

French Symbolist Aesthetics and Hazrat Inayat Khan's Musical Ontology

MAURICE WINDLEBURN

Abstract: In 1913, French composer Claude Debussy hosted Sufi mystic and (in Debussy's own words) "musician-philosopher" Hazrat Inayat Khan at his home, where they performed for each other their music. Taking this brief meeting as my opening, this paper compares Khan's "musical ontology" to similar beliefs held by the French Symbolists in Debussy's milieu. Khan's assertion that a vibratory, spiritual plane is the source of material, everyday existence is related to the beliefs of musicologist and bookstore owner Edmond Bailly; the "cenesthetic" poetics of Symbolists like Charles Baudelaire; Paul Gauguin's "musical" paintings; and Debussy's implementation of silence in his music.

Keywords: Sound, vibration, synesthesia, emanationism, Claude Debussy

Introduction

In 1913, pianist Walter Rummel arranged for Sufi musician Hazrat Inayat Khan to meet and perform for French composer Claude Debussy. Arriving at the composer's apartment, Khan and his brothers performed some North Indian Islamic music for Debussy, who in turn played his own piano music for the visitors. Inayat Khan's younger brother, Musharaff, also allegedly gave Debussy a brief *vina* lesson.¹ The precise impact of this encounter, on either Debussy or Khan, is difficult to ascertain; scholars have suggested that the unfinished "Indian drama" Debussy planned to write soon after, with the poet Gabriel D'Annunzio, was the result of their shared exposure to Khan's music (D'Annunzio had written an enthusiastic review of Khan's public performance in Paris); while conversely, the Sufi mystic would later refer to Debussy in his lectures and writings. Without making claims of direct influence (for which there is little evidence), this article takes Debussy and Khan's meeting as an opportunity to situate the latter's philosophy into Paris' turn of the century intellectual milieu, and to provide a novel reading of French Symbolist poetry, painting, and music via Khan's thought.

Although Khan was primarily a travelling musician in his early life, he later turned towards spiritual leadership, adapting Sufi mysticism into a universalist, syncretic spiritualism (much in the vein of the Theosophical Society, popular at the time). In the lectures he gave and writings he published throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, Khan espoused an emanationist ontology that especially privileged music as a primary metaphysical force – what I will here call, a "musical ontology". By musical ontology I do not mean an ontology *of* music, but rather, an ontology that claims music (or some related phenomenon like sound or vibration) as the cosmological origin, first principle, or *apeiron* of all things. Khan's own musical ontology will be outlined in greater detail below, after which it will be compared to the ideas of certain French Symbolists. Emerging throughout the late-nineteenth century, Symbolism was by the 1910s a well-established (even somewhat *passé*) aesthetic paradigm in Paris. As with Khan, Symbolist figures often placed an especially high value on music, not only as the aesthetic ideal towards which all art should strive, but also as the universe's underlying metaphysical force – the "truth" all art should seek. Symbolism's own musical ontology was largely indebted to Schopenhauerian beliefs flowing into the movement via French Wagnerism; yet it was

further supported by both Western and Eastern mysticism, occultism, and spirituality. For Khan and many Symbolists, an ontological division existed between the everyday material world, and a more primary vibratory (and often spiritual) plane beneath it.

My comparison between Khan and the Symbolists is in three parts. The first focuses on musicologist Edmond Bailly, whose bookstore *Librairie de l'art independant* was a central hub for both Symbolist and esoteric thinkers. A personal friend of Khan's, Bailly made many similar claims for music's metaphysical primacy, postulating a spiritual, vibratory realm beneath material existence. In the second section, an analogous ontological divide between material and vibratory is read into the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud, whose literary synaesthesia confused the senses in order to reach a deeper "cenesthetic" resonance. In the third section, Paul Gauguin's paradoxical attempt to make painting truer to its "inner force" by emulating music is understood via Khan's hierarchy of the senses – where sound sits closer to the spiritual plane than does light. Debussy's use of silence is read in a similar manner, given that Khan's purest form of vibration, "abstract sound", is silent. To conclude, some past criticisms of vibrational or musical ontologies (like Khan's) are raised, though primarily for the purpose of situating both Khan and the Symbolist's thought into a broader history of ideas. First though, some additional mention of Khan's biography and his musical ontology needs to be given.

