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**Title:** Listening Without a Listener : Understanding the Self and the Activity of Listening to Music Through Nishitani Keiji' Philosophy

**Year:** 2024

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Kuusela, A. (2024). Listening Without a Listener : Understanding the Self and the Activity of Listening to Music Through Nishitani Keiji' Philosophy. The Journal of East Asian Philosophy, Early online. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43493-024-00046-7>



# Listening Without a Listener – Understanding the Self and the Activity of Listening to Music Through Nishitani Keiji's Philosophy

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Received: 22 December 2023 / Revised: 17 July 2024 / Accepted: 21 August 2024  
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## Abstract

In our everyday life, music is taken as an object – an object that is helpful in one sense or the other: Music can help alleviate sadness, lift the mood if life seems a bit dull, or enhance an already great atmosphere. In other words, music is often approached as an instrument of so-called affective scaffolding. Yet music is more than an instrument which can be used to gain desired affective states. In the present paper, the possibility of an experience of listening without a listener is examined – that is, an experience where music is not separated from one's self into an instrument, into an external object. The analysis of listening without a listener carried out here will be based on Nishitani Keiji's philosophy of emptiness. Additionally, I will critically employ the concept of affective scaffolding and elaborate the possibility of listening without a listener in relation to this concept. The aim of this paper is to show that there are hidden depths in our relation to music, which are obscured by taking music as an object and by approaching it instrumentally. Further, it will be argued that by illuminating these hidden depths we can, moreover, understand ourselves more deeply, to reveal the empty nature of our selves.

**Keywords** Nishitani · Emptiness · Philosophy of music · The Kyoto School · Aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the concrete, lived experience of listening to music through Nishitani Keiji's (1900–1990) philosophy, especially his concept of thusness (Jp. *jitai*, 自体). Through the concept thusness, I will present the possibility of both the self and of music to exist as they are, an approach that I will call *listening*

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*without a listener*. Listening without a listener is in contrast with our usual approach to listening to music, which often is instrumental. That is, we often use music to alter or support our emotive states. Therefore, in addition to Nishitani's philosophy, I will analyze music and listening to it through the concept of affective scaffolding.

While our relation to music is often instrumental, it is not essentially so, nor does it need to remain instrumental. Thus, although approaching music might start as an instrumental activity, it can, from the depths of this very instrumental approach, enter the regions of listening without a listener. This possibility is, in fact, present in our everyday experiences of listening to music. These experiences will, thus, be used to provide the connection between the theory and practice of listening without a listener.

For it is precisely in our quite ordinary relation to music in which listening without a listener can be manifested. In our everyday activity of listening to music, music can captivate us to an extent that the self disappears in the activity of listening and listening to music becomes an experience of listening without a listener. Fundamentally, becoming one with the music listened to is a matter of mindful and cultivated, even transcendent, practice, which can enable the listener to transcend the confines of the self-centered self. In transcending these confines, the self and music are revealed as empty.

Before going into the main subject matter, I wish to first clarify the stance taken towards the philosophy of Nishitani, which is often characterized as "religious": I will not focus in or make use of this characterization. Suffice it to say that what Nishitani means by "religious" or "religion" is to do with the essence or the fundamental aspect of the self. This fundamental aspect, for Nishitani, is the emptiness of the self (Nishitani, 1982: 1–9; Heisig, 2001: 14). In this sense, as the focus of the present paper is precisely on this emptiness of the self, the notions presented here can be considered "religious". However, I will forgo any further mention to the term "religious" to avoid the conceptual baggage it carries and to avoid distraction from the focus of the present paper.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Nishitani's Philosophy of Emptiness

In this section, I will briefly explain the relevant aspects of Nishitani's philosophy for the discussion of listening to music without a listener, focusing especially on his typology of existence. This will, essentially, give us a sort of a beginner's guide into approaching music without a listener – in other words, letting music be in its thusness, without the subject objectifying music and reducing it to a mere instrumental usage. It is precisely through Nishitani's examination of the fields of existence and especially the field of emptiness that we can come to appreciate music as it is, not only to the extent that it is somehow useful for us.

