropological approaches to music for more than a century.

John Blacking famously argued that music should be understood as "humanly organized sound," a definition that shifted attention away from musical objects toward the people who create and experience them.² His formulation remains influential because it rejects the assumption that music exists independently of social life. Songs, rhythms, and performances acquire meaning through the communities that sustain them. The same melody may function as prayer, protest, entertainment, or memorial depending upon the circumstances in which it is performed. Musical structure matters, but structure alone cannot explain why particular sounds become culturally significant.

Victor Turner's work on ritual extends this insight by emphasizing process rather than symbolism alone. Ritual, in his account, interrupts ordinary patterns of social life and temporarily suspends familiar hierarchies. Participants enter what Turner calls a liminal state, occupying a threshold between established identities and new forms of social relationship.³ Music frequently accompanies these transitions, not because it illustrates ritual, but because it helps produce the altered

temporal and emotional conditions through which ritual becomes effective. Repetition, coordinated movement, and sustained sonic environments reorganize attention in ways that ordinary speech rarely can.

Turner's concept of *communitas* is especially useful here. During ritual, participants often describe an intensified sense of equality and shared purpose that differs from the structured relationships governing everyday life. Music contributes directly to that experience. Singing together synchronizes breathing. Drumming aligns movement. Dance organizes bodies within a common pulse. These actions are physical before they become symbolic. The feeling of belonging is not simply represented through music; it is enacted through coordinated participation.

Mircea Eliade approached ritual from a different direction. For Eliade, ceremonial practice distinguished sacred time from ordinary chronological time. Festivals and rites did not merely commemorate foundational events; they renewed them by returning participants to an imagined beginning.⁴ Music frequently occupies a central place within this process because repetition creates the sense that time is unfolding differently. Cyclical rhythms, recurring melodic formulas, and repeated liturgical texts encourage listeners to experience duration as something other than the linear progression of daily life. Whether or not one accepts Eliade's broader theory of the sacred, his observations about ritual temporality remain suggestive for the study of music.

Ethnomusicologists have generally been cautious about universal theories of ritual, and for good reason. Musical practices emerge from particular histories, languages, and systems of belief. A funeral lament in rural Greece, a Yoruba praise song, and a Balinese temple performance cannot be understood through a single explanatory model. The temptation to identify universal meanings often obscures the local knowledge that gives musical performance its significance. Bruno Nettl repeatedly argued that comparison is most valuable when it preserves difference rather than dissolving it into abstraction.⁵

That caution is worth maintaining. The traditions discussed throughout this essay are not presented as evidence of a single, timeless spirituality. They differ in musical organization, cosmology, performance practice, and historical development. Yet comparison remains valuable because similar questions continue to emerge within very different cultural settings. How does sound establish relationships among participants? How does musical repetition shape attention? Why are particular ceremonies difficult to imagine without organized sound? These are not questions confined to one civilization. They appear wherever music becomes part of collective life.

Balinese gamelan illustrates this point particularly well. To describe gamelan simply as an orchestra misses the way musical performance is embedded within Balinese religious and social practice. Temple festivals, life-cycle ceremonies, and communal celebrations all depend upon ensembles whose interlocking rhythmic patterns and cyclical forms reflect broader understandings of balance, reciprocity, and cosmic order.⁶ No single performer controls the musical texture. Individual

parts are intentionally incomplete, achieving coherence only through their interaction with the ensemble. Listening, in this context, is necessarily relational. One hears not isolated lines but a continually emerging musical whole.

The same principle appears in different forms elsewhere. Hindu philosophical traditions associated with *Nāda Brahma* understand sound not merely as artistic expression but as a fundamental aspect of reality itself. Sacred recitation derives significance from vibration as much as semantic meaning, making attentive listening an act of participation rather than passive reception.⁷ Sufi practices of *samāʿ* similarly place listening at the center of devotional experience, though within an entirely different theological framework. The aim is not aesthetic appreciation alone but a disciplined openness through which music may deepen remembrance of the divine.⁸

These traditions are separated by language, history, and doctrine, yet they share a refusal to treat music as ornament. Organized sound does work. It gathers people, directs attention, shapes memory, and orders experience in ways that spoken discourse alone often cannot. That observation does not require the conclusion that all ritual music serves the same purpose. It does suggest that listening occupies a more fundamental place in human cultural life than modern aesthetic theories have sometimes allowed. The question, then, is how those older understandings of listening persist within societies where ritual has become less central to public life. That question leads beyond archaeology and anthropology into the changing musical cultures of the modern world.

