Revue musicale OICRM

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Smialek, E. (2024). Compte rendu de [*Recentrer la musique. 1. Audiotactilité et ontologie de l'oeuvre musicale : musique d'écriture, jazz, pop, rock,* by Laurent Cugny, Lyon, Symétrie, 2021, 368 pages]. *Revue musicale OICRM*, *11*(1), 204–212. https://doi.org/10.7202/1113320ar

Recentrer la musique. 1. Audiotactilité et ontologie de l'œuvre musicale: musique d'écriture, jazz, pop, rock, **by Laurent Cugny**

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Keywords: audiotactility; Vincenzo Caporaletti; musical work; ontology; music philosophy.

Mots clés : audiotactilité ;Vincenzo Caporaletti ; œuvre musicale ; ontologie ; philosophie de la musique.

Recentrer la musique. 1. Audiotactilité et ontologie de l'œuvre musicale: musique d'écriture, jazz, pop, rock is an especially thorough study of prior philosophical research on musical ontology, with original contributions in ontological theory around musical traditions, like jazz and pop-rock music, that have arisen with recording technology. Vincenzo Caporaletti's theory of audiotactility, highlighted in the book's subtitle and a driving force behind it, encourages readers to think differently about what musicians prioritize in genres that emphasize recording and live interaction. As the name suggests, audiotactility shifts the emphasis from visual media such as scores and transcriptions to aural and bodily experiences. It is both a perceptual principle and social process in that its final product, "the audible recording," audibly encodes the social interactions of performance within the recorded outcome, prioritizing those interactions more than they tend to be in recordings of score-based interpretations. Improvisation is one context in which the importance of this social element is

especially clear and, as Laurent Cugny shows in depth, the recordings that capture it will frequently take on the status of "original" work as much as a composer's manuscript might in art music traditions.

Cugny's book addresses many of the transformations that interested Walter Benjamin in his famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." While Benjamin was writing about the implications of new technologies for the future of art in the twentieth century, one might think of Cugny's book as a detailed philosophical study of what came to pass, specifically within the art of music. Primarily by means of Caporaletti's theory, but also through effective engagement with other theories like Lydia Goehr's critique of the work concept (pp. 67, 254), Luigi Pareyson's formativity (pp. 11–12, 295–297), and Peircean semiotics (e.g. pp. 177, 251), Cugny details how various musical fields such as jazz, popular music, and avant-garde improvisation differ in what they prioritize and how their practitioners conceive of music.

Recentrer la musique is organized in four main parts that replicate on a larger scale the same structure he uses for individual subsections (the book does not use numbered chapters). Along with a brief preface and introduction, Cugny bookends his study with a conceptual background on the theory of audiotactile music in the first part, and a consolidation of his earlier findings in the fourth and final part devoted to comparing different regimes of production (i.e. written transmission, oral transmission, audiotactility, and improvisation). In between are two central parts dedicated to exploring several currents of philosophical literature on musical ontology and aesthetics: an established ontological literature within score-based music (part 2), and an emerging literature within the more recording-oriented traditions of rock, pop, and jazz (part 3). Throughout the book as a whole, one can thus observe an approach whereby Cugny gives preparatory theoretical background, presents the majority of his material, and then extrapolates some theoretical lessons to conclude.

This approach to the standard intro-body-conclusion format is worth noting for at least a couple reasons. For one, Cugny is quite consistent with it on a smaller scale, following a similar approach to each part. Thus, part 2 presents wide-reaching prolegomena spanning from 1400 BC to Guido of Arezzo to Guido Adler to Lydia Goehr; it plunges in depth into the contrasting schools of analytical and continental philosophy; and it ultimately returns to those two paradigms to synthesize and compare them with a view towards establishing important ontological distinctions from the practices in the remainder of the book. Because every part is so consistently structured, in part 2 and elsewhere, readers need not read *Recentrer la musique* in a linear way but can carve multiple paths along individual schools of thought or authorial approaches that most interest them, checking back for theoretical background when they reach a concept they do not understand or jumping to preview where Cugny will take the material. In fact, I would encourage readers to begin by familiarizing themselves with the summary *théorie* subsection that functions like an appendix near the end of the book. It will serve as a useful reference map with which to navigate the entire book.

