

**The Place of Music in Alfred Schütz's Life-world**  
**Die Stelle der Musik in Alfred Schützs Lebenswelt,**  
**Místo hudby ve světě života podle Alfreda Schütze**

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Alfred Schütz (1899–1959) is regarded as the founder of phenomenological sociology. Although he spent most of his life working as a bank clerk, from the 1940s he was becoming more and more prominent in the academic field. He taught at the departments of sociology and philosophy and he wrote many scholarly articles. Most of his works were however published posthumously.<sup>1</sup> It was Edmund Husserl's thinking that was most important for Schütz's philosophy, he however drew inspiration also from the rich intellectual tradition of the interwar Vienna (the Viennese circle, F. Kaufman, E. Vögelin). This is where Schütz came across the works of Henri Bergson who had a significant impact on his first paper on the theory of life-forms. He referred to Bergson's terminology also in his later works on music (*durée*, *attention à la vie*). In sociology it was Max Weber who influenced Schütz essentially. Another record of Schütz's approaches and the conceptual links between his works and the works of other prominent scientists is the correspondence he exchanged with Aaron Gurwitsch and Talcott Parsons.<sup>2</sup>

After he was forced to emigrate to the United States in 1939 his European roots found fertile soil to spread into. Some Schütz's students became his important successors, while Schütz's way of thinking had an impact on the developing sociological concepts (ethnometodology, social constructivism, works of Maurice Natanson).<sup>3</sup> It is primarily the links between philosophical presuppositions and fields of application (theory of music, sociology) that is in the center of our present attention.

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<sup>1</sup> His *Collected Papers*, vols. I–III started to appear in the 1960s, the only book published during Schütz's life was *Der Sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, Wien 1932, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1974.

<sup>2</sup> *Alfred Schütz – Aron Gurwitsch Briefwechsel 1939–1959*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1985. Schütz, A., Parsons, T.: *The Theory of Social Action, The Correspondence of Alfred Schütz and Talcott Parsons* (ed. R. Grathoff), Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1978.

<sup>3</sup> For Schütz's biography cf. Urbánek, E.: *Kritika fenomenologické sociologie*, Univerzita Karlova, Praha 1989, pp. 57–70.

## Life-world and music

Alfred Schütz developed notably Husserl's concept of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*).<sup>4</sup> It has often been pointed out that within this framework Schütz uses the Husserlian concept of *epoché* with an altered meaning.<sup>5</sup> The function of *epoché* in the life-world is to bracket out doubts about the existence of the world so that it becomes taken-for-granted, just as it is for all individuals because "sociální realita je již a priori realitou interpretovanou a předem vyloženou [social reality is a priori an interpreted, pre-processed reality]."<sup>6</sup> Schütz then poses the question of how we make sense of the surrounding world, how we find our place in it. In contrast to Heidegger's analysis of the structure and quality of existential settings and his analysis of our being-in-the-world, Schütz focuses on pragmatic factors determining our existence in the life-world. He analyzes the structure of our behavior and in addition, he explores what the structure is formed by. Schütz develops an extensive terminology for describing relationships with other people as well as the place of more remote social horizons in our lives. The focus of the present paper being music, we will not deal with the social aspects of the life-world and we will direct our attention to more general principles that render the surrounding world meaningful.

Each individual is determined by a specific **biographical situation**. Schütz is against local perspectives that decompose individuals into partial components, because human thinking and behavior integrates all internal diversity into intentional acts of consciousness. A biographical situation has a physical, historical, and conceptual aspect. It therefore includes both what we were born with and what we acquired from our surroundings, as well as our "sedimented experience".<sup>7</sup> When we speak about biographical situations in relation to music within our lives, this concept will embody all our musical abilities, needs, experiences, and our various approaches to music. A biographical situation thus constitutes a passive determination by the past.