Listening Across Cultures

Once music is understood as a social practice rather than an autonomous object, comparison becomes less a search for universal musical structures than an examination of the different ways societies have understood listening itself. Ethnomusicology has long resisted the temptation to rank musical traditions according to Western aesthetic standards, insisting instead that musical systems be interpreted within the intellectual and cultural worlds that produced them. That methodological shift altered more than the study of non-Western music. It challenged assumptions about what music is for.

Christopher Small captured this change with the term *musicking*. The significance of music, he argued, lies not primarily in composed works but in the relationships created whenever people perform, listen, rehearse, dance, or gather around organized sound.⁹ A symphony orchestra, a village ceremony, a church choir, and a neighborhood drum circle differ enormously in repertoire and performance practice, yet each constitutes a network of social relationships enacted through music. Listening is one of those relationships, not a passive activity occurring after the "real" musical work has been completed.

This perspective helps explain why listening occupies such different positions across musical cultures. In many Western concert traditions, audiences are expected to remain silent, directing their attention toward performers whose authority rests partly upon technical specialization. Elsewhere, participation rather than observation defines the event. Singing, movement, conversation, and ritual

action may be inseparable from musical performance itself. Neither approach is inherently more attentive than the other. They cultivate different kinds of listening.

Balinese gamelan offers one of the clearest examples. The dense interlocking textures known as *kotekan* distribute musical responsibility across the ensemble so thoroughly that no individual performer carries the complete musical line. Precision depends upon cooperation. A single part, heard in isolation, often appears fragmentary; only in performance does the larger pattern emerge. Michael Tenzer observes that this musical organization reflects broader Balinese ideas concerning reciprocity and collective responsibility rather than individual display.¹⁰ The listener encounters a texture whose coherence depends upon relationships rather than isolated voices.

The experience is striking for those accustomed to following a principal melody. Attention moves constantly between foreground and background because those distinctions are less stable than in much Western concert music. Rhythmic density creates clarity rather than confusion. The music rewards sustained listening, but it does so by encouraging the ear to hear interaction rather than hierarchy.

Indian philosophical traditions approach listening from another direction. Within the concept of *Nāda Brahma*, sound is not simply something perceived by human beings; it is understood as a fundamental principle through which reality itself becomes intelligible.¹¹ This does not mean that every musical performance is treated as sacred, nor should the idea be generalized across the immense diversity of South Asian musical traditions. It does, however, place vibration and attentive listening within a philosophical framework that differs markedly from aesthetic theories centered primarily on artistic expression. The listener is not merely receiving sound. Listening becomes participation in an ordered universe.

Related ideas appear in the concept of *Śabda Brahman*, where sacred utterance derives authority not only from semantic content but also from disciplined vocal production and careful transmission. Chant preserves meaning through sound itself. Accuracy matters because sound carries efficacy independent of ordinary language. Such practices resist the familiar Western distinction between form and content. The way something is sounded cannot easily be separated from what is being communicated.

Sufi traditions provide another perspective. The practice of *samāʿ*, often translated simply as "listening," encompasses considerably more than hearing music. Jean During describes it as an intentional discipline through which poetry, melody, rhythm, and silence may deepen remembrance of God.¹² Whether accompanied by instrumental performance or vocal recitation, the act of listening is expected to transform the listener's disposition. Not every musical gathering becomes *samāʿ*, and Islamic scholars have long debated its proper role within religious life, but those debates themselves demonstrate the seriousness with which listening has been regarded.

East Asian musical thought raises still another possibility. Confucian writings consistently connect music with ethical cultivation and political order. The *Record of Music* (*Yueji*) does not describe music primarily as entertainment but as a force capable of shaping character and harmonizing society.¹³ Good music, within this tradition, contributes to moral formation because it orders emotion without suppressing it. The concern is less with private aesthetic experience than with the relationship between individual conduct and collective life.

