

# Edward T. Cone

## And His Ideas About How We Hear Music

by Paul Geraci

Edward T. Cone's ideas on music perception cause people to re-examine how they listen to music. He presents no objective theories that can be proven in a concrete sense and he often leaves the reader with more questions than answers. But his ideas cause one - or even force one - into thinking about the parameters and boundaries of music and how it will ultimately be perceived. Therein lies his greatest strength as a music theorist: he makes us think! The main ideas that will be discussed throughout this endeavor are Cone's concept of musical frames and the presence (or absence) of the composer's voice. Because this paper is meant to explore the timelessness of Cone's theories, a considerable portion will be dedicated to applying Cone's questions to new examples from a variety of different time periods and genres.

*Shhh! It's about to start.*

Close your eyes. You are there; in the concert hall. The audience is waiting restlessly as they have gathered to hear the famous Tchaikovsky *Symphony No. 4*. The strings tune up and you hear the familiar sounds of open fourths and fifths. Then a hush falls over the crowd. Maestro Whatshisface enters the stage and assumes the podium with enthusiastic applause from the audience. He raises the baton and looks directly at the horns. An uncomfortable silence rings in your ears and you have a lump in your

throat as the anticipation is eating at your gut. Perhaps you can ever hear your own heart beat. There goes the prep beat....The downbeat.... And the horns burst forth with the fate motive! Wow, talk about tension and release!

One of Cone's principles about music perception is to challenge us by simply asking "When does music begin?". The above example illustrates many sounds and silences that occur prior to the "performance" that are not in the score. Can we safely say that this symphony begins on that first downbeat and that all of those emotional moments that came before are not part of it? Or that the energy and power cast into the conductor's silent prep beat are not part of the music? <sup>1</sup>

Cone reminds us that music is a temporal art. That is to say that it occurs throughout a specified or unspecified period or periods in time.<sup>2</sup> Therefore we often feel a need to define this period of time during which we are experiencing music (or cinema, theatre, or dance). This is accomplished by imposing a frame around that time period, a powerful frame that often takes the semblance of silence. It is this effect, this lack of sound, that heralds the arrival of the first note. It is a symbol to listeners as well as performers that we are about to begin... Or have we already begun?

Let us imagine this concept in something less temporal such as a painting or photograph. The artwork is rarely held up on the wall by Scotch tape and thumb tacks.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T.Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 1968), 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 15-16

It has a frame, - a beautiful wooden frame engraved with gold that provides the picture with boundaries and makes it come alive within that given space. The matting is such that it highlights both the gold frame and dark colors of the picture. Is the frame part of the art? Of course the artist who conceived the picture did not build its frame, and that frame is interchangeable with any other. But somehow the picture wants to expand beyond itself and fill out its frame. Perhaps we are more unsure of ourselves than when we started. Good. At least we begin to think. Now let us look at some other examples.

Since we now have the possibility of having a silent frame around music, perhaps a frame within a frame can exist or the frame itself can be a musical event. Take Beethoven's *Symphony no. 3 "Eroica"* for example. Where does the music start? Is it the main theme or the two sharp orchestra hits preceding it? Are these hits part of the music or Beethoven's attention getting gesture screaming "HEY!!! Listen up! I've got something to say!" Beethoven's *Symphony no. 5 in C minor* is another example. Does the music start on beat one, which is a tutti eighth rest, or on the "and" of one?<sup>3</sup> Some conductors like to think of the first bar as the fourth in a silent phrase, which is the anacrusis to the downbeat of measure two. By mentally counting three blank bars, one places the strength of the downbeat of bar 2 on a strong bar, in which case there are several places where one could argue the music actually starts.