The Spiritual Plane of Abstract Sound

Born in 1882 in the North Indian city of Baroda (now Vadodara), Khan was the member of a musically accomplished family – his grandfather was the local maharajah's court musician, and his uncle had travelled to England, studying at the Royal College of Music. Trained as a musician from an early age, Khan travelled throughout India as a performer, leading to a successful tour of the United States (where he accompanied the famous exotic dancer Ruth St Denis), and a visit to Europe in 1912 (where he made his appearance at Debussy's home).² At the outbreak of World War I, Khan immigrated to England, and, in the face of comparatively little interest in his music, became more involved in the propagation of his Sufi beliefs. Khan developed a universalist form of Sufi mysticism, partly detached from its Islamic roots, that in 1921 formed the basis of a more organised religious group called the "Sufi Movement" – headquartered at first in the outskirts of Paris, then in Geneva (though with branches throughout Western Europe and America). The group underwent a noticeable expansion throughout the 1920s, but reached its peak by the time of Khan's death in 1927.

The bulk of Khan's writings on music have been published as a compendium titled *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, but most of these texts were first delivered as public lectures. Throughout the collection Khan establishes a core claim that everything is music – stating that, "to me architecture is music, gardening is music, farming is music, painting is music, poetry is music" (Khan 1996: 3). Yet two separate conceptions of the word "music" are actually at play in Khan's thought; the first is music as it is commonly understood – music as an artform that we hear; the second refers to a more primary vibration lying beneath all things: a type of pure "movement" Khan calls "abstract sound", or *sawt-e-sarmad* (and elsewhere, *anahad*).

This "abstract sound" is a primary ontological force that coalesces into the concrete objects, beings, things, or forms we perceive in everyday life. These concrete entities in turn constitute a separate ontological plane to abstract sound. Khan's ontology hence resembles many process philosophies, where a temporal flux consistently creates, maintains, or destroys the objects otherwise enduring to our senses. As Khan clearly states, "Everything that has been created, and then constructed or destroyed, has come into being through vibration and sound" (Khan 1996: 292); elsewhere he notes that

If the whole creation can be well explained it is by the phases of sound or vibration, which have manifested in different grades in all their various forms in life. Objects and names and forms are but the

expression of vibrations in different aspects. Even all that we call matter or substance, and all that does not seem to speak or sound – it is all in reality vibration (Khan 1996: 18).

In addition to representing a process philosophy, Khan's thought is also deeply spiritualist: he considers the "grosser" (his term) plane of concrete objects to be fundamentally "material", while the abstract sound beneath it is "spiritual", acting as an ontological ground. Although Khan claims that "spirit and matter are the same in the higher sense" (Khan 1996: 9), this is only insofar as abstract sound is responsible for the material plane's existence: the latter is ontologically dependent on the former, resulting in a hierarchised (rather than a flat) ontology. Yet since the material plane has abstract sound as its foundation, interactions between material entities are still considered "musical" by Khan (who labels such relationships as either harmonious or dissonant). Because all things are made from the same vibrating flux (the spiritual plane of abstract sound), they may resonate within each other, and this can occur even when they are spatially or temporally distant. Khan claims that "All things and beings in the universe are connected with each other – visibly or invisibly – and through vibrations a communication is established between them on all the planes of existence" (Khan 1996: 126).