Japanese aesthetics frequently locates expressive power in what is withheld. The concept of *ma* refers to the interval, pause, or space through which events acquire shape.¹⁴ Applied to music, *ma* encourages attention to silence, resonance, and temporal openness as active elements of performance rather than empty gaps between sounds. The listener waits as much as listens. Meaning emerges from the relationship between sounding and not sounding, presence and absence.

These traditions differ in almost every respect that concerns the ethnomusicologist. Their scales, instruments, performance conventions, histories, and theological commitments resist easy comparison. Yet they share an assumption that has become less common within many modern discussions of music: listening is something one learns to do. It is cultivated through practice, discipline, and participation. The ear is educated no less than the performer.

That observation casts contemporary musical life in a different light. The question is no longer whether modern listeners continue to have experiences that resemble older religious practices. A more interesting question concerns the habits of attention contemporary musical culture encourages—or discourages. Concert etiquette, recorded music, streaming platforms, festivals, headphones, and immersive installations all teach listeners how to hear. They also shape what listening can become.

Those changing habits deserve closer attention, particularly because the modern concert has often been described as inheriting social functions once associated with ritual. Whether that comparison ultimately succeeds depends less on superficial similarities than on the forms of attention musical performance continues to cultivate.

Music Beyond the Temple: Performance, Community, and the Modern Concert

The emergence of the public concert transformed the social life of music without severing its relationship to ritual. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe gradually relocated much musical activity from courts and churches into civic institutions designed for public performance. The concert hall represented a different kind of gathering. Admission depended less upon religious affiliation than upon shared interest, and audiences increasingly assembled around repertoire rather than liturgy. Even so, the behavioral expectations surrounding concert attendance developed a formality that invited comparison with ceremonial practice. Silence, architectural orientation, prescribed moments of collective attention, and the temporary suspension of ordinary conversation distinguished the concert from everyday social life.

Christopher Small argued that these conventions should not be dismissed as peripheral to musical performance. They constitute the performance. The arrangement of seats, the separation of audience and performers, the timing of applause, the lighting of the hall, and the expectation of concentrated listening all contribute to the relationships enacted through musical events.¹⁵ A symphony concert is therefore more than the presentation of a musical work; it is a carefully structured social encounter that communicates ideas about authority, community, and attentive behavior before a single note is played.

Those conventions, however, are historically contingent rather than universal. They differ markedly from participatory traditions in which listeners become singers, dancers, or ritual participants. The silence expected during a string quartet performance would appear strange in many ceremonial settings where conversation, movement, or spontaneous response forms part of the musical event itself. Recognizing these differences discourages romantic comparisons between concerts and religious ceremonies while still allowing us to ask why both devote such careful attention to the organization of listening.

Victor Turner's observations concerning liminality remain useful here, although not because concert halls reproduce ritual in any straightforward way. Public performance temporarily alters ordinary patterns of social interaction. Individuals who may never otherwise occupy the same space agree to suspend everyday concerns in favor of sustained attention directed toward a shared sonic event. The experience lasts only a few hours, yet during that time a different rhythm of social life becomes possible.¹⁶

That rhythm is perhaps most obvious when performance exceeds ordinary entertainment. Long-duration works by Wagner, Mahler, Morton Feldman, or Éliane Radigue demand forms of concentration that resist the accelerated pace of everyday life. The listener cannot absorb such works casually. Their scale changes the experience of time itself. Minutes cease to function merely as units of measurement and become perceptual spaces through which attention gradually reorganizes itself.

Minimalist composition explores this possibility from another angle. Steve Reich, Terry Riley, La Monte Young, and later composers associated with minimalist and post-minimalist aesthetics employ repetition in ways that challenge conventional expectations of musical development. Repeated patterns do not eliminate change; they slow its rate until subtle shifts assume unusual significance. A slight alteration in rhythm, timbre, or harmonic color acquires perceptual weight precisely because the surrounding musical environment remains comparatively stable. Keith Potter has noted that such music often depends upon prolonged listening before its internal relationships become fully apparent.¹⁷

This change in temporal experience helps explain why minimalist music has often attracted listeners interested in meditation, contemplative practice, or expanded awareness, even when the composers themselves resist explicitly religious interpretations. The experience does not arise because

the music communicates a theological message. It develops through attention. As repetition continues, listeners frequently report hearing details that seemed absent during the opening minutes—not because those sounds were newly introduced, but because perception itself has changed.

