

EAR | WAVE | EVENT

Issue One
Spring 2014
earwaveevent.org

“Mind BAD, Body GOOD” BY AMY CIMINI & WOODY SULLENDER

Editor's note: the conversation that was the basis for this expanded transcript started in late 2013 in Brooklyn. Woody Sullender and Amy Cimini discuss listening, performance, presence, and power; Amy shares some musicological perspectives on embodiment and discusses some work she's done with Baruch Spinoza's philosophy, specifically on his Ethics (published posthumously in 1677). This exchange pushes Cimini's take on the Spinozan rejection of Cartesian mind-body dualism into dialogue with a wide range of topics, including listening at The Stone, Kanye West, and simply going to band practice.

Woody Sullender: So just for some context and background, where did your interest in looking at bodies or the musical body come from?

Amy Cimini: Well, what is now my scholarly interest in musical bodies comes from my experience as a violist. It's something of an autobiographical story, which is where so many scholarly projects begin, regardless of how well they hide it. As a conservatory student during the late 1990s, I became really interested in the sound worlds of myriad post-war European and American avant-gardes: the solo viola repertoire, chamber music, free jazz, punk, and noise musics (etc.!). I wanted to power extended techniques on the instrument with a spontaneous energy drawn from improvisation and volume, distortion, and processing that was probably more germane to rock or punk musics.

Perhaps ironically, even though I was so interested in what it was like to try to inhabit the limits of instrumental technique, it was really repetitive strain injuries (tendonitis, carpal tunnel, etc.) that pushed me toward critical and theoretical resources for thinking about the performing body – and toward musicology, more broadly. How could I talk or write the ways in which the body seemed sometimes inexplicably capacious? And could I make the ways in which it was sometimes resistant meaningful beyond my own experience? How could these detailed intensities – along with embodied activity in general - act as a locus of meaning or a form of knowledge production? I mean, these weren't (and aren't) new questions. The New Musicology had

been asking them throughout the 1990s and of course phenomenology and feminist theory before that. But it was pretty thrilling to connect with these disciplinary and intellectual histories through an idiosyncratic process of experimentation and questioning as well as a series of unexpected musico-technical successes and failures.

WS: I know you were engaging with composers like Ferneyhough...

AC: 'Engaged with' is a strong term. Maybe 'thought about sometimes' would be the better description. Actually, I wrote a little bit about his 'Time and Motion Study III' (1975) a few years ago, but I've never played his music.

WS: I was hoping that you could historicize some of this academic interest in bodies. I was wondering what sort of other cultural things were in the air to make musicologists suddenly want to talk about bodies. Also noticing that this is coming out of, say, the mid-eighties?

AC: Late eighties and early nineties.

WS: So, noticing that this would be post-New Left, once removed from all the identity politics that initially followed the class politics of the Old Left. Is this way of thinking an attempt to insert or re-insert all these identity politics of race and gender?

AC: Right, this is a great question. Thinking about bodies became a way to root the work of historical musicology in the socio-political field, which then demands methods for analyzing how music participates in the production and distribution of hierarchical constructions of difference. The demands of the New Left are definitely in play here, as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity emerge as key categories of analysis. An influx of heterogeneous theoretical models, like hermeneutics, deconstruction, theories of performativity, destabilized the authority of formal analysis and opened new paths for interpretation more sensitized to cultural concerns. Methods proliferated for undoing presumptions that music somehow transcends its social and political contexts, an inheritance from some strains of aesthetic thought surrounding so-called 'Absolute' music of the 19th century. Adorno was central, precisely because the practice of immanent critique allowed the field to uphold the centrality of certain repertoires while making them 'say' different things. I've working on an essay with Jairo Moreno, right now, that explores some such

ramifications.

Broadly, what is at stake is undoing the universalism implicit in histories of Western humanism. One of my graduate students at UCSD and I have been working with Robyn Wiegman's 2009 *Object Lessons*¹, a broad-ranging reflection on the demands disciplines oriented around identity-knowledge make on the relationship between a knowing subject and a known object. Her analysis is ultra rich, and though I can't quite summarize it here, she glosses the connection between bodies and New Left demands on the academy really wonderfully, so it comes to mind. Bodies *embody knowledge* and different bodies produce new knowledge that demand what Wiegman calls (after Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o) a *decolonization of the mind* that challenges official (national, disciplinary) forms of historical and cultural narration.

WS: What specific music texts were you drawn to?

AC: Susan McClary and Suzanne Cusick's work is really important in this 1990s moment. Richard Leppert and Rose Subotnick's work, specifically her engagement with Adorno. Ruth Solie's work on feminist music history. Queer theoretical interventions on music and sexuality were also crucial.