The spiritual nature of abstract sound, along with its omnipresence and ontological primacy, leads Khan to make it synonymous with God or "the Beloved". Regularly evoking the Biblical origin of the universe, Khan claims that abstract sound is the Voice of God – hence subscribing to an immanent theology where God exists in all things and where all things are interconnected as God's first and ongoing creative act. One important consequence of Khan's understanding that abstract sound is the Voice of God is his conflation of words and music. Khan grants words a communicative function akin to the direct physical impact musical vibrations may have on the body. Khan notes that he has "found in every word a certain musical value, a melody in every thought, harmony in every feeling" (Khan 1996: xi), maintaining that "Although it has been dimmed by manifestation, your thought, your mind, is made of sound" (Khan 1996: 24). For Khan, words – as well as thoughts and feelings – are manifestations of abstract sound (just like material objects); this view consequently abolishes the arbitrary nature of signs and the inherent gap between signifier and signified, sender and receiver, allowing Khan to claim that sound is integral to a word's meaning, and that words have unmediated effects on bodies and things.³

Abstract sound (the root of all objects, words, and thoughts) is not, however, the sound that we hear. Abstract sound is not music in the common sense, and in fact abstract sound cannot be heard at all (at least not through the ears – something I return to below). The music we hear is an entity existing on Khan's material plane along with feelings, thoughts, words, forms, and objects. Nonetheless, music has a privileged relationship with the spiritual plane beneath it, not shared by other material entities. For Khan, music is a "picture of the Beloved" (Khan 1996: 2) and he mentions how "among all the different arts, the art of music has been especially considered divine, because it is the exact miniature of the law working through the whole universe" (Khan 1996: 3). Elsewhere Khan states that

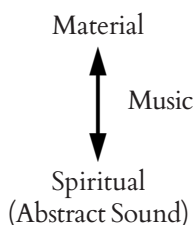
The music of the universe is the background of the little picture which we call music. Our sense of music, our attraction to music, shows that music is in the depth of our being. Music is behind the working of the whole universe. Music is not only life's greatest object, but music is life itself (Khan 1996: 11).

Hence, a macro-microcosmic relationship exists between abstract sound as the source of everything, and music as an audible, material entity (one thing among many). Music reflects abstract sound's own manner of working, and this emulation is so faithful that the two become almost synonymous – their distinction nearly collapses as Khan's above-given quote suggests.

Consequently, Khan believes that music may almost turn "matter into spirit, into its original condition" (Khan 1996: 114), and so music acts as a point of mediation between the material and spiritual planes: it is "the bridge over the gulf between the form and the formless" (Khan 1996: 113–114). As such, Khan claims that music has magical properties – that it is able to affect things in a manner that is not readily explainable from our position on the material plane and this is thanks to the contiguity that exists between music and abstract sound, the latter of which imbues all things.

A belief in something akin to abstract sound was common among occultists, Theosophists, and philosophers in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. This included composer and musicologist Edmond Bailly, whose bookstore on the rue de la Chaussée d'Antin (opened in 1889) was an important meeting place for Symbolist poets, painters, and musicians, as well as followers of esoteric thought. Debussy was a regular visitor to the store, and Bailly was a personal friend of Inayat Khan's between 1911–1914. Bailly's writings on music share some striking parallels to the Sufi mystic's, defining vibration as a "pure movement" that gives "form and structure" to "both the higher and lower planes" (see Pasler 2020: 334). Sound (or at least vibration – the distinction is ambiguous with Bailly) is a force that exists in literally everything, including trees, wind, planets, and even the climate; yet these vibrations or sounds are often "microscopic" or purely "ambient" (see Pasler 2020: 333) – in other words, they are not necessarily heard. Like Khan, Bailly spiritualised these vibrations, upholding the belief that God's voice was the universe's origin and its ongoing, underlining force.

A shared ontology can hence be derived from both Khan and Bailly's beliefs: the universe, as we experience it, is that of a "higher", "grosser", or "material" plane of seemingly discreet entities; yet these entities have as their source a shared "lower", "thinner", or "spiritual" vibratory plane. Music, as a privileged entity, mediates between these planes by emulating the spiritual within the material.