All individuals however have access to efficient means of controlling their actions, the so-called **stock of knowledge at hand**. Besides experience, this is what enables us to interpret a given situation. The stock of knowledge is structured into **types** which we construct and which allow viewing different phenomena as homogeneous on the basis of the features they share. Schütz differentiates between: course-of-action types (features of actions), personal types (attributing motives to actions) and object types (by 'objects' he means physical, socio-cultural, and spiritual objects).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Schütz, A.: *Theorie der Lebensformen* (ed. I. Srubar), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1981; Schütz, A., Luckmann, T.: *Die Strukturen der Lebenswelt, Bd. I-II*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1979, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nohejl, M.: *Lebenswelt a každodennost v sociologii Alfreda Schütze*, SLON, Praha 2001, p. 83; Schütz, A.: On multiple realities. In: *Collected Papers, vol. I: The Problem of Social Reality* (ed. M. Natanson), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1962, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> Nohejl, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Sociologické školy, směry, paradigmaty*, SLON, Praha 2000, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nohejl, pp. 76–77.

Schütz also acknowledges that music, and works of art in general, have a specific place in our common knowledge. There is a good reason to believe then that musical pieces as spiritual objects have some features in common, that musical experiences of different people have some common traits. Schütz even claims that phenomenology of music should focus exactly on those features of music that occur cross-culturally. In this respect Schütz's emphasis on meaningfulness must be taken into account. A phenomenological approach to music should certainly deal with music already experienced with a qualitative definition. Meaningfulness however depends on the existence of typology forming the stock of knowledge at hand and Schütz is aware of this. He claims that if listeners do not have appropriate prior knowledge, the music they hear will be meaningless for them. Nevertheless, for phenomenological analysis of musical experience it is sufficient to acknowledge that listeners may have such previous knowledge; we do not necessarily have to know it.<sup>9</sup> How can this reasoning be coped with? Not without difficulties. We will point out below that Schütz defines music as a meaningful context. For his analysis of music nonetheless, the meaningful context "this is music" is sufficient. But what is music? It is a meaningful context. This circular argumentation shows clearly that either Schütz's definition of music or his starting point for the analysis of musical experience is not completely correct. One cannot suppress the impression that Schütz bases phenomenology of all music on a specific kind of music only. On the other hand, it is reasonable to believe that music will always be connected with specific types of sounds and their arrangement in time, which serves as a legitimate starting point for Schütz as explained below.

Schütz is interested in the place of music in our lives. He says that "the decision to listen to pure music involves a peculiar attitude on the part of the listener (...) in Bergson's terminology, his tension of consciousness has changed." Listeners "accept the guidance of music in order to relax their tension and to surrender to its flux."<sup>10</sup> Schütz's thinking thus approximates the Kantian postulate of uninterestedness which characterizes aesthetic attitudes, although his approach is more comprehensive. In his paper "On multiple realities"<sup>11</sup> Schütz introduces the concept of plurality of social realities defined as **finite provinces of meaning**. Unlike William James, whose concept of sub-universes he found inspiration in, Schütz assumes that these regions of reality are constituted by the meaning experienced within their frames. In other words, unlike James whose term refers to objective aspects of reality, Schütz emphasizes the characterization of regions of reality by the structure of their subjective meaning. Individuals thus always relate to a section of reality (defined by its unity and continuity) with the help of meaning they ascribe to it and not to reality as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Schütz, A.: Fragments on the phenomenology of music. In: *Music and Man*, 1976, Vol. 2, pp. 44–46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Schütz, A.: On multiple realities. In: *Collected Papers, vol. I: The Problem of Social Reality* (ed. M. Natanson), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1962, pp. 208–259.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Sociologické školy, směry, paradigmata*, SLON, Praha 2000, p. 172; Gurwitsch, A.: *Field Theory of Consciousness*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, p. 401.