Cugny's nested structure of background-bulk-extrapolation is also worth noting because it reveals how key the two central parts are, which is somewhat unusual in

that they are dedicated to the work of his predecessors rather than his own theoretical contributions that form the extrapolation at the end of the book. Although it is by no means merely a literature review, the writings of twentieth-century philosophers and secondary literature are a combined focus throughout the book. Indeed, the two central parts of the book proceed as a succession of author names, grouping and comparing them in a way that feels much like an upper-level, undergraduate textbook. That is, while Cugny consistently maintains a research-oriented voice that draws extensively from multiple literatures and adds his own arguments, the inner parts of the book are mostly quite pedagogical in their orderly presentation of prior schools of thought and representative authors. His comprehensive coverage deals with major authors on musical ontology, as well as others he argues have been unjustly neglected (e.g. Gisèle Brelet, Boris de Schlœzer), and guides readers with helpful charts, lists, and bullet point summaries. Cugny uses this literature to highlight the dominant focus of previous literature about written scores and extract theoretical principles that subsequently help him refine an ontological theory flexible enough to accommodate twentieth-century musics like jazz, rock, and pop.

In part 3, the exploration of the ontological literature on rock, pop, and jazz, proceeds in much the same way, but with Cugny's voice foregrounded more, evaluating the claims of major authors and making his own historical summaries of how recording technology changed the conception of musical works and their creation (see Count Basie's testimony on p. 263, n. 112, for instance). I personally appreciated his introduction to literature written in French, like Roger Pouivet's *Philosophie du rock* (Pouivet 2010), his condensed summary of the history of sound recording (p. 224, n. 33), and his summarizing conclusions about how profoundly recording technology has affected musical form, conception, and industry pressures in multiple performance traditions (pp. 243–246). Cugny takes a different approach with pop, framing his discussion primarily around a single text, *Dialectique de la pop* by Agnès Gayraud (Gayraud 2018), a philosopher and pop musician whose own categories of production types align with Cugny's quadripartition (written, oral, audiotactile, improvised). Here, I was surprised by the subject matter and emphasis. Much time is spent, instructively, on how Gayraud grapples with differences between jazz and pop, particularly with the treatment of improvisation, as well as several refreshingly autobiographical passages that are devoted to Cugny's philosophical reflections on his own experiences, especially with The Beatles, Joni Mitchell, and, overlapping with jazz again, Billie Holiday—a selection that reflects Cugny's very broad conception of "pop," albeit one that he doesn't take for granted but instead tackles directly ("*qu'est-ce alors que la pop ?*") (p. 268).

This selection brings me to something I observed throughout the book, which is a notable emphasis on canonical greats. What I have in mind can be seen in Figure 1, which tabulates names that figure prominently enough throughout the book to require multiple line breaks in Cugny's name index. I compiled it not just to show this canonical emphasis but also because it gives something of an overview of the book at a glance. Names that appear in italics, like Beethoven, The Beatles, and Miles Davis have three-lines' worth of page numbers in their index entries while the others have two-lines' worth. Nearly all these names are major canonical figures in

jazz or classical music, with only The Beatles representing pop-rock music to this degree. Given that a consistent thread throughout the book is Cugny's dissatisfaction with how prior ontological writings have limited themselves to score-based music, his desire to expand that view beyond tradition strikes me as existing in contradictory tension with his rather traditional emphasis on masters and masterworks. Indeed, it also seems somewhat contrary to the conscious attention he sometimes gives to pointing out when certain writers on music ontology have been neglected.