The Long Echo of Cenesthetic Correspondences

Given Inayat Khan and Bailly's friendship, it is tempting to postulate some direct line of influence between the two; yet as mentioned earlier, their ideas were common among many *fin-de-siècle* thinkers and artists. Musicologist Jann Pasler mentions how Bailly's vibratory "law of analogies" had one origin in the writings of Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society (Pasler 2020: 335); Pasler also notes how Symbolist aesthetics – particularly those established by Charles Baudelaire in his well-known poem *Correspondences* – provide yet another origin for Bailly's thought. In the first stanza of Baudelaire's poem, he mentions how symbols form a forest, resonating through those who walk within:

Nature is a temple, where the living
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;
Man walks within these groves of symbols, each
Of which regards him as a kindred thing. (Baudelaire 1993: 19)

These "symbols" are not, however, of a typically semantic kind, having no singular, preestablished meaning. Instead, they are more akin to vibrations – permeating not only the person who walks through them, but also one another. Baudelaire's poem illustrates this core principle of Symbolist thought – that all things have everything else as their meaning. This results in an infinite refraction, or a process Baudelaire calls, in his second stanza, a "long echo":

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,
Heard from afar, blend in a unity,
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond. (Baudelaire 1993: 19)

This echo, akin to Khan's abstract sound, connects all entities at a level below the material plane ("shadowy", "from afar"). Baudelaire's second stanza also introduces synaesthesia as a particular type

of correspondence or “echo”; here, the different senses (and the physical phenomena they relate to) blend with one another, forming a unity.

Synesthetic correspondences became a foundation-stone for Symbolist thought and poetry throughout the late-nineteenth century – evident in Paul Verlaine’s association of consonant sounds with concepts or moods, as well as Arthur Rimbaud and René Ghil’s (differing) linkages of vowels to colours. Intriguingly, synesthesia also appears as a topic of discussion throughout Inayat Khan’s lectures, where he maintains that “In reality there is music in colour, there is music in lines, there is music in the forest where there is a variety of trees and plants, in the way in which they correspond with each other” (Khan 1996: 18). This quote almost reads as a commentary on Baudelaire’s poem, with its description not only of musical colors and lines but also a forest of correspondences. A similarly suggestive link also exists between Verlaine, Rimbaud and Ghil’s poetic experiments and Khan’s assertion that “Every vowel, such as *a* or *e* or *o*, has its psychological significance, and the composition of every word has a chemical and psychological significance” (Khan 1996: 260).⁴

Yet the connection between Khan’s thought and Symbolist poetics runs deeper than just these few suggestive quotes, since both postulate a resonant core beneath the senses that allows for synesthetic correspondences to occur. Literary critic Lauren Silvers has noted that the synesthesia Symbolist poets evoked in their work was not necessarily for its own sake; rather, it was “a privileged means of transcending such correspondences in the service of a more profound and unified mode of feeling” (Silvers 2014: 382). Silvers follows *fin de siècle* psychologists in referring to this feeling as “cenesthetic”: an intense corporeal sensation generally considered vibratory in nature. Cenesthetic poetry therefore involves the production of a direct physical encounter between words and body, at a level below the strictly intellectual, but also below the individual senses.

Silvers elucidates this rather opaque aesthetic theory by recourse to the philosopher and critic Jules de Gaultier, who, in his study of Verlaine’s work, argued “that poetry can draw on the origins of language as primordial, affective, nonlexical communication” (see Silvers 2014: 390). Gaultier believed that words had a direct vibratory impact on their reader and consequently, a word’s meaning was subordinate to its musical sound. Gaultier hence interprets Baudelaire’s *Correspondences* as a cenesthetic, rather than synesthetic, poem; that is, “not as a treatise on sensory analogies but as a work that excavates ‘sensation’ in its most profound, ‘brute’ state, as ‘original nervous vibration’ and ‘primitive vibration’” (Silvers 2014: 395). For Gaultier, Symbolist poetry evokes a realm that is “Beyond the psychic regions where the perceptions of vision, hearing, touch, scent, and taste are clearly distinguished from one another, toward the confines of the unconscious” (see Silvers 2014: 395). This “original nervous vibration” that our body naturally transforms into the “diverse perceptions” of our senses is hence triggered via reversal in Symbolist poetry; that is, the literary confusion of the senses leads towards the “primitive vibration” that is their common source.