Schütz also identifies the parameters that establish finite provinces of meaning. Each province is defined by a specific cognitive style that is formed by: "a specific tension of consciousness and, consequently, also a specific *epoché*, a prevalent form of spontaneity, a specific form of self-experience, a specific form of sociality, and a specific time perspective."<sup>13</sup> Schütz developed the notion of musical temporality which he understands to be closely connected with specific intentionality of consciousness. Another strongly related and interesting issue is the sociality within music. We will return to these topics in the second part of the present paper. In his phenomenological analysis of music Schütz did not specify any other topics because in the social sphere their features apparently become more distinctive. Self-experience and forms of spontaneity seem to become important in modern non-artificial music that is often intended for dancing. However, this does probably not belong to the questions Schütz himself brings up, considering that he searches for features common to all music. As regards *epoché*, Schütz proposed its definition in relation to music; it is not very clarifying though.<sup>14</sup>

Schütz also discussed the nature of the transitions between provinces of meaning. What is more interesting for our purpose however is the notion of **relevance**, which is in fact the principle underlying the establishment of separate meaning provinces. A thematic relevance is activated when "ve vjemovém poli vystoupí jako tematické něco, co se odlišuje od struktury horizontu, na kterou jsme navyklí [something differing from the accustomed structure of horizon becomes thematic in the perceptual field]."<sup>15</sup> In other words, a thematic relevance arises when something unknown appears within the known in a particular meaning province. With respect to musical experience we therefore deal with various levels of perception and also with acquired knowledge. When listening to a particular musical piece, we experience as thematic any theme or motif of that piece if we recognize it as such, and actually, so is the case of any so-called Gestalt, a concept widely used in phenomenological and psychological literature on music (Ingarden, Tenney and Polansky, Javorskij, Kurth). A proximity of the approaches of Gestalt psychology and phenomenology, described e.g. by Lyotard and Gurwitsch, is thus illustrated.<sup>16</sup> Each individual makes an effort to explain the disturbing unknown by means of an interpretative relevance. They choose a type from the stock of knowledge at hand that they fit the unknown into. And finally the motivational relevance gives a shape to the decision to explore the new phenomenon and establish its clear definition. We thus employ our sedimented aesthetic experience and musical preference which both have a value aspect and which exist in a specific way in our minds on the background of biographical situations.

<sup>13</sup> Schütz, A.: On multiple realities, p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> With respect to music, *epoché* is supposed to bracket out "more layers of the reality of daily life". Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> Nohejl, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Aron Gurwitsch in his field theory and Lyotard, J. -F.: *Fenomenologie*, Victoria Publishing, Praha 1994, p. 47.

## The meaningfulness of musical experience

We have discussed Schütz's emphasis on meaning in various contexts and it is meaning that leads us to the next section of this paper. Although Schütz defines his finite provinces of meaning by experiencing, he is interested in the nature of phenomena the provinces are set up around, and by extension, in the nature of musical objects and their mode of existence. Schütz defines a musical piece broadly as a meaningful context, which we do not find sufficient because there are a great number of various meaningful contexts. The definition has the mere value of revealing that music is something essentially separated from something else. In this respect we can appreciate that the definition enables contrasting the musical meaningful context with other meaningful contexts and discover its specificities. This is where Schütz contributes with the inspiring concept of polythetical constitution based on Edmund Husserl's Ideas. Each language allows naming objects in the extralinguistic reality because it utilizes conceptualization – an immediate encapsulation of content, although knowledge of the content must be acquired step-by-step (e.g. in a scholarly article). The meaning of music on the other hand arises always only from a step-by-step constitutional process, polythetical steps occurring in inner time. Schütz also measures different art forms by the amount of conceptualization they involve and arrives at the following order: language – language-based art – visual arts – (abstract visual arts) – ornament – dancing – music. According to Schütz, music does not have a semantic aspect and it does not represent any objects or their properties; one can only notice the similarity between music and the syntax of language.<sup>17</sup>