John Cage approached listening from an even more radical position. His concern was never silence in the ordinary sense, but the impossibility of silence. In *4'33"*, the performer does not produce conventionally organized musical sound, yet the performance remains filled with acoustic activity: shifting bodies, distant traffic, ventilation systems, whispered conversation, the resonance of the room itself.¹⁸ Cage's intervention redirected attention away from musical objects toward the conditions of listening. The work asks less, "What is music?" than "What happens when we actually listen?"

That question continues to shape contemporary sound art, installation practice, and acoustic ecology. The environment is no longer treated as background to musical activity but as an active participant in sonic experience. A cathedral, warehouse, forest, subway station, or coastal landscape contributes acoustic properties that influence perception regardless of whether composed music is present. Listening extends beyond repertoire into place.

The distinction matters because it shifts attention from composition to experience. Music no longer appears as an isolated artwork detached from everyday life. It becomes one way—though certainly not the only way—of learning to inhabit acoustic environments more attentively. R. Murray Schafer's work on the soundscape emerged from precisely this concern. Industrialization, he argued, altered not only the sounds surrounding modern societies but also people's capacity to notice them. The loss was ecological as much as aesthetic.¹⁹

Barry Truax developed this argument further by describing sound as a medium of communication linking individuals with their environments. Listening is never entirely private. Every acoustic space reflects relationships among architecture, technology, geography, and social practice.²⁰ One hears not simply music but the conditions under which music becomes audible.

Pauline Oliveros's concept of Deep Listening carries this insight into musical practice itself. Her workshops rarely distinguished sharply among improvisation, meditation, environmental awareness, and collaborative performance. Participants were encouraged to notice reverberation, bodily sensation, distant environmental sounds, and silence with the same care ordinarily reserved for composed musical material.²¹ Listening ceased to be a skill directed exclusively toward artistic works. It became an orientation toward the world.

Oliveros's work is especially valuable because it resists easy classification. It is neither conventionally religious nor conventionally secular. It borrows from contemplative traditions without belonging to any one of them. The emphasis falls instead on disciplined attention, on the possibility that perception itself can be cultivated. Whether participants describe the resulting experiences in aesthetic, philosophical, ecological, or spiritual terms remains secondary to the practice of listening that makes those interpretations possible.

That shift—from music as object to listening as practice—marks one of the most significant developments in contemporary musical thought. It also provides an unexpected point of contact with many of the traditions discussed earlier. Balinese musicians, Sufi practitioners, Confucian philosophers, and advocates of Deep Listening disagree about nearly everything except one point: listening is something that must be learned.

Listening, Consciousness, and Musical Experience

Questions about listening eventually become questions about consciousness. Ritual theory explains how music functions within ceremonies, and ethnomusicology shows how musical meaning emerges from particular cultural worlds, but neither entirely explains why organized sound alters experience so reliably. The answer cannot lie in musical structure alone. Two listeners may hear the same performance and leave with entirely different memories of what happened. The notes are identical; the experience is not.

For much of the twentieth century, scholars tended to separate cultural explanations from biological ones, as though choosing between anthropology and neuroscience were necessary. More recent work has made that distinction harder to maintain. Musical experience is always embodied. Cultural expectations shape listening, but they do so through perceptual systems shared by all human beings. The brain is not an alternative to culture. It is the condition that makes culture possible.

One of music's most remarkable features is its ability to organize expectation. Unlike speech, whose meaning often depends upon reference, music unfolds through anticipation. Listeners continually predict rhythmic continuations, melodic direction, harmonic arrival, and formal change, often without conscious awareness. David Huron argues that much of music's emotional force emerges from this ongoing negotiation between expectation and surprise.²² Satisfaction, tension, suspense, disappointment, and release are not simply contained within the music itself. They arise through interaction between sounding events and the listener's predictions.

Anyone who has attended a live performance has experienced this process. An orchestra delays the final cadence by only a measure or two, and the audience collectively leans forward. A jazz solo circles around an expected resolution without immediately reaching it. A singer hesitates before the final phrase. These moments depend upon shared expectation. Their emotional power would disappear if listeners had no sense that something had been deferred.