<sup>1</sup> On the differences between "religion" in its Judeo-Christian sense and "religion" as the term is ascribed to Asian philosophical/religious traditions see Davis, (2006) and Davis (2020).

In the philosophy of Nishitani, emptiness is a field that engenders appreciation for things as they are in their thusness (see Nishitani, 1982). Emptiness is not, for Nishitani, a logical category, but rather is in keeping with the traditional Buddhist analysis of emptiness of all phenomena and the middle ground this implies. That is, emptiness is an *experiential* and *palpable* emptiness of both the self and worldly phenomena. Moreover, emptiness allows for both to appear as they are (Heisig, 2001: 222). In Nishitani's experiential conception of emptiness, the self can meet worldly phenomena on a field where both can be in their thusness, allowing for the "infinite beauty" and "boundless terror" to manifest in their relation (Nishitani, 2004: 40).

In his later philosophy Nishitani understands the existence of the self to belong to one of three fields of being. These are consciousness (*ishiki*, 意識) or the so-called everyday existence; nihility (*kyomu*, 虚無), the negation of the first field; and the field of emptiness (*kū*, 空; Sanskrit *śūnyatā*)<sup>2</sup> (Parkes, 2020: 466). These are not fields strongly separated from each other, but rather "standpoints" that are taken and which, to some extent, interpenetrate each other. Nishitani writes, for example, that when the being of the self on the field of consciousness is compromised, she is plunged into nihility. Yet the self cannot find a foothold for herself in nihility and thus tries to return to the field of consciousness. Moreover, nihility appears intermittently in the life of the self, like cracks below one's being, which she then tries to smooth over and run away from (Nishitani, 1982: 4, 86). Nihility thus appears as a crisis in one's life which needs to be solved or withstood through distracting oneself with various activities, and from which one hopes to, eventually, return to the standpoint of consciousness (Nishitani, 1982: 1–9).

This tendency is enforced by the fact that the everyday field, the field of consciousness or of "intellectuality" (知識的), is the most evident way of being, which does not require any reflection to be grasped (The collected works of Nishitani Keiji vol. 11: 7, hereafter NKC). Even if one does wonder about oneself, that wondering comes forth from within the self-evident self itself (NKC10:18). The field of nihility, on the other hand, is opposite to the field of consciousness, and a standpoint of doubt, which negates the things one previously held inviolate: the world, its things, and the self itself (NKC10:6–7). This "Great Doubt" is the deepening of self-consciousness of the subject from the self-evident (NKC10:7). Here, the doubt of the Great Doubt is a "doubt within a doubt", or the "self-presentation of the Great Doubt" (Nishitani, 1982: 176). This doubt is not the doubt of skepticism, which is a doubt within the dimension of reason (Nishitani, 1982). As such, the doubt within doubt is not something the subject can run away from. It is self-consuming, or perhaps more accurately, ego-consuming. In short, the Great Doubt is taking seriously the crisis that nihility presents, and not trying desperately to return from nihility back to consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> I give both the Japanese and Sanskrit terms for emptiness here since "in his mature writings, Nishitani explicitly employs the Mahāyāna term 'emptiness'" in contrast to mostly all members of the Kyoto School, who tend to "favour the Chinese glyph *mu* (無)" (Davis 2023).

When the Great Doubt makes everything into a one big question mark, the self cannot answer this question nor solve it from the outside: rather, the answer must come from within the self itself (NKC11:16–17). Only then can “the self become itself” (自己自身になる), to realize the emptiness of itself. This realization is predicated by the severing of “differentiating knowledge” (分別知) and its transformation into “undifferentiating knowledge” (無分別知), which is the absoluteness of emptiness, and the self-awareness of the self as no-self (NKC11:25–26).

That is to say, the emptiness of oneself is, at the same time, the selfhood of emptiness: otherwise, it would only be the negation of the self (NKC10:156). This follows the famous formulation from the Heart sutra: “*Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form*” (Sotoshu, 2001: 28). Applying this formulation to the context of Nishitani’s thought, we are informed of the sense in which the standpoint of consciousness remains in the standpoint of emptiness. For emptiness is not a transcendental renunciation of the world, but rather comes to be precisely in the world of form. That is, emptiness must come to be as a living reality and as a realization, as its own self-realization in the twofold sense of *understanding* and *making manifest* (自己実現) (NKC10:9, 67, 179).