Strong connections can once again be made to Inayat Khan’s thinking, the Sufi noting how,

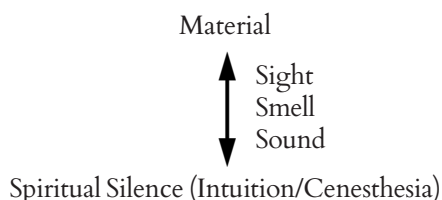
Since both colour and sound are perceived differently and we have different senses through which we perceive them, we have distinguished between visible and audible things. But in reality those who meditate, who concentrate, those who go within themselves, who trace the origin of life – they begin to see that behind these outer five senses there is one sense hidden, and this sense is capable of doing all that which we seem to do or experience (Khan 1996: 42).

For Khan, Gaultier, and the Symbolists more broadly, the senses and their correspondences were a byway leading to a deeper vibratory force – an abstract sound, the perception of which was not, strictly speaking, aural, or even necessarily sensual, but rather cenesthetic or, using Khan’s more conventional term, “intuitive” (Khan 1996: 287).⁵

Descending a Vibrational Hierarchy through Painting and Music

Khan’s musical ontology implies a hierarchy of the senses (and their correlative artforms), with abstract sound as their shared ontological ground. Khan states how “In its original condition vibra-

tion is inaudible and invisible, but in its first stage towards manifestation it becomes audible, and in its next step visible" (Khan 1996: 34). Moving from the material plane to the spiritual, a mystic would pass through the sense of sight and colour (for which Khan uses the Vedantic term *jatanada*), then through smell and fragrance, onto audible sound (what Khan calls *nada* or *Nada Brahma*), and finally, to the purely intuitive experience of abstract sound: the finest, most spiritual vibration (Khan 1996: 34). The Symbolist poets similarly used words to transverse a comparable hierarchy, evoking the senses (sight, smell, sound) and intermingling them to reach a properly cenesthetic core. This ontological hierarchy, implicit in both Khan and the Symbolists' thought, will now be used to explain the aesthetic priorities of two non-literary Symbolists: Gauguin and Debussy.



Gauguin's paintings, like his literary compatriots' use of words, treated colour and light as forms of vibration that could have a direct, unmediated, impact on viewers. According to Gauguin, the artist should not just paint figurative representations of material reality but abstract away from this reality to suggest the spiritual plane beneath. This approach was partly justified by reference to music, whose vibratory status was less disputed than painting's, as was its abstract, non-semantic and non-representational nature.⁶ As art historian Debora Silverman succinctly notes,

Gauguin considered the direct, autonomous power of music as a key to the realm of the eternal, and he tried to emulate this power in the expressive capacities of line and color. In comparing the harmony of color to musical tones, for example, Gauguin directed his painting to "touch the heavens," evoke the ineffable world of the divine, and allow the painter and viewer to set sail "on the phantom ship of the infinite," transcending the limits of physical materiality (Silverman 2008: 151).

In the same way that music could supposedly transport its listeners beyond mundane material reality (a common notion in post-Romantic thought), Gauguin's novel arrangements of color and light would shift both painter and viewer into a spiritual realm. This was theoretically plausible because "colour, which as well as music is vibration, attains to what is most general and therefore most vague in nature: its inner force" (Gauguin 1997: 31).

Yet Gauguin's emulation of music (much like the Symbolist poets' use of synesthesia) was largely a means towards a different end. Gauguin moved painting away from representation, making it more "musical", but this was so that painting could be more faithful to its own vibratory essence as colour and light. What Gauguin sought was not necessarily some kind of "visual music", but an evocation of the deeper spiritual realm that both music and painting had as their common source. This transcendental vibration, or "inner force", once again suggests Inayat Khan's abstract sound, and music becomes, yet again, the metaphorical bridge between this spiritual substrata and material reality.