Scored-Based (Visual)	Recording-Based (Audiotactile)
Beethoven	*Beatles, The*
Bach, J.S.	*Davis, Miles*
Gershwin, George	Armstrong, Louis
Mozart	McCartney, Paul
	Monk, Thelonious
	Morton, Jelly Roll
	Parker, Charlie
Authors (esp. Philosophers)	
Caporaletti, Vincenzo	Fisher, John Andrew
Goehr, Lydia	Gayraud, Agnès
Goodman, Nelson	Genette, Gérard
Ingarden, Roman	Gilson, Étienne
Pareyson, Luigi	Giombini, Lisa
Pouivet, Roger	Gracyk, Theodore
Schloezer, Boris de	Kania, Andrew
Arom, Simha	Sartre, Jean-Paul
Darsel, Sandrine	Souriau, Étienne
Dufrenne, Mikel	

Figure 1: Selections from Cugny's name index: italicized names take up three lines in the index while the others require two.

Of course, such an emphasis on the canon is partly because the previous philosophers whom Cugny writes about have relied upon it, but it is unlikely to be limited to just that. The emphasis on well-known, recognized figures and works carries into the original analyses that the author provides in part 4. This matters because a focus on recognized historical figures and works indirectly results in omissions of representation and perspective. The sociopolitical issue of representation has become a significant topic in recent music curriculum discussions in North America, especially since Philip Ewell's 2019 plenary address at the Society for Music Theory but also with societal demographic surveys increasing throughout the new millennium. If men, by majority representation, are the default agents in the creation and performance of the music discussed by Cugny, the matter of representation also raises questions about whether certain other ontological nuances might be missed by the selective emphasis that the canon affords. Before I elaborate further, I will stress that, Cugny's coverage in this regard is wide ranging and he does account for some culturally diverse ontologies like the orally transmitted music studied by ethnomusicologist Simha Arom, whom he cites often enough to figure in the table above. He seems to anticipate criticism by addressing the issue of canons, power, and cultural domination head-on (p. 69), agreeing with and aligning his purpose alongside Goehr's critiques (p. 63, n. 8; p. 67) and arguing for the social relevance of masterworks via a negotiated, societal consensus that gives rise to them (p. 297).

But this is where the social dimensions of musical ontologies outside of the canon take on importance because they involve the voices of those who are often silenced or marginalized and thus not always part of the often "rockist" canon of popular masterworks ([Sanneh 2004](#)) or the construction of jazz historiography ([DeVeaux 1991](#)). Thus, Dana Baitz asks: "What could a phenomenology of 'the transsexual woman at the piano' tell us about music, embodiment and experience?" ([Baitz [2018]2022](#), p. 367). Indeed, the relatively recent advent of hyperpop and its emphasis on post-production simulacra leads to intriguing questions about the role of trans identities in the creation of SOPHIE's music and its reception. Such topics are challenging and benefit tremendously from collaborative authorship within the LGBTQ community, facilitating the hybrid *etmic* [*sic*] approach that Cugny cites (p. 33, after [Caporaletti 2018](#), pp. 12–13). In this way, looking outside the historical canon to the present day adds a contemporary dimension to the already socially oriented questions about interactions between different human agents that Cugny asks regarding the profoundly canonical, early electronic work *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956) by Stockhausen (pp. 304–305). More current topics, especially in the pop section, such as Taylor Swift's sales of "Taylor's version" albums, could add another legal dimension to the ontology of music copyright of the "Tiger Rag" jazz controversy Cugny analyzes (more on this below). Swift's marketing tactics with insider clues and Easter eggs for fans might well expand notions of the album as a work in terms of how its reception involves multiple sources of media. In this way, expanding the historical view of pop-rock music to examples in the present day allows the study of music ontology to question how platforms like social media ([Avdeeff 2021](#)) and podcasting ([Galloway 2023](#)) affect marketing and reception.