In contrast to making manifest and understanding which constitute a living reality, the self-conscious and self-evident way of being of the self prevents her from getting in touch with the true nature or the living reality of herself and of other beings (NKC1:21–22). In other words, oneself, the being of others, and the being of other phenomena are seen to be external objects presented for the intellect (NKC1:20–22; NKC10:13, 20–22). Yet beings, when seen as objects, cannot be understood properly, as realization, and thus one becomes alienated from both other beings and from oneself (NKC1:19–21; NKC16:26–27, 47). Only in being on the field of emptiness, on its dynamic field, can the self let other beings be in their thusness (Nishitani, 1982: 139, 147).

### 3 Music and Affective Scaffolding

Having arrived at the field of emptiness, where the self makes herself manifest and understands her own emptiness as a being of thusness, I will next take a step back to the ordinary and self-evident way of being of the self. I will approach this self-evident way as it is expressed in our common way of relating to music instrumentally to affectively scaffold our emotive states. I will, in the next two sections, thus trace a path from the field of consciousness to the field of emptiness anew from the viewpoint of the relation of the self to music. This will, in essence, provide a possible roadmap for the deepening of our relationship with music that will, at the same time, manifest as a deepening of the being of the self.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As seen in the second section, for Nishitani, the deepening of the field of consciousness leads to the field of nihility, and the deepening of this second field to the field of emptiness. However, the second field will not be focused on in the present paper, for even though the relation one has towards music will be altered on the field of nihility, listening to music, normally, does not engender such a crisis in being that Nishitani considers the field of nihility to be (see NKC10:6–7).

Normally, when we listen to music, the foremost notion we have in mind is that this activity of listening is going to affect me, the listener, in some way or another. Usually this means that music is going to engender certain kinds of emotions in the listener and is somewhat pre-determined by the music chosen. For example, when feeling sad, the music one listens to can either help to alleviate that sadness or intensify it. As such, music is a powerful tool to cope with and alter emotions. In addition, music often enables the listener to explore the depths of oneself. These two effects of music can be, and often are, complementary. On the surface, music promotes desired feelings or relations to feelings and clears out the complex emotional states of the self. Having cleared or made sense of these emotional states, music can then, on a deeper lever, open pathways towards what can be considered the inner self and the exploration of that self.

I will return later to the second effect of music and focus here on the first, which can be called “affective scaffolding”. In the field of the philosophy of mind affective scaffolding is a widely used concept, meaning essentially that we use different things to scaffold our emotional situations (Taipale, 2023: c14p12). Furthermore, affective scaffolding is most often an activity where the subject aims to alter her affective states positively – that is, to alleviate sadness, make a crushingly lonely situation bearable, to make an already great mood even better etc. This entails changing the current affective state of the self into a desired one, but also, reciprocally, annihilating the non-wanted affective state, thus implying a rejection of the non-wanted (Taipale, 2023: c14p49).

While affective scaffolding usually means conscious efforts to affect emotional situations, scaffolding can also happen unconsciously, environmentally. Further, the theory of affective scaffolding presupposes the situatedness of the mind, that mental activity is “fundamentally co-determined” by the environment in which the mental activity of the self takes place in (Saarinen, 2020: 822, 825). Thus, as Saarinen points out, since we are always part of the world in which the mind can be scaffolded unconsciously and environmentally, the mind is always a scaffolded one (Saarinen, 2020: 832–833).<sup>4</sup> In the light of the constant situatedness of the mind, annihilating the non-wanted inherent to affective scaffolding comes to mean, at least in part, the annihilation of the non-wanted ways we are always scaffolded. For the ways we are scaffolded unconsciously and environmentally might not be only positive or desirable.

Music is, arguably, one of the clearest and most direct ways to scaffold our experience of ourselves and of the world positively and in ways we consciously want to – a fact to which various studies on the relation between the experience of music and musical scaffolding attest to. Specifically, the aptitude of music to scaffold our emotions has been widely studied (Taipale, 2023, c14p5–6). In addition to scientific

<sup>4</sup> This contention, evidently, shares similarities with the notion of dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), where every being and every event is interrelated and happens or comes to be through an interrelated chain of events (Blumenthal 2013: 91). However, it lacks the central connection that dependent co-arising has with the no-self, the self that is empty.

studies, the direct lane music seems to have into our emotions and into affecting them can be easily attested through our everyday experiences.