Like Gauguin, certain *fin de siècle* musicians also wished to emphasise their medium's "inner force"; however, emulating music was obviously not a viable way in which this could be achieved. Music could not suggest abstract sound by simply being itself in the same way that painting could suggest abstract sound by emulating music. Yet since abstract sound operates below the senses – with Khan stating that 'The vibrations of this [abstract] sound are too fine to be either audible or visible to the material ears or eyes' (Khan 1996: 170) – it is essentially *silent*; music might, therefore, strive towards abstract sound by implementing or emulating silence.

This paradoxical aesthetic is most evident in Debussy's compositions, where an unusual amount of silence is often present (particularly in the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, adapted from Maurice Maeterlinck's Symbolist play) (Rolf 2016; Wiskus 2013: 39–52; Johnson 2020: 53–68) – the com-

poser himself stating, in a letter to Pierre Louÿs, that “Silence is a fine thing and God knows that the empty bars in Pelléas bear witness to my love for that kind of emotion” (see Rolf 2016: 119). The philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch has also commented on how Debussy regularly “seeks to grasp the liminal moment when silence becomes music” (Jankélévitch 2003: 144), noting the composer’s use of soft dynamics and his penchant for decrescendos that lead “to the point where almost-nothing and nothing become indistinguishable” (Jankélévitch 2003: 144). Debussy’s Symphonic *Nocturne* “Nuages”, as well the piano Preludes “Mouvement” and “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses”, all end by fading away into nothing.

Jankélévitch also briefly mentions Debussy’s Prelude “Brouillards” (which means “fogs”) as an example, whose ending deserves closer attention, since it offers a clear case of sound transpiring into silent, intuited abstract sound (see Figure 1). Additionally, the composition date of this Prelude – between late 1912 and early 1913 – along with the fact that Rummel premiered it soon after organizing Debussy and Khan’s meeting, offers a strong temptation to suggest that it was one of the pieces Debussy played for his visitors. The Prelude ends on an unusual III–II cadence, strongly implying resolution to the tonic (a minor). This descending cadence, along with Debussy’s soft dynamics and his direction “*Presque plus rien*” (almost nothing), gives the impression that the piano’s sound is falling away into oblivion, or into a “fog” of silence. Nonetheless, the listener (at least one acquainted with Western tonality) still “hears” the un-played tonic chord that is strongly implied by the cadence; that is, they hear it in their mind’s ear despite its failure to sound. In other words, the listener *intuits* the chord Debussy has submerged into silence – they “hear” an abstract sound.



Fig. 1: Claude Debussy, “Brouillards” (*Preludes pour Piano (2e Livre)*, Paris: Durand, 1913), mm. 49–52

Conclusion: Towards a History of Musical Ontologies

In Gauguin’s paintings, colour and light emulate music to suggest the abstract sound that is painting’s ontological core; meanwhile, Debussy drags his music down into silence to suggest abstract sound – the ontological foundation of music. These two statements highlight the paradoxical nature of ontological claims like Inayat Khan’s, and similarly, the Symbolists’ aesthetic aims. In both cases, a medium (whether of words, color, or sound) becomes more itself, reaches its own inner core, by emulating something other than itself, something supposedly closer to the inner force of abstract sound. In the case of poetry and painting this something else is music; in the case of music, it is silence.