But let's leave the symphony. Out of the balcony box seats, into the fancy elevator, down to the red carpeted lobby. BUT WAIT! Did you miss it? *The Girl from*

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 18

*Ipanema* was playing on the Muzak system in the elevator. When did it start? When did it end? Both Satie and Hindemith characterized this as music for use, which means it has a functional or utilitarian value. Since this music has a use (to relax the nerves with tranquil background tones in what some might consider a claustrophobic environment) does it start when A) The janitor turns it on in the morning, B) We can hear it, C) When we enter the chamber and allow the music to do its assigned task, or D) When the song changes? Before you answer this difficult question, why don't you sleep on it?

Perhaps you were enjoying that nice doze when the clock radio struck 7am and started blaring the chorus of Aerosmith's *Dream On*. Almost instantly your hand smashes down the snooze button. Before you go back for your five more minutes of rest ask yourself this. You just heard 6 seconds of a song. Did you hear the beginning and ending of the piece? What was the goal of the music? Can the goal of music be different under different circumstances? If it can, can the start and end of the composition vary as well? By now that clock radio has gone off again and this time it's playing Brittany Spears - So do us all a favor and smash the damn thing!

*When will this be over?*

Now that we are at the end of beginnings we can proceed to the beginning of the ends. Just as the start of a piece may be ambiguous, so the precise location of the piece's ending. I assume you have anticipated the next line of questions. Does it end with the last note? When we leave the concert hall? (Perhaps you are rude and leave early) With

the final reverberations and reflections in the hall? The frame of silence? The applause? Perhaps if it is functional music it is completed when it has finished its task. Again, Cone gives us difficult choices. Now I will compound the problem with technology.

You've finally gotten out of bed and make it in to the music studio. You've laid down some tracks and are ready to do a final mix. The ending however, is a typical 1980s pop song fade out where the master faders are smoothly reduced to an inaudible level. A factor to remember is that the fade occurs over repeated material and the song has really said what has needed to be said. But keep in mind there is still 30 seconds of music left on the tape, although it exists below the threshold of hearing. So then the question is; when does the song end? Perhaps it is an imaginary end or maybe it is meant to be infinite? Does it end at the moment of attenuation or at the end of the fade? I suppose the Schenkerian view would be that it will eventually settle on a tonic chord preceded by a dominant whether it is audible or not. Although you may not have an answer to this dilemma yet, let's go test these new tracks over at the local dance club and maybe we'll find some answers.

You slip the DJ twenty bucks and your CD and watch to see people's reactions. You notice some people going on to the dance floor and some coming off and others stay where they are. The DJ compliments you saying "Man! People can really dance to this groove!" Then you realize you have composed functional music and its purpose is for people to dance to it. Then you ask yourself "Does the music end when someone leaves the dance floor?" What about at the other points we mentioned before? Let's listen a bit

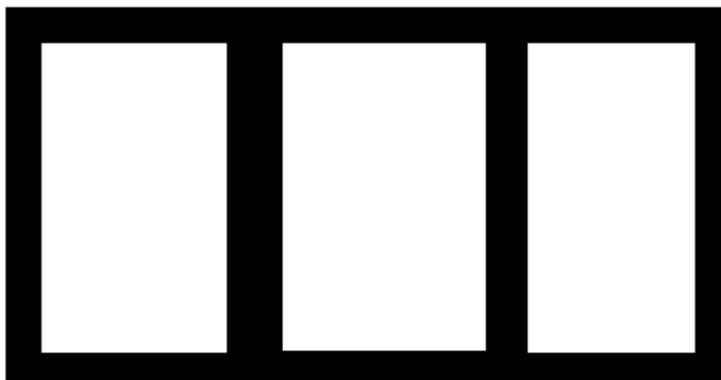
longer as we are nearing the end of the song. Maybe people's actions will determine where the end really is and you can get on with your life without asking yourself any more philosophical questions.