We are often moved by music and sounds in various ways. For example, we might hear music apt to a scene in a movie or a favorite song come up at a party. In the former case, music, together with the images of the movie, move us more than the mere images of the scene; and in the latter, the mood of the party is instantly transformed into a much more pleasant one. Moreover, we often seek musical experiences which can have an effect in our affective states. We do not go to a concert with an expectation to be bored or to not be affected by the music at all – in a concert, the fact that we are going to *feel* is taken as a given.<sup>5</sup> The same goal applies to listening to music in everyday situations: we do not put on music at home or listen to music from headphones while commuting to work just to feel bored or uninterested. Here, musical scaffolding positively supports our feelings – not necessarily by engendering positive emotions but emotions we want in contrast to ones we are in fact having.

Through positively supporting emotions, either in the sense of engendering positive emotions or emotions that we want, musical scaffolding helps us make clearer how we feel. For example, by browsing our music libraries and coming across music that speaks to us therein we come to understand what the inexplicable feeling we had really was. Yet by making a feeling explicit we, at the same time, exclude other feelings and are taken further away from what we do not feel (Taipale, 2023: c14p52). According to Taipale, affective scaffolding, specifically as related to music-use, essentially entails – in the sense of destroying the non-wanted – a “thanatic dimension” (Taipale, 2023: 49–51). Thus, music as a form of affective scaffolding includes a negative side, which is the “controlled destruction of what currently prevails. And so, besides the positively scaffolding side of music, we could also talk of the negative, the ‘deadly side’ of music” (Taipale, 2023: 51).

Based on the examination of the functioning of affective scaffolding it seems evident that, in making a feeling explicit or engendering through music feelings we desire, we come to conceptualize various feelings as wanted or as unwanted. Further, this process seems to be a fundamental element of affective scaffolding. In the terms of Nishitani, affective scaffolding appears to be grounded on the “standpoint of consciousness”, in which things are seen from the viewpoint of the self-centered self. In such a standpoint, music is seen merely as a thing being for us, and not for itself<sup>6</sup> (Nishitani, 1982: 118). Importantly, in such a state of separation, even the self itself is seen merely as an object, and the emotions of the self too are made subordinate to the “I” who is having these emotions. That is, the emotions of the subject come to

<sup>5</sup> What is felt at a concert is not necessarily only positive emotions. To some extent, the music at a concert is allowed to give rise to what are considered, at face value, negative feelings – like sadness and yearning. Further, in some instances music and its performance are allowed to be thought-provoking. Still, one might be left feeling uneasy if these were the foremost feelings one has after a concert.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, music is, fundamentally, something that is performed or played only when the mood strikes, or when its performing is previously agreed upon. Thus, in a way, it always is something that exists only for us, the listeners and performers, not on its own. Yet, music can still exist “for its own sake”, and not only “for our sake”, as something that is performed and listened to for reasons other than instrumental in nature.

have an object-like being through which, moreover, the subject-as-object comes to know itself. In other words, the subject exists squarely on the field of consciousness, where she is enclosed within her own self (NKC10:13–14). In other words, in the process of scaffolding the self is merely another object in relation to music-as-object and to the self-as-object, with music-as-object and emotions as musically scaffolded sustaining this view.

## 4 The Offloading Nature of Music

While affective scaffolding often takes place within the frameworks of relational consciousness and a self enclosed within her own self, it is not necessarily restricted to these frameworks and can instead point beyond them. In dealing with binary values inherent in affective scaffolding – scaffolding the wanted affective state and annihilating the unwanted – affective scaffolding is revealed to always contain its other side, the negation of the wanted. Through this other side, diving deeper into negative feelings and safely exploring the night side of what is wanted is possible. In other words, musical scaffolding can support, in addition to positive emotions, negative emotions and our exploration of them.