WS: Thinking of what else is concurrent at that moment, it just dawned on me that there is work like Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. There's also a lot of stuff happening around early networks coming out of the late eighties. People considering how bodies and gender work in MUDs [Multi-User Dungeon] and MOOs [MUD, object-oriented] and online communities. I'm wondering if such people engaging with the early Internet are almost physically experiencing what would be a sort of Cartesian dualism.

AC: Haraway has been very helpful to some feminist musicologists in undoing positivist epistemologies and insisting on an embodied approach to musical knowledge that acknowledges its situatedness and constitutive incompleteness. I think you're right that something *is* happening in the 1980s and 1990s that is sensitizing scholars of embodied practice to the stakes of losing interpretive and critical contact with the bodies that act as the kind of condition of possibility for their fields. But honestly I am not sure how

¹ Robyn Wiegman. *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2009.

scholars in the 80s and 90s were experiencing early networks and how that impacted their interest in bodies. That would be a really interesting micro-research project, I think. Performance Studies is also cohering as a field during this time, too. For musicology, however, this took shape not so much as an engagement with what you call 'early networks' but as an intense series of interventions in music history aimed, in part, at illuminating how music is implicated in the production and regulation of desire.

WS: Bringing us up to your project - looking at that eighties and nineties stuff as not necessarily problematic, but as maybe still premised upon this Cartesian mind-body issue. Something which you're not necessarily proposing to solve, but to complicate and challenge with the ideas of Spinoza.

AC: Really what the project is trying to do is produce new intellectual historical resources for thinking about the mind-body relationship. We don't simply have to undo or reverse Descartes' denigration of the body (on both epistemological and moral grounds) while retaining the separation of mind from body that drives Descartes' thought. I mean, inverting Descartes' hierarchy can be an important polemical tool but it can also be a blunt one, insisting contra Descartes: "mind BAD, body GOOD." I wanted to try to put something else on the table. I mean, it's not fun to read [Spinoza's] *Ethics*. [laughs] It's a difficult text. There's barely a single metaphor in there. But once you start to grasp the relationships between the proofs, it gets pretty mind-boggling.

WS: I wanted to hit upon that 'body good, mind bad' idea. Hearing versus vision can also play along those lines or even, the mind as masculine, the body feminine. These are all false dichotomies but...

AC: Definitely. The more you develop an interpretive framework that is sensitive to the propagation of dualist categories, the more these oppositions proliferate. The process of composition, the work of analysis, gets imputed to the mind. Sovereignty, also, becomes an important historical and conceptual category to address here.

WS: So, your project is basically proposing answering the mind-body problem via Spinoza's *Ethics* as a proposition for looking at musical bodies.

AC: Right, that was pretty much the game plan at the time! Ultimately, I am quite certain that I haven't really effectively 'answered' the mind-body problem, and the project ended up seeming a lot more polemic than I had intended. A question that I was asked a long time ago (and which I still haven't answered!) is, *why Spinoza now?* And yet his thought coincides with so much work right now. For example, he's really useful in thinking about ecological systems, or as a way to rethink the constitution of materiality. How do material things transmit affect? Can they transmit ideas? What kind of agency do things have? He's also been important in some aspects of feminist theory, coming from his foundational affirmation of the body's inextricability from thought.

WS: Speaking of why these issues at this moment, there is also all the hype and the money going towards neuroscience, which has the appearance of being a scientific answer to the problem. There's an underlying idea that if we could just create a map of all of the mind's parts like billiard balls, we'd solve this thing. Is there a parallel here between these projects?

AC: A handful of neuroscientists cite Spinoza as a sort of proto-thinker of the embodied mind. It is interesting that bringing him into play gives us an opportunity to reconfigure some of the relationships between the humanities and the sciences, the social sciences, and intellectual history, like early-Modern studies. I think it gives us a chance to think about the early-Modern period really differently, and to develop what someone proposed to me as not 'anachronism' but 'diachronism.' There are obliquely related kinds of thinking going on in Spinoza's Amsterdam in the late 17th century and in different areas of mind sciences in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. There are so many really interesting questions there.

WS: Coming back to this focus on bodies now and why... I can't help but think of something like hip-hop on the MTV Music Awards. In terms of production, this is a music largely without physical action, as well as what happens to the grain of the voice with current vocal production techniques like comping or even AutoTune. Live it is almost...I hate to say a presentation of simulacra or something, but...the presentation of what a music performance would or 'should' be. In some ways, physical presence is the one thing that gives this simulation something like 'authenticity' as a musical performance. My experiences now with live, performed music are probably first and foremost through Youtube, where physicality is as de-

emphasized as ever in the reception of music if not in the production as well. I recently saw Kanye West perform wearing a mask with his voice AutoTuned while using the recorded album as backing tracks. The main defining element was simply his presence.