An awareness of this paradox has fed criticism of musical and vibrational ontologies. Jankélévitch, although receptive to Debussy’s privileging of silence, also critiqued what he called “musicosophy”: the postulating of “an invisible and inaudible harmony, suprasensible and supra-audible”, or a music “of another realm”, as the cosmic force behind everything (Jankélévitch 2003: 10). He notes that such claims lead us away from music as it is actually heard, and that it is not very clear why an unhearable vibration should be labelled as music in the first place. Claims for a musical ontology like Inayat Khan’s are, in Jankélévitch’s eyes, only ever metaphorical at best. More recently, Brian Kane has critiqued the “ontological turn” in sound studies and what he coins “onto-aesthetics” – applied to scholars like Christoph Cox and Greg Hainge, who postulate vibrational ontologies akin to Khan’s.⁷ If “artworks are selected, discussed, and esteemed when they disclose their ontology” (Kane 2016: 11) than an onto-aesthetics is at work, which Kane argues is a category mistake that makes “Objects embody their ontology” even though “*Embodiment* does not come in degrees. It is all or nothing. Ontology, being embodied, is not *capable* of being exemplified” (Kane 2016: 12). For Kane, painting cannot be more itself by emulating music (or by taking on any other aesthetic commitment), and

music cannot be more musical by implementing silence: a painting is painterly by merit of being a painting, and music is music, period.

There has been retaliation to these critiques (notably Cox 2018: 131–134), but my reason for mentioning them is not to enter this debate. Rather, by noting the applicability of Jankélévitch and Kane's criticisms (whether or not they are substantiated) to both Khan's thought and Symbolist aesthetics, these theories can be situated into a much larger intellectual history of musical ontologies. For Jankélévitch, a chief proponent of "musicosophy" was Arthur Schopenhauer – a noteworthy influence on the Symbolists, largely by way of Richard Wagner; additionally, Cox's sonic ontology (one of Kane's prime targets) is indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche (who was Gaudier's key influence) and Henri Bergson (a contemporary of the Symbolists). Cox's precedents also stretch far beyond the *fin de siècle* towards Deleuzian new materialism and post-Cagean sound art. Furthermore, an onto-aesthetic attempt to reach the heart of one's artistic medium can be considered a key principle of modernist aesthetics, evident in numerous cases spanning the era between Debussy and Gauguin to Cage and the Abstract Expressionists.⁸

Inayat Khan's musical ontology is hence not only comparable to French Symbolist thought but is part of a much broader history of metaphysical speculation on sound and vibration's ontological primacy. Additionally, similarities between Khan's musical ontology and Symbolist thought highlight the ongoing cross-cultural entanglement of Western and non-Western philosophies in the development of this idea (being situated between Schopenhauer's Indophilia and Cage's fascination with Zen).⁹ Of course, an array of distinctions and differences between the thoughts of Khan and the Symbolists have not been given here – differences that would multiply fourfold if the history of musical ontologies was told in its entirety.¹⁰ Such a task is vital for a comprehensive history of ideas, though it is obviously far beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, the above-given comparisons between Khan and the Symbolists aim to both encourage and contribute to an ongoing consideration of musical ontologies, resituating the Symbolists into the history of this idea and emphasizing Inayat Khan's place in its development and dissemination.

University of Melbourne, Australia

Notes

¹ For accounts of Khan's meeting with Debussy, see Lesure 2019: 294–295, and Pasler 2020: 331–332.

² For more information on Inayat Khan's tours of the United States and Europe, see Sedgwick 2017: 158–162.

³ Jacques Derrida has notably criticized the idea that language can act as a pure presence in the manner Khan espouses (see Derrida 1973); however, for a critique of Derrida directly pertinent to Khan's mention of God's voice, see Wolterstorff 1995: 153–170.

⁴ For an alchemical interpretation of Rimbaud's synesthetic poetry, see Meltzer 1979.

⁵ Connections can also be made to more recent understandings of "affect" as a vibratory and essentially sonic phenomenon (see in particular Goodman 2009).

⁶ Gauguin was not the only Symbolist painter who took music as their model. Odilon Redon claimed that his drawings "place us, in the same way as music does, in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate" (Redon 1986: 22), while Gauguin's friend Vincent van Gogh favorably noted how "Painting as it is now, promises to become more subtle – more like music and less like sculpture" (see Schmunk 2011: 178).