Further, music not only scaffolds our emotions, but also offloads them – that is, through scaffolding our emotions, music provides us an access to new ways of thinking, into new ways of experiencing, and into new ways of behaving (Krueger, 2019: 55). Offloading allows us to access the hidden recesses of mind and spirit, which are normally shut to us and hidden beneath the all-consuming nature of emotions. In addition, the oppositional and self-enclosed view we often take towards the world further obscures these recesses. Nevertheless, music can take us to these recesses not normally explored – that is, to the abyss of nihilism as a negation of our ordinary being.<sup>7</sup>

As an example of both the process of specification and of that which is left outside of this specification, we can take, again, the ordinary activity of listening to music. As a person is putting on the music she wants, she has some inkling regarding the emotions she is about to have. In this view music and the self have both been externalized into objects of consciousness, where music-as-object will produce a certain reaction in the self-as-object. The listener thus sees both oneself and music on the standpoint of consciousness, inadvertently obscuring the true nature of both. Rather than seeing the self and music in their thusness, the listener instead sees them as representational objects.

However, at the same time as music engenders or specifies emotions, it also takes on the weight of them. As Krueger (2019: 60) states, music deals with our emotions for us. As music deals with our emotions, we are freed to explore these

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<sup>7</sup> Nihilism harkens to Nishitani's usage of the term, not as the Great Doubt and a crisis in being, but as the negation and deepening of mere self-evident and positive existence. That is, an exploration of what here is called the hidden recesses of mind and spirit. It is, to be sure, a more limited deepening than what Nishitani means with the deepening of consciousness, but a deepening, nonetheless.



emotions in their depths, and that which they obscure. Thus, we cannot only deal with complex emotions through music, but also enter regions beyond these emotions. In other words, we can access the hidden recesses of the mind and ourselves, going beyond seeing ourselves and music as mere representational objects. We can, thus, come to be more deeply in touch with our thusness, and exist in a more intimate relationship with the world and its beings. That relationship is, as stated, full of infinite beauty and boundless terror, open to various manifestations not restricted to the self-centered, objectifying thinking of the self.

The self-centered and objectifying thinking of the self can be seen to stem from a certain kind of intentional activity, which Nishitani describes as the process of the ego coming to be-for-itself (対自的), knowing itself as such, and coming to view things as being outside itself, as objects (NKC1:19). However, the issue here is not the process of the ego relating to things, but in the ego remaining on such a field. Rather than stopping on this field which is, as seen above, self-evident way of being, the “true self” behind this ego must be made to come forth by destroying the frame of the ego (NKC1:7). Thus, while this process of relating to things is a rather self-evident one in our normal existence, it can be broken through (see NKC11).

Breaking through our normal existence is a matter of practice. Through practice, one forms a totality self-concentration in which one transcends differentiating mind and forms a unity of knowledge and practice, which is, furthermore, revealed to be the unity of the person (NKC20:64). In other words, the aim of practice is to go beyond the differentiation between the subject and the object. In the context of the present paper, through practicing listening without a listener, one can transcend the separation between oneself and music, to become one with the activity of listening. Further, only in practice does a given method appear truly (NKC20:60). Thus, listening without a listener is possible and appears as it is only through practice.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of practice, breaking through our normal existence highlights the fact that the problems arising from affective scaffolding are not problems of that process per se. They are, rather, problems arising from focusing on that process and not going beyond it, aided by the offloading effect music can have. Through that effect, music can point beyond its instrumental usage, towards the thusness of both itself and the self. For in putting on the music she wants, the listener also opens to the possible unfolding of the path beyond the activity of musical scaffolding. This path leads to the thusness of the self, a mode of being in which the self no longer regards music as a mere object but can approach it through the activity of listening without a listener.

Yet even though such a possibility exists, often it remains veiled behind the self-evidence of the standpoint of consciousness and the self-evident relating to things this standpoint engenders. Thus, even though musical scaffolding can offload our affective states and can develop – even when began as a scaffolding activity – into an empty approach to music as it itself is, due to the strong workings of the standpoint of consciousness, the oppositional consciousness and instrumental approach to music are not easily overcome.