Rhythm works differently. It organizes bodies before it organizes ideas. Infants respond to pulse long before they understand musical systems, and adults instinctively synchronize movement with external rhythm. Clapping, marching, dancing, rowing, chanting, and congregational singing all depend upon this capacity. William McNeill described these forms of coordinated movement as "muscular bonding," emphasizing that synchronization produces social relationships through bodily action rather than verbal agreement.²³ Long before participants explain what a ceremony means, they have already begun moving together.

The implications extend beyond ritual. Choir rehearsals, drum circles, protest marches, military drills, football stadiums, and dance clubs all rely upon similar processes of temporal coordination despite pursuing very different social goals. Music cannot explain these events by itself, but it provides a medium through which large groups of people regulate attention simultaneously. Few other cultural practices accomplish this with equal efficiency.

Memory introduces another dimension. Music has an unusual capacity to preserve experiences that resist ordinary recollection. A melody heard unexpectedly after many years can restore forgotten places, relationships, and emotions with startling immediacy. Oliver Sacks drew attention to this phenomenon through numerous clinical observations of patients whose musical memories remained accessible despite severe neurological impairment.²⁴ Songs often survived when names, dates, and conversations had largely disappeared.

The importance of this observation extends well beyond medicine. Throughout history, communities have entrusted music with preserving stories, genealogies, sacred texts, political identities, and collective memory. Oral traditions are sustained not despite music but through it. Melody and rhythm provide structures within which cultural knowledge becomes memorable across generations. Ethnomusicologists have repeatedly encountered societies in which music functions as an archive long before writing assumes that role.

These observations invite caution as well as enthusiasm. It is tempting to conclude that neuroscience has finally explained why music matters. Such claims ask too much of scientific evidence. Brain imaging may reveal patterns associated with musical perception, but it cannot determine why particular sounds acquire religious significance in one society, political significance in another, and personal significance in a third. Those meanings remain historical achievements rather than neurological facts.

The reverse mistake is equally unhelpful. Treating biology as irrelevant because musical meaning is culturally constructed ignores the obvious reality that every musical culture depends upon shared human capacities for hearing, movement, memory, and prediction. Neither perspective eliminates the other. They address different levels of the same phenomenon.

Perhaps this explains why musical experiences are so often described in similar language despite enormous cultural differences. Listeners speak of losing track of time, feeling unusually present, becoming aware of others in new ways, or experiencing moments that seem resistant to ordinary explanation. Abraham Maslow's discussion of peak experiences, although developed outside musicology, offers one vocabulary for describing these reports.²⁵ The language differs across traditions, but the recurring themes are familiar: absorption, clarity, unity, expanded awareness.

None of these descriptions settles the question of transcendence. They were never capable of doing so. A neuroscientist may describe distributed neural activity, a philosopher may speak of

aesthetic experience, a monk may describe contemplation, and an ethnomusicologist may emphasize enculturation. Each account illuminates part of the event without exhausting it.

Listening remains slightly larger than any single explanation.

That persistent excess—the sense that musical experience can be analyzed in remarkable detail while still retaining something irreducible—may be one reason music has continued to occupy such an unusual place in human life. It invites explanation. It has never been entirely explained.

Music, Secularization, and the Persistence of the Sacred

Discussions of music and transcendence inevitably return to secularization, although not always for the reasons the debate is usually framed. The question is often presented in institutional terms: as religious participation declines, what becomes of practices once embedded within religious life? Music complicates that narrative because it has never belonged exclusively to religious institutions. Chant migrated into the concert hall, folk hymns entered popular music, devotional traditions found new audiences through recording technology, and composers continued to draw upon sacred texts long after European concert culture had become largely secular. The movement was not one-directional. Musical practices crossed institutional boundaries with surprising ease.

Classical secularization theory remains indispensable for understanding these historical changes. Bryan Wilson argued that modernization progressively reduced the social authority of religious institutions, while Steve Bruce maintained that declining participation, diminished clerical influence, and the privatization of belief represented genuine historical developments rather than temporary fluctuations.²⁶ Measured in those terms, secularization has substantial explanatory power. Churches closed, congregations shrank, and many forms of religious authority no longer occupied the cultural position they had held for centuries.