Schütz claims that music does not refer to the reality of the life-world. He does assume though that rhythm refers to physiological processes, to the outside world (to events including motion), and to some ways of structuring musical ideas in modern music (where rhythm can be the function of harmony). However, since the importance of rhythm is weakened e.g. in old liturgical singing (according to Schütz there is no rhythm whatsoever in Gregorian chants or in Palestrina's music) it cannot be regarded as an essential property of musical experience. Schütz cannot reconcile himself to the fact that the meaningfulness of rhythm surfaces on several levels.<sup>18</sup> We can hardly agree with Schütz's evaluation of rhythm though, all the more so that by rhythm he actually means all temporal structuring of music on the level of tones. Common musical knowledge tells us that even if we listen to a piece composed exclusively from tones having the same duration, which is a minor area of music, a crucial role is played by the choice of tone duration. We also know that, thanks to inter-tone relations or to specific pitch and intensity of tones, a differentiation of prominences of individual tones occurs, or to put it differently, a chronological structure of music is generated. It is therefore risky to speak about music without rhythm or without a temporal structure. We must therefore point out that Schütz did not finish his

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Schütz, A.: *Fragments on the phenomenology of music*, pp. 23–26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

major work on music and that he refers to constructed interpretations of rhythm that do not exist. It is possible that Schütz would have modified his argumentation.

It is also interesting that in a different place Schütz claims that music's not referring to objects of the outside world is not unconditional. If it does refer to the outside world, it is on the basis of a specific coordination of the physical world and its inner timing; this specific coordination is enabled by patterns of movements, body movements above all, both from the perspective of subjective kinesthesia and when viewing the body as an object.<sup>19</sup> The differentiation between the body as an object and the subjectively perceived body has already been made by M. Merleau-Ponty; as a matter of fact, Schütz uses kinesthesia for his typology of art and he concludes that musical experience does not involve kinesthesia. Music is thus located in the dimension of time alone, not in the dimension of space. The idea that the difference between high and low tones has a temporal aspect is surely interesting.<sup>20</sup> It approximates David Lewin's theory of generalized intervals which calculates on the possibility of regarding various parameters of music as intervals.<sup>21</sup> A certain reduction into a more general experience thus takes place. It is slightly paradoxical though that the notion of interval, into which all parameters are converted, creates the very impression of space rather than shift in time. Schütz meant the kinesthesia connected with action; we can however assume that kinesthesia becomes connected with listening to music automatically in consciousness just because of the movement patterns that are apparently activated when coordination with the outer system of movements occurs.

Schütz's ideas are nevertheless interesting due to the new they bring rather than due to what they lack. Let us then discuss Schütz's analyses of music as of what fills our inner consciousness. For the sake of conciseness we will sum up Schütz's ideas from Fragments as follows:

1. The stream of music corresponds to the stream of consciousness.
2. The stream of consciousness is structured by means of individual temporal modalities. (In reproduction and retention, objects are handled as the past – either as ones that have been experienced and are recalled in current consciousness /reproductions/ or ones that are still linked to the presence of living /retentions/. Future objects are grasped with the help of protention, which is the counterpart of retention, and with the help of anticipation, which is a “jump” into the future.)
3. The stream of music thus contains “themes” (phenomenological formations) whose constitution is the result of interweaving acts of time consciousness.
4. Retention and protention are forms of the so-called passive synthesis, which means that the acts of linking the past and the future objects to the presence of living are carried out automatically without a conscious effort, precisely thanks to the familiarity with the relatively elementary relations.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 32–37. Skarda, C. A.: Alfred Schütz's phenomenology of music. In: *Journal of Musicological Research*, 1979, Vol. 3, p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Lewin, D.: *Generalized Musical Intervals and Transformations*, New Haven, CT, 1987.

5. Reflexive acts, in the specific linkage of the past to the present, are what allows music being meaningful.<sup>22</sup>
6. Reflection is induced by the completion of a formation, by anticipation, or by the disruption of streaming.
7. If we abandon the stream of music we abandon music.
8. The dependence of internal consciousness on the continuance of music is the pillar of the specific musical sociality. This is because individual meanings reach us necessarily as if they reached another person.<sup>23</sup> The insistence of the stream of music was also aptly described by Jaroslav Zich: "Průběh vnímání si tedy u děl hudebních, dramatických a tanečních nevytváříme sami, nýbrž je nám zvenčí předkládán v přísné časové vazbě [The progress of perception of music, drama, and dance is not in our own hands, it is rather imposed on us having a strict temporal structure]." "Časový průběh vjemu je nám přímo vnucován [We are almost being forced to accept the temporal arrangement of a percept]."<sup>24</sup>