## 5 Music and the Self as Empty

Examining affective scaffolding from both its instrumental and offloading effects has revealed both the entrenchment of the instrumental effect and the possibility of the offloading effect. To further illustrate the latter and the possibility of listening without a listener, let us now focus on the attitude of relating to things as they themselves are. Nishitani calls such an attitude, with Bashō, “learning (習う) from the pine tree of the pine tree, and from the bamboo of the bamboo” (Nishitani, 1982: 128). In such an attitude one enters the mode of being itself of the thing learnt from. Relating this attitude of learning to listening to music, the act of listening without a listener comes to be understood as an activity where, in entering the mode of being of music, one forms a unity with music and comes to be without the self or the listener altogether.

Arguably, such an activity comes about precisely through the offloading effect of music. Through it, we can investigate the regions of ourselves normally shut to us, including being without a self, i.e., the fact of our selves being empty. In listening to music, we can, thus, attain an experience of *where there’s music, I am not*.<sup>8</sup> For example, immersing oneself deeply in a musical experience, often it happens that the sense of time and even of one’s spatiality are forgotten. A great song is seemingly over before it even began, and a good concert can feel shorter than its total duration would suggest. Additionally, one tends not to be overly conscious of one’s surroundings in such a state of immersion – the details of one’s bench at a concert or the features of the room the song is playing in are not important in a state of immersion. Nor really is the self who listens. The thoughts normally racing through one’s mind take a backseat, with only the act of listening mattering. Yet this act is not based solely on our own power, but is essentially linked with the power of music, in its empty nature and in this nature’s power to empty us in the act of listening.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in listening the fact that I am not as I previously thought is revealed.

Of course, the process of “learning from music of music” and entering through it into an activity of listening without a listener is not this straightforward. Rather, such learning from music, like all learning, is a process. Listening without a listener must, thus, be approached as a practice engaged in. Moreover, while we can become skilled in listening without our self, it nevertheless must be an ongoing practice one cannot complete. For while one can appreciate music and like to listen to it, this appreciation does not yet count as a practice of listening without a listener. For in the sentiment of appreciation we still, usually, detach ourselves from the object appreciated and are not engaged in it (Ishihara & Tainer, 2024: 112). This engagement with music is crucial for listening to count as a practice of listening without

<sup>8</sup> My description here is congruent with a line of poem of Huineng: “Fundamentally, there is not a single thing” (Huineng 2017: 22). That is, music reveals that we do not in fact possess even that single thing we most deeply believe we possess, namely, a self.

<sup>9</sup> While the distinction between “own-power” [自力] and “other-power” [他力] is a Shin rather than Zen Buddhist conception, I believe it is informative here. Still, I will not go into this distinction more deeply. For more information see e.g., Tanabe 2016; Unno & Heisig, 2020.

a listener. In other words, we learn to practice what Ishihara calls “loosening one’s grip on one’s beliefs” and which she argues leads to an ability to “be more open to reality” (Ishihara & Tainer, 2024: 9). That is, we learn to loosen our grip on our self-enclosed selfhood and the effect that music must have on that self, instead learning to be more open to the depths of music and the emptiness of the self.

Further example of loosening the grip on our beliefs can be taken from a rather common experience when listening to music. When something sounds good, it catches our attention, and we focus on what we are hearing. But the notes that caught our attention are already gone. We cannot, therefore, focus our attention on anything specific and grip it, for if we do so, music comes to be seen through “colored glasses” and through “biases and projections” (Ishihara & Tainer, 2024: 9). Rather than gripping, we should loosen our grip and let music play itself out. If we just grip some element of music, it does not breathe. One can perhaps grasp this meaning when listening to something one has strong views either for or against. When strongly disliking or liking a piece of music, the perception of the music playing is colored by our like or dislike and music does not appear as it is. In such a colored state, music is, in a sense, dead. Only in loosening one’s grip and letting music breathe and by becoming one with the activity of listening is music alive. This is, fundamentally, the activity of listening without a listener which, additionally, reveals the true nature of phenomena: by being without a self, phenomena – including music – show us things the intellect cannot grasp alone.