Recentrer la musique is the first of a two-part planned book project, so there is ample room for possibilities outside of the standard historical canon moving forward. Cugny's second book will focus specifically on jazz, applying the theoretical model he outlines in his appendix. Based on the author's introduction, both this first tome and the planned second book appear to respond to what he calls a powerful epistemology of decentring ("*l'épistémologie du décentrement*") from musicology (p. 8), hence the recentring in the book's title. Considering that the most heated polemics between the new musicology and so-called formalist music analysis during the 1990s have since calmed, I'm not sure it is still needed as a foil. The bewilderment he cites from jazz specialist Henry Martin in 1996 as he defends detailed analysis (p. 8, n. 7) no longer seems in line with contemporary debates. And the concluding remarks Cugny makes about new justifications for music analysis (p. 13) strike me as similarly no longer needed. Rather than recentre music (analysis) from a place of displacement, I'd instead frame Cugny's project as enriching music analysis with a multitude of ontological questions, including the social ones about agency that the new musicology foregrounds. It is the canon, not music analysis, that might need adjusting with respect to its central position. With it, the sociopolitical components of the music—the identities of musicians and audiences, the power dynamics involved in those identities—and the cultural particularities of their musical ontologies, would add depth to Cugny's already expansive project.

I consider Cugny's book useful and important in part due to current divides in linguistic and cultural circles, some across the Atlantic, some related to readerships operating primarily or entirely in English. Incidentally, the author touches on such divides in his reflections on why so much continental philosophy about musical aesthetics prior to the 1960s has not reached an English-language readership (pp. 186–187), in addition to some thoughts on why his and Caporaletti's respective writings may not have been consulted in debates about recordings and the status of the work in jazz (p. 248, n. 72). Caporaletti's theories have been well-known in Italy and France for decades, yet they are relatively scarce in English translation (Caporaletti 2015, 2018). Outside of music philosophers, it seems likely that many Anglophone readers of research in popular music and jazz may not be aware of this literature and will wish to familiarize themselves with the work being done on audio-tactility in French, Italian, and Portuguese. Since 2018, a journal has been dedicated to it, the *Revue d'études du jazz et des musiques audiotactiles*. A year prior to that, the term *musiche audiotattili* appeared in the Italian parliament's legislation, committing to work with industry specialists and musicologists to better specify their definition of contemporary popular music for legal purposes (Parlamento Italiano 2017). Evidently, the relevance of an audiotactile perspective on musical practices since the advent of recording technology has found tremendous resonance in Italy and France. It also has in Brazil, thanks largely to Fabiano Araújo Costa's work on Brazilian popular music (see, for instance, Araújo Costa 2018).

As a popular music scholar, I see several benefits of this book for students and colleagues. With so much in-depth review of prior philosophical traditions, *Recentrer la musique* provides a deep overview and background for broad philosophical traditions that implicitly inform current debates and approaches to music research. Students and researchers studying popular music will find useful summaries of debates about music within analytical and continental philosophy, recognizing links between familiar approaches including semiotics (e.g. Pierce's type/token distinction on p. 94; the esthesic/poietic opposition that structures pp. 131–174) and phenome-nology. Regarding the latter, I was excited to find background on the notion of an *intentional object* within the work of Husserl's student Roman Ingarden (p. 137) and a critical examination of this concept by Mikel Dufrenne (p. 155). I've previously found this notion inspiring in the analytical work of Marion A. Guck (2006, p. 194) and, although Guck cites philosophical and semiotic literature (*ibid.*, n. 7), I hadn't before considered that her application of the concept derives from continental philosophy. Readers who do not themselves have a specialized background in music philosophy will no doubt find several such discoveries that will enrich their understanding of the philosophical spirit and provenance of their own methodological lenses.