AC: I hear what you're saying. But I also think that right now we are inundated with bodily practices through which we are supposed to 'authenticate' our corporeal selves, whether that's through cultivating healthy bodies, embracing a certain food politics, managing stress and risk, or making certain choices about reproduction. Self-control, self-care, and 'presence' are tied together in a way that's really complicated. And while I think you're right that some of our listening habits may tack toward the simulacral...and though the notion of 'presence' packs a tremendous rhetorical punch, I don't think it's an adequate category for talking about the texture of power as it works on bodies in different domains right now. There are just so many things you can do wrong as an embodied subject: You can breathe wrong, eat wrong, walk wrong, sleep wrong. Right now, I'm looking at your cookbooks over there and thinking about how our capacity to manage certain approaches to food get interpreted as a way of being attached to different kinds of life or conceptualizations of livability. The body gets constructed as much as a liability as it is a locus of what you call presence or authenticity.

Some of the ways in which we listen give us an intense, probably illusory sense of control and agency with respect to the enterprise of curating ourselves in music. Maybe this is just another way of thinking about self-management and entrepreneurial individualism.

WS: To change the focus a little bit here, I want to speak a little bit about the influence of theory on art production and music production. Historically, composers may have engaged with specific theories of tonal analysis and those kinds of things... Being you are both an academic as well as a performer who makes music, I am interested in not just how these tools of thinking about embodiment are useful for us to analyze music, but what might the ramifications be in terms of practice?

AC: This is a great, difficult question. In general, I don't think of this Spinoza research as analogous to a theory of musical construction that might operate in a prescriptive way. Because my work sometimes takes umbrage with some common ways of neutralizing dualism, it is often read as prescriptive or

polemical. That's not the intention. I want my work to be generative, and to be generative it must undergo critique which means it has to be challenged and utilized. What kind of perspectives on, say, a collaboration, or a solo project, or different disciplines of practice and rehearsal become possible when we conceptualize embodied action as a kind of thinking? I play in a rock band, where the songwriting process is super rough and kinetic. The group and its constitutive members 'think' through interlocking, heterogeneous actions that can probably best be described as working both 'in concert and conflict.' Deliberation, aggressive playing, tentative playing, argument...this list could be longer, but you probably get the gist. Now, I'm not saying that Spinoza's thought maps cleanly onto this experience. I'm not here to use theoretical systems that way (plus, Spinoza, ...and others, would probably be pretty horrified to observe these practices). But, there are tools here for reflecting on collaborative movement as a form of thinking. For Spinoza, knowledge and bodily capacities are foundationally social; they are both products *and* motors of circulation and transmission. Adequate knowledge – as well as complexification and nuance within the body - are both social, collaborative achievements, in Spinoza's thought. This is not the solitary work of Cartesian meditation.

WS: You led to my next question: talking about the place of this knowledge as being within transmission. Most of the language that we have used so far has been either thinking about the performance of music or the production of music. If we are all about this in a social context, it seems like the reception of the music is equally or more important.

AC: It is constitutive of what is happening in the scene of performance, yeah...

WS: I'm just thinking of different modes of music reception. I mean, we operate in many worlds, so you know the difference between Lincoln Center and Lightning Bolt. So, if these things are premised on different forms of knowledge, maybe you can address reception via this lens.

AC: [pause] Hmm, there's a really basic sense in which this framework doesn't really recognize a hierarchical distinction between production and reception, or how we might separate some locus of creative or composerly control from what could be construed as more passively listener position. There are so many disciplinary scenes that produce a version of the

exemplary, focused listener. That's why you can't eat gummi bears at The Stone, which inexplicably drives me crazy. What I like about thinking in this Spinozistic framework is that it recognizes listening as simultaneously an embodied and intellectual activity that participates in precisely the production *and* transmission of knowledge, like performing does, though from a different perspective. It affirms listening as a creative mobilization of bodies.

WS: The Stone example seems straight out of the classical concert hall: you are supposed to be having an idealized, dis-embodied experience, without even recognition of the other listening bodies around you.

AC: Yes, definitely. If you are attending to musical practice and you want to address how it's expressing some specific set of material constraints and possibilities, you want to experience how they are unfolding within and between other bodies. Sometimes you have to move. You have to talk. You have to move through different intensities, intensify the experience in different ways. Sometimes you listen really well when you are talking to somebody about what you are hearing. Or sometimes you listen really well from a really weird corner of the space. Or you listen really well as you are moving and as you are thinking.

WS: That relocates the site of music to the entire experience and not just acoustic phenomena. Talking to your friend and eating gummy bears in certain contexts is just as much a part of the musical experience, right?