For if we allow it, music can ask us questions and reveal to us things we could not have understood on our own. Similarly to Nishitani’s analysis of the *mondō* between Kyōzan Ejaku and Sanshō Enen,<sup>10</sup> where Sanshō takes over Kyōzan and then releases him, music too asks who we are, takes our place, and then releases us back to ourselves. For Nishitani, this conversation represents playfulness, where the self is not rooted into place, but can freely be what it is in its thusness (NKC12:277). This is the way music plays with us: it captivates and releases, scaffolds and offloads. When we put on the music we want, we ask of ourselves, through this choice, who we are. However, music does not play by our rules, and answers by penetrating our very being and capturing our self. Thus captured, we are revealed to ourselves in a light not previously thought of. Ultimately, being captured by music, our self might even disappear, revealing the empty grasp we have on ourselves. Thus, music, in challenging us by asking who we are, forces us to confront this question of identity and, ideally, makes us realize the truth of the emptiness of the self.

Obviously, while music has the power to empty us and to show us our own emptiness, it is not a given that such an event of understanding will take place through listening to music. Yet engaging deeply and consciously in the practice of listening without a listener, at least some glimpse of this truth can be gleaned, and the self forgotten, even if only momentarily. While such forgetting does not yet count as an enlightenment experience, such a realization of the absence of self will, arguably, point us further towards the emptiness of our selves. However, this is not to argue that music is the best medium of “directly pointing to the mind, outside of

<sup>10</sup> From the case 68 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, see Cleary & Cleary 2005.

scriptures” (Dumoulin, 2005: 85). Albeit music is in its empty nature, arguably, a powerful medium for communicating the Buddhist truth of emptiness and of directly pointing to the mind, it too is just an expedient means (*upāya*)<sup>11</sup> like any other. Therefore, while the focus here has been on music and its power to communicate the truth of emptiness, this is not to say that other artforms could not also work as great communicators of this truth, depending on the context and the individual.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, while music is not usually invoked in the sense ascribed to it in the present paper in Buddhist literature, in the context of Zen, the analysis of music here presented is not as far-fetched as it would initially seem. For in the context of Zen monasteries, sutra chanting is usually practiced alongside meditation. In this context, chanting – the intoning of words – may “seem to turn words and sentences in to ‘mere’ sounds ... that, in the ears of many devotees, embody the truth or the dharma” (Maraldo, 2021: 291–293). Further, this turning of words into mere sounds through chanting is called the “mystery of scripture recitation” (Maraldo, 2021: 292). This mystery can be taken to mean hearing music in its thusness, not through its textual or intellectual representations. In its thusness, then, music communicates the dharma: the truth of emptiness of the self and of phenomena, manifesting as a concrete experience of listening without a listener.

Moreover, examples from the Zen tradition which illustrate the possibility of music – or sounds – to communicate the truth of emptiness can be found. One example is the story about Kyōgen Chikan,<sup>13</sup> who, as a student, was asked by his master to answer a question: “What is your original state before conception?” (Whitfield, 2016). Unable to answer, Kyōgen left the presence of his master to consult his notes on Buddhist sutras. Not finding an answer to his master’s question from them, Kyōgen burnt his notes as useless. (Whitfield, 2016). After the incident, Kyōgen became dispirited with his practice and left the monastery of his residence to set up a hermitage. There, while weeding, “a loose stone struck a bamboo tree, making a sound. Suddenly, free and laughing, great awakening opened” (Whitfield, 2016). Fundamentally, trying to intellectually solve the “great matter of life and death” (Parkes, 2020: 465) gets us nowhere and for Kyōgen, what his thinking mind could not grasp, a sound opened. As with Kyōzan and Sanshō, in the case of Kyōgen too laughter here represents playfulness in the openness that is our original nature, our thusness, towards which sound directly points to.

Thus, even though not necessarily an enlightenment experience, practicing the attitude of listening without a listener can let us experience emptiness to some capacity, and free us into playfulness. This playfulness, as seen through the examples of Kyōzan and Sanshō, and Kyōgen, manifests as a truer relation with both the world at large and with ourselves. In other words, experiencing emptiness through music, I am not. Rather, to borrow expressions from Nishitani, we learn from music of music, i.e., of emptiness. In other words, we learn to be, as stated above, more

<sup>11</sup> For *upāya*, see Blumenthal 2013.