The question remains whether listening to music cannot diverge from the polythetic constitution under certain circumstances. When we listen to a piece of music not for the first time for instance, we have the feeling that repeating all steps is unnecessary.<sup>25</sup> In addition, an item of our knowledge can surface and get related to the music just heard. We know that meaning is ascribed to what is connected with the past; by extension, what is connected with our previous musical experiencing will become thematic in music; this presupposition probably holds both for a completed listening to a particular piece and for chronologically more remote acts of listening. Our debate can be developed even further. Perceiving music is a source of emotions; emotions experienced when listening to music apparently bear relation to emotions that we store in our memory from previous cases of listening to music and from prior experience in general. It can be thus concluded that some forms of abandoning the musical stream are necessary for the establishment of musical meaning, in order for music to be attractive for our existential situation.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Patočka speaks of the "osmyslující kontext [sense-giving context]" of an individual phenomenon – the relation to environment lends meaning to objects. Cf: Patočka, J.: *Husserlova fenomenologie, fenomenologická filosofie a „Karteziánské meditace“*. In: Husserl, E.: *Karteziánské meditace*. Svoboda, Praha 1968, p. 176.

<sup>23</sup> "We have therefore the following situation: two series of events in inner time, one belonging to the stream of consciousness of the composer, the other to the stream of consciousness of the beholder, are lived through in simultaneity, which simultaneity is created by the ongoing flux of the musical process. It is the thesis of the present paper that this sharing of the other's flux of experiences in inner time (...) constitutes (...) the experience of the "We", which is at the foundation of all possible communication." Cf: Alfred Schütz: *Making music together*. In: *Collected Papers, vol. II: Studies in Social Theory* (ed. A. Brodersen), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1964, p. 173.

<sup>24</sup> Cf: Zich, J.: *Kapitoly a studie z hudební estetiky*, Supraphon, Praha 1987, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Schütz speaks about this possibility in connection with the concept of the passive synthesis, but the consequences should be broader. Cf: Schütz, A.: *Fragments on the phenomenology of music*, p. 55.



## Zusammenfassung

Alfred Schütz hat bahnbrechend eine Lösung den soziologischen Fragen mit phänomenologischen Prinzipien und Terminen verbunden. Er hat auch eine phänomenologische Musiktheorie und Theorie der Musiksozialität aufgeschlüsselt. In unserer Studie beschäftigen wir uns mit Schützs Auffassung der Musik im Hintergrund der phänomenologisch bestimmten Sozialwelt, der Konzeption der Lebenswelt, die aus Spätwerken von Husserl ausgeht. Das Ziel ist zu schauen, dass die nach innen orientierte Analyse von Schütz, vor allem die Analyse der musikalischen Zeitlichkeit, seinen Auffassungen der Mechanismen von Erfahrung der Welt, die uns umsteht, entspricht. Strittige Momente, die bei dieser Konfrontation entstehen, ermöglichen auch weitere Frage nach einer Beschaffenheit der Musikströmungsstruktur, zu derer Aufklärung Schütz inspirative Mittel anbietet.

## Resumé

Alfred Schütz průkopnický spojoval řešení sociologických otázek s fenomenologickými zásadami a termíny. Samostatně rozpracoval také fenomenologickou teorii hudby a hudební sociality. V přítomné studii se zabýváme Schützovým chápáním hudby na pozadí fenomenologicky určeného sociálního světa, koncepce Lebenswelt, vycházející z pozdních Husserlových prací. Cílem je ukázat, že Schützova dovnitř zaměřená analýza hudby, zejména hudební časovosti, zapadá do jeho pojetí mechanismů zakoušení světa, který nás obklopuje. Sporné momenty, které při dané konfrontaci vyvstávají, rovněž dále umožňují ptát se po povaze strukturace hudebního proudu, k jejímuž osvětlení Schütz nabízí inspirativní nástroje.