⁷ Additionally, Graham Harman would label Khan's ontological privileging of abstract sound as an instance of "undermining", criticizing it on the ground that it makes anything at a level above abstract sound somehow "less real" or, at least, less valuable (Harman 2018: 46). In Khan's case this would seem to include music as actually heard, something he otherwise holds so dear.

⁸ Kane mentions Clement Greenberg's theory of modernism and his argument in favour of Abstract Expressionism as a clear instance of onto-aesthetics (Kane 2016: 10–11). For a discussion of vibratory ontologies and modernist art more contemporaneous with Khan, see Henderson 2002.

- ⁹ This is important to mention given recent claims that musical or vibrational ontologies are manifestations of “whiteness”. Although Cox has noted the erroneousness of such claims (Cox 2018), it nonetheless stands that non-Europeans have rarely been the focus of studies on these ontologies.
- ¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot long ago made notable distinctions between Bergson and the Symbolist’s ideas (Blanchot 1949), and although the Deleuzian ontological divide between “actual” and “virtual” may, at first glance, seem to align with Khan’s division of the material and spiritual, Gilles Deleuze was, of course, a materialist, not an emanationist, and so does not give his “virtual” spiritual importance (although it has been suggested otherwise; see Hallward 2006).

Works Cited

- Baudelaire, Charles. *The Flowers of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Translated by James McGowan.
- Blanchot, Maurice. “Bergson and Symbolism.” *Yale French Studies*. Vol. 1 (1949): 63–66.
- Cox, Christoph. *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018.
- Cox, Christoph. “Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture: A Reply to Marie Thompson and Annie Goh.” *Parallax*. Vol. 24 (2018): 234–242.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973. Translated by David B. Allison.
- Gauguin, Paul. *Gauguin’s Intimate Journals*. New York: Dover, 1997. Translated by Van Wyck Brooks.
- Goodman, Steve. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2009.
- Hallward, Peter. *Out Of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*. London: Verso, 2008.
- Harman, Graham. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Penguin Books, 2018.
- Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. “Vibratory Modernism: Boccioni, Kupka, and the Ether of Space.” *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, edited by Bruce Clarke, and Linda Dalrymple Henderson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. pp. 126–149.
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Music and the Ineffable*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Translated by Carolyn Abbate.
- Johnson, Julian. *After Debussy: Music, Language, and the Margins of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Kane, Brian. “Sound studies without auditory culture: a critique of the ontological turn.” *Sound Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Vol. 1 (2016): 2–21.
- Khan, Hazrat Inayat. *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*. London: Shambhala, 1996.
- Lesure, François. *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2019. Translated by Marie Rolf.
- Meltzer, Françoise. “On Rimbaud’s ‘Voyelles.’” *Modern Philology*. Vol. 76 (1979): 344–354.
- Pasler, Jann. “Revisiting Debussy’s Relationships with Otherness: Difference, Vibrations, and the Occult.” *Music and Letters*. Vol. 101 (2020): 321–342.
- Redon, Odilon. *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*. New York: George Braziller, 1986.
- Rolf, Marie. “Symbolism as Compositional Agent in Act IV, Scene 4 of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*.” *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, Contexts and Legacies*, edited by Barbara L. Kelly, and Kerry Murphy. New York: Routledge, 2016. pp. 117–148.
- Schmunk, Peter L. “Van Gough in Nuenen and Paris: The Origins of a Musical Paradigm for Painting.” *Music and Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Marsha L. Morton, and Peter L. Schmunk. New York: Routledge, 2011. pp. 177–208.
- Sedgwick, Mark. *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Silvers, Lauren. “Beyond the Senses: The Cenesthetic Poetics of French Symbolism.” *Modern Philology*. Vol. 112 (2014): 381–404.
- Silverman, Deborah. “Transcending the Word?: Religion and Music in Gauguin’s Quest for Abstraction.” *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870–1939*, edited by Barbara L. Kelly. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008. pp. 149–171.
- Wiskus, Jessica. *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.