AC: That's something I'd been thinking about before reading Spinoza. You don't need Spinoza to think about this, even though his conceptualization of mind-body parallelism gives you a pretty rich vocabulary for talking about it.

WS: [laughs] I mean, our experiences at punk shows push some of this where there are a variety of ancillary activities that are as integral as what is happening on the stage. Pre-internet, these performances were a locus of all kinds of information for a lot of us. We are both too young to have experienced venues such as Danceteria or AREA, where the reception of music was conflated with dance, video art, and sculpture, not to mention sex.

AC: Well, maybe a punk show wants us to think about how energies and ideas are transacted in these kinds of scenes...a way to talk about not just

people but also things, like, 'the viola,' 'the amplifier;' how, in different concatenations and configurations, do they become constitutive of what you can and cannot do. I'm surprised, in other words, that some theorists (particularly in recent debates about sound art) are still inclined to divorce the material of sounding from thought or critical intellectual work. There are so many interesting ways – Spinoza and his 20th and 21st century interlocutors are only one trajectory – of thinking them together.

WS: This leads to some thinking more towards theater. Brecht versus Artaud, à la Jacques Rancière, as has been so popular in the art world recently. So many people are asking what a politically activated performance space might be, or if that is even the right kind of question. If we are talking about being in a performance situation where one is aware of power being enacted upon you, what would a musical space ripe with potential be, where these sorts of power relations could be ruptured?

AC: Right, this is a great question, and points to some of the limitations of this project's intense, almost obsessive focus on bodies. A thinking of *musical spaces* and how to characterize them is not as developed as I'd like it be. Thinking about the performing body – particularly the conservatory-trained body, which is where this project began – moves subjects constituted through a number of intersecting forms of privilege to the center of the project. And perhaps it reifies a kind of individualism that ought instead to be challenged.

WS: Which is a certain historical thread....

AC: ...which helps ground a more robust thinking of power. I've been trying to take this work on embodied knowledge and parlay it into a more sophisticated thinking of power. How, in other words, does potentializing the body in different ways operate as both a form of expression and a locus of control? I mean, this is not an original question. Foucault thinks this question; so does Judith Butler, and so does Pierre Macherey, specifically through Spinoza.

WS: So, what would a musical space that refuses to moralize the failure of self-management, that refuses to optimize certain kinds of skills of attention and skills of production - what would that space look like?

AC: I don't really know, but I think those are the kinds of themes, the kinds of trajectories that it would oppose.

WS: Assuming we do to a degree already have such alternative music experiences, what are the actual ramifications of these, other than for academia?

AC: Yeah, I think that that's hard to say. It is so easy to overstate the force of the intervention that you are making.

WS: Well, for example, free jazz gets this all the time. The soloist has a "space of freedom" ... The liberation politics are really problematic.

AC: The obligation to perform a radical politics is incredibly complicated. But I have to say that I don't know that I have a good answer to your question about a performance space, scene or scenario. Thanks for pressing at some limitations.

There's a lot of great new work on so-called experimental practices in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s that is lending a lot of nuance to our understanding of the political life of some of these practice. Great stuff on Cage. Challenges to the racial politics that underlie the term 'experimental.'

WS: And the orientalist aspect...

AC: Yeah, the question then becomes how to aide in the proliferation of options or perspectives for thinking about the functioning of power without simply indicting some practices as good or bad. This is a commitment that does indeed come from my relationship to Spinoza and Descartes, I suppose.

Amy Cimini is violist and historical musicologist. Her research, teaching and performance practice engage 20th century philosophy and political thought with an emphasis on theories of the body and the ethics of experimental practice. She earned her doctorate in Historical Musicology at New York University in 2011 and she is Assistant Professor of Music at UC San Diego. She has also held a Mellon Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellowship in Music Theory at the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation, "Baruch Spinoza and the Matter of Music," proposed Spinoza's ethics as a new resource for theorizing embodied musical projects and as a means of overcoming persistent constructions of Cartesian mind-body dualism in contemporary musical thought. She has published work drawn from this research in *Contemporary Music Review*, *Gamut* and a number of edited volumes. As a violist, Cimini moves fluidly between improvisatory, contemporary classical, noise and rock idioms. Recently, she has enjoyed premiering Anthony Braxton's most recent opera, *Trillium J* and preparing the third release of with improvising duo *Architeuthis Walks on Land* (with bassoonist Katherine Young) after residencies at EMPAC and the Rensing Center for the Arts. She is currently writing a book about the 20th century listening practice entitled *Listening in the Future Tense*.

<http://music.ucsd.edu/bio.php?fn=Amy+Cimini>

<http://www.tillbyturning.com/>

Woody Sullender is co-editor of *Ear | Wave | Event*.

<http://www.woodynullender.com/>