Music tells a more complicated story. One need not claim that concerts have become religious ceremonies to recognize that listeners continue searching for experiences once closely associated with ritual life. Long before the first note sounds, audiences often speak of anticipation. They travel considerable distances, gather with strangers, submit to shared conventions of behavior, and devote sustained attention to an event understood as distinct from ordinary life. None of this is uniquely religious. Neither is it entirely ordinary.

Charles Taylor's account of the immanent frame provides one way of understanding this shift. Modern societies, he argues, no longer assume that transcendence provides the unquestioned horizon of experience. Belief remains possible, disbelief remains possible, and many individuals move between those positions over the course of their lives.²⁷ Experiences themselves have not disappeared. What has changed is the range of interpretations available to those who undergo them.

Music occupies an unusual position within that landscape because it asks comparatively little of its listeners. A Bach Passion, an all-night gamelan performance, an Arvo Pärt quartet, or an ambient installation can move people whose philosophical commitments differ completely. One listener hears

theological affirmation. Another hears historical beauty. A third describes psychological restoration. The performance remains the same; its meaning is not.

That flexibility helps explain why music continues to attract scholars from disciplines that otherwise share relatively little common ground. Anthropologists describe ritual action. Philosophers discuss aesthetic experience. Neuroscientists investigate predictive processing and emotional regulation. Sociologists examine collective identity. Sound studies shifts attention toward listening itself. The conversations overlap without ever fully converging because music persistently exceeds the vocabulary of any one discipline.

Some scholars regard that excess with suspicion. Pascal Boyer, for example, argues that experiences frequently interpreted as spiritual can be understood through ordinary cognitive mechanisms without appealing to transcendence.²⁸ From this perspective, the emotional intensity associated with music reflects evolved capacities for pattern recognition, social coordination, and affective processing. There is no need to invoke the sacred when well-established psychological processes provide adequate explanation.

That criticism deserves more attention than it sometimes receives. Too much writing about music adopts transcendence as though it were self-evident, assuming that powerful experiences require extraordinary explanations. They do not. Human beings routinely experience grief, love, wonder, terror, and beauty without concluding that those emotions exist outside ordinary cognition. Musical experience should be approached with the same caution.

Yet reduction presents its own difficulties. Explaining how rhythmic entrainment occurs is not the same as explaining why communities choose particular musical forms to accompany mourning rather than celebration, pilgrimage rather than protest, initiation rather than entertainment. Biology accounts for capacities; it does not account for meanings. The same rhythmic synchronization observable in a laboratory acquires radically different significance in a Pentecostal church, a military parade, a Balinese cremation ceremony, or a football stadium. Culture remains indispensable.

Perhaps the debate has become unnecessarily polarized. The choice is rarely between neuroscience and religion, or between anthropology and philosophy. Most musical experiences involve all of these dimensions simultaneously. Bodies synchronize. Memories surface. Cultural expectations shape interpretation. Acoustic environments influence perception. Personal histories color emotional response. None of these observations excludes the others.

The more interesting question concerns why music continues to occupy this intersection while comparatively few other human activities do. Language communicates propositions. Images organize visual attention. Architecture shapes movement through space. Music certainly does some of these things, but it also unfolds through time in a way that requires participation from the listener. A melody cannot be grasped instantaneously. It must be remembered while new sounds arrive. Listening therefore depends upon continuity. One hears the present against the background of what has already

sounded and the anticipation of what has not yet arrived. Every musical tradition, regardless of style or historical origin, asks the listener to inhabit time differently.

That may be one reason music has proven so resistant to purely functional explanation. Its value has rarely depended upon practical utility alone. Communities continue singing at funerals despite the absence of measurable benefit. Pilgrims continue chanting while walking. Protest movements continue adopting songs that bind strangers together. Parents sing to children who cannot yet understand the words. These practices persist because they accomplish something difficult to replace, even if that "something" remains resistant to precise definition.

Listening, in other words, has survived cultural transformations that have fundamentally altered nearly every other aspect of musical life. Instruments change. Technologies change. Institutions change. The disciplined act of giving sustained attention to organized sound remains remarkably familiar. It is there, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the historical continuity explored throughout this essay can still be heard.