<sup>12</sup> For this would disregard the vast tradition of regarding various forms of art, e.g., tea, swordsmanship, painting, and poetry, as avenues to enlightenment.

<sup>13</sup> Xiangyan Zhixian, a Chinese Chán Master of the Tang Dynasty.

open about reality and its being, to the extent that we might be able to “play with reality” (Ishihara & Tainer, 2024: 9).

The experience of emptiness through listening without a listener thus takes a two-fold meaning. Firstly, it reveals the one-sidedness of conventional truths<sup>14</sup> on the field of consciousness. Directly experiencing music reveals that the object which I took as “me” is not in fact me, but me-as-object – and that music too was grasped as such an object. Secondly, as music reveals that there is no “I” in a conventional sense, it also reveals the true nature of the self as empty. In such an event, music envelopes the listener, darkening the I to reveal the self. Ideally, when music then passes away, so too does the ego-self, making space for the true Self.

Should this happen, a true encounter between the self and others, as they are in their thusness, would become possible. Music could exist as it is, as something that asks of the self who she is and then takes over her, with the self, not being self-centered and self-attached, being able to let this happen. Further, in learning such an open approach – a listening without a listener – the self can learn to encounter other phenomena and beings in this sense too. Thus, listening without a listener opens into a wider meaning of an encounter without the one encountering. Simply put, this is the field of the real I-Thou-encounter, where both the I and the Thou can be in their paradoxical, mutually negating relationship. On this field the self does not view others from her self-centered field, where others are only things objectified by the subject’s gaze. Rather, the self lets beings be in their thusness while encountering them and is, thus, open to the infinite beauty and boundless terror present in a true I-Thou-relation (NCK12:277–278, 284–287). Listening without a listener can thus open into a wider significance, to listening the other and the world without the self-centered and objectifying case of the self, letting every being be, as they are, in their thusness.

## 6 Conclusion: Music Resounding in Emptiness

To conclude, I would like to weave together the threads of “listening without a listener”, presented throughout the paper, into one, overall image. As stated, listening to music without a listener is a cultivated practice. It comes to be from beneath the normal, instrumental usage with which we often engage with music and the world at large. For in our everyday, busy lives it is easy to be contented by the music we choose to put on and not further inquire into what listening to music does to us. Moreover, it is easy to let music just entrench our views regarding ourselves, to scaffold the experience we have of our self and of our lives. That is, music can easily come to belong to the horizon of those things which help us cope with the horrors and demands – in addition to the beauty and wonder – of human life. Yet, being a cultivated practice, listening without a listener can come about even if one’s engagement with music was begun as an instrumental practice. Additionally, listening

<sup>14</sup> On the Buddhist meaning of conventional truths, see e.g., Williams 2009; Cowherds 2010.

without a listener can happen not only in ideal situations, but, importantly, within our everyday lives too.

Even during our busy lives, we can pay attention to the offloading effect that listening to music – often imperceptibly – brings about. Observing this, the possibility of going beyond the instrumental usage of music opens, and we become able to access the depths, the boundless horizon, beneath our standpoint of consciousness. On such a horizon, the listener disappears, and we come to listen without a listener. That is, we are the activity of listening in its thusness, without the object-self of the field of consciousness. Therefore, listening without a listener occurs when one learns to pay attention to oneself not as an object but a being in one's thusness, and a being sharing in with the thusness of other beings. This entails a letting go of oneself, at least for the duration of the music one listens to. Further, letting go of oneself amounts not to unfeeling and unthinking being, but to an experience of immersion in the activity of listening to music, where the music listened to takes on a life of its own. That is, the music does not only serve the listeners ends of engendering certain kinds of emotions. Rather, music asks questions of the self, takes over the self, and then releases the self, which can, further, be seen as one reason why one can feel refreshed after listening to music.

In short, listening without a listener is a practice of learning to let go of the self we hold dear and close. When one learns to do that, and to listen without a listener, an attitude of openness towards oneself, others, and the world can manifest itself. Further, from this attitude, something of profound beauty, between the self and music, the self and the world, and the self and the other, can take place. In a word, in this openness of being without a grasping self, “love can come forth” (Nishitani, 2012: 77).

**Funding** Open Access funding provided by University of Jyväskylä (JYU).

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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