Moreover, *Recentrer la musique* provides specialized depth and specificity to questions around what conceptual objects musicians create and work with as well as how they approach them. This can help bring historical changes to life in the classroom. For anyone interested in tracing the changing technological currents throughout the twentieth century, Cugny's book provides a rich point of comparison between separate methods of transmission (written transmission, oral transmission, audiotactility, free improvisation) and how musicians approach them. Such differences

are summarized in his theoretical appendix (pp. 323–332) but are vividly explained in five example analyses early in the book (pp. 43–51) that compare five ontological contexts based on differing performance traditions, performer backgrounds, and recording technologies. The controversy surrounding who should be credited as the "composer" of "Tiger Rag" (pp. 45–46), recorded in 1918 by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, is one that occurred as relatively new phonographic technology was transforming notions of authorship and copyright. It involved mixed traditions of oral, written, and an intermediary "extemporized" transmission (pp. 26–28), and brings to mind the more recent dispute between the Beastie Boys and James Newton ([Lewis 2019](), pp. 35–56). Instructors who teach critical thinking about authorship, copyright law, and musical ontology now have two spectacularly instructive legal cases to compare, and can draw on Cugny's four other analyses if they prefer to teach about the ontological consequences of literary/oral traditions, improvisation, fragmented versions, or post-production (see also the note about harmonic progressions and copyright on p. 252, n. 83).

To help both in the classroom and in research, *Recentrer la musique* explains useful theoretical concepts and vocabulary that will be intuitively familiar to scholars of jazz and popular music but new by name to those who are not yet familiar with Caporaletti's work. These cues can facilitate speaking about historical nuances with greater precision and can clarify thinking about twentieth-century musical developments that arose from technological innovations. In addition to originality and distinction, these developments also illuminate aspects of similarity and points of overlap between different musical traditions. General principles such as "extemporization," mentioned above, show how jazz can function as an intermediary between the interpretation of a written work, which one finds in the classical dyad of composition-performance, and free improvisation, which eschews premeditation of any sort (p. 27). Others like "mediologic subsumption" draw attention to how various formative media such as written scores and sound recordings overlap in their involvement of similar procedural logics yet variously subsume certain procedures as subordinate to others. As Cugny explains, a string quartet performance will involve similar kinds of cognitive and stylistic entrainment among their members—adapting phrasing, tempo minutiae, and rhythmic feeling to each other—but these will be a secondary adaptation that responds to the more constitutive score. A jazz combo, on the other hand, may use a written lead sheet, but its deliberate underdetermined quality allows the performers' individual creative choices during improvisation to shape the recording and contribute to its aura as the definitive work. Musicians who live within these traditions have a deep familiarity with these distinctions, which might seem self-evident to them. But Cugny's discussion and the terms he explains greatly help to elucidate such interlocking similarities and difference of degree, especially for classroom discussion.

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge that *Recentrer la musique* has some beautiful and poetic moments. Cugny's fountain analogy is especially nice and a case in point, perhaps reflective of his similarly aquatic choice of Debussy's *La Mer* to illustrate some of the ontological questions around programme music. Cugny envisions an ontological fountain where the summit symbolizes a high level of

generality and we can shift our gaze progressively downwards to more detailed levels of particularity (pp. 57, 70–71). With *La Mer* and programme music, he outlines all the complex ways that a representation of water can move a composer and listener. It seems apt then that he imagines himself and readers gazing upon another instance of art involving water—the fountain—to move between different viewpoints from considering music in a general way to individual musical practices more specifically.

Lastly, *Recentrer la musique* provides an opportunity for North American scholars to learn about work happening in Europe, both with audiotactile theory and with broader philosophical traditions that operate to a significant extent outside of English. Having recently moved across the Atlantic myself, I've been struck by instances when highly current topics in North America, like Philip Ewell's critique of Schenker, have not registered among some of the European academics I've spoken to. My own surprise with discovering Caporaletti's theory and the massive literature around it outside of English is a humbling instance of the reverse. I suspect that many North Americans will share this experience and similarly benefit from investigating this fascinating and illuminating area of research themselves. Cugny's *Recentrer la musique* is a formidable achievement and a valuable guide.

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