Listening Beyond the Sacred

Questions about music often begin with style, technique, or historical development. They end somewhere else. Once listening becomes the focus, familiar distinctions between sacred and secular, aesthetic and social, or artistic and ritual begin to appear less stable than they first seemed. None of those categories disappears, but each becomes more permeable when viewed through the experience of organized sound.

The traditions considered here resist easy comparison. Balinese gamelan emerged within a Hindu-Balinese cosmology that differs fundamentally from the devotional practices of Sufi *samāʿ*. Confucian discussions of music and ethical cultivation share little theological ground with Pauline Oliveros's philosophy of Deep Listening, and neither resembles the minimalist aesthetics of Arvo Pärt or Steve Reich. Their differences matter. Ethnomusicology has spent decades demonstrating that musical traditions lose much of their significance when removed from the historical and cultural worlds that produced them.

Those differences, however, do not prevent comparison. They make careful comparison necessary. Across these traditions, listening is rarely treated as passive reception. It is cultivated through discipline, participation, repetition, and attention. Communities learn how to listen long before they learn how to analyze music. The education of the ear is also an education of memory, of the body, and of social life. Whether expressed through ritual performance, communal singing, contemplative practice, or concentrated concert listening, music repeatedly asks participants to inhabit time together.

This observation does not resolve the debate surrounding secularization. It was never likely to. Charles Taylor's account of the immanent frame captures important features of contemporary experience, while Steve Bruce's defense of secularization theory remains persuasive when institutional

religion is the object of analysis. Pascal Boyer is equally right to remind scholars that extraordinary experiences emerge through ordinary cognitive processes. These perspectives are not easily reconciled because they ask different questions. One concerns historical institutions, another the interpretation of experience, and another the mechanisms through which experience becomes possible.

Music moves among those questions without belonging exclusively to any of them.

Its significance cannot be located entirely within ritual, because musical practices regularly outlive the ceremonies in which they originated. It cannot be explained entirely through neuroscience, because identical perceptual mechanisms acquire different meanings in different cultural settings. Neither can music be reduced to aesthetic form, since listening continually produces relationships extending beyond the musical work itself. Performers respond to audiences, audiences respond to one another, and every performance unfolds within acoustic, architectural, and historical conditions that shape what can be heard.

Perhaps this explains why music has remained so difficult to classify. It is art, certainly. It is also social practice, historical memory, embodied knowledge, and cultural expression. Depending upon where one begins, each description appears incomplete. Music continually exceeds the categories intended to contain it.

Listening occupies a similarly uncertain position. It is often treated as the most passive element of musical experience, something that follows composition and performance. The traditions examined throughout this essay suggest almost the opposite. Listening is productive. It establishes relationships among people, places, and sounds. It gives coherence to musical events unfolding through time. Without listeners there is vibration, but there is no music in any meaningful cultural sense.

That insight has implications extending beyond ethnomusicology. Contemporary life is saturated with sound yet increasingly fragmented in attention. Music accompanies work, travel, exercise, shopping, and communication so routinely that sustained listening has become comparatively uncommon. The issue is not that modern societies hear too much music. It is that they often hear without listening. Pauline Oliveros's distinction between hearing as physiological process and listening as conscious practice therefore reaches beyond experimental music. It names a broader cultural problem.¹

The essays and studies brought together here do not suggest that careful listening offers a remedy for every aspect of modern life, nor do they support nostalgic claims that music can restore forms of community that have disappeared. They indicate something more restrained. Listening remains one of the few practices capable of gathering attention without demanding immediate utility. It slows perception. It draws individuals into shared temporal experience. It encourages awareness of relationships that ordinarily pass unnoticed.

For ethnomusicology, that may be the most enduring lesson. Music is not simply something societies possess. It is something they do. Equally important, listening is not merely something

individuals experience. It is something cultures teach. Whether in temples, concert halls, village squares, recording studios, forests, or homes, human beings continue to learn how to attend to one another through organized sound. The forms have changed repeatedly across history. The practice itself has not.

Notes

1. Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 1–18.
2. John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 25–48.
3. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94–130.
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