As the music reaches the fade out the DJ creates a cross-fade into the next tune. People have not even noticed the end. With the cross fade they did not even hear it. Some keep dancing, others quit. It's as if they didn't even care. Here we must take a departure back to older dance forms such as minuets, courantes, waltzes, and pavannes. Courtly dance music involved many steps and needed time between songs for participants to prepare for a definite beginning. Only then would they begin to dance. Music at a modern dance club plays continuously allowing participants to join in or exit as they please, yet Cone might argue that the music only truly "begins" when one begins dancing. Consequently the music ends once the function of dancing has ceased.

Cone's thoughts seem akin to the argument "If a tree falls in the woods..." This may be true and we can ponder it for many hours. But is it important? My old music teacher told me people always remember two things: the beginning and the end. It would be nice if we knew which was which. Perhaps then, it is something worthy of thought, especially if the composer, analyst, or listener value the beginning and the end of a work. Still confused? Maybe Mr. Cone can provide a clearer picture.

### *Help! I've Been Framed!*

Since music is intangible and exists throughout a period of time, it is the task of the composer to put a limitation (or lack thereof) on that period or as Cone refers to it: a musical frame. But we have already gone over this concept. What else can it mean? Let's start with possibly the most controversial piece of all time: John Cage's *4'33"*.

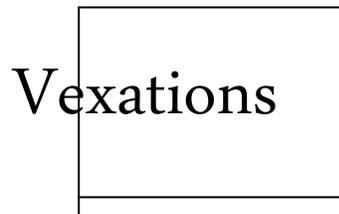


*4'33" John Cage*

While some consider this work merely to be silence or the absence of music, others regard it as a serious musical composition. But if Cone's ideas of musical frames are taken into account we can see that the composer has done some serious planning. The piece is divided into three movements; all with a specified time frame. The three minutes together total 4 minutes and 33 seconds. So in essence, what Cage has done is created a sophisticated overlapping series of frames to capture a specific amount of time. Anything that invades those frames becomes the music. When it occurs within the frame determines what movement it happens in. Well, a picture says a thousand words...

*Still Confused? Maybe Even... Vexed?*

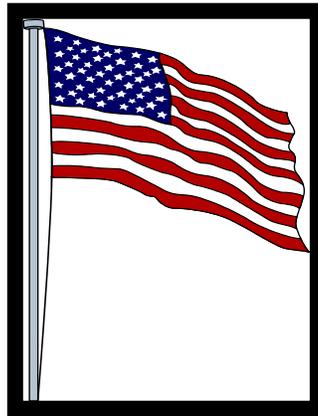
Another example would be Satie's *Vexations*, which is a work that repeats itself an ungodly number of times. Under normal circumstances one would not listen or even perform this work in its entirety, although it has been done as marathon relay concerts have been run. In fact, because of its length, it does not fit onto standard recordable media. Where then does it begin? Where does it end? In a marathon concert version where several pianists take turns audience members frequently enter and exit at their own discretion. Therefore, Cone would take the stance that while they are audience members they install a frame around the music they experience. It might look like this.



*Picture This!*

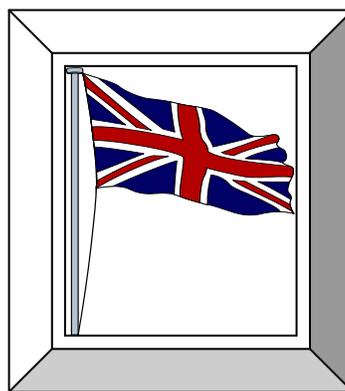
OK so we have an understanding of how frames work but do they really affect our perception of a musical work? Absolutely! Perhaps you are familiar with the tune America (My country tis of thee...). Let's put this fabulous patriotic work of art on display. The only dilemma now is how to frame it. Wait! Yes, I realize that it composer's job to install a temporal frame but the type of frame we (the listener) employ

will alter our musical perception. Step back and "view" this musical picture. What images are conjured fourth? Perhaps something like this.



*America*

What a clear picture. How could we ever imagine anything else? Well let's put a new frame on it. Or more accurately, let's put the older original frame on it. Perhaps our perception of the same music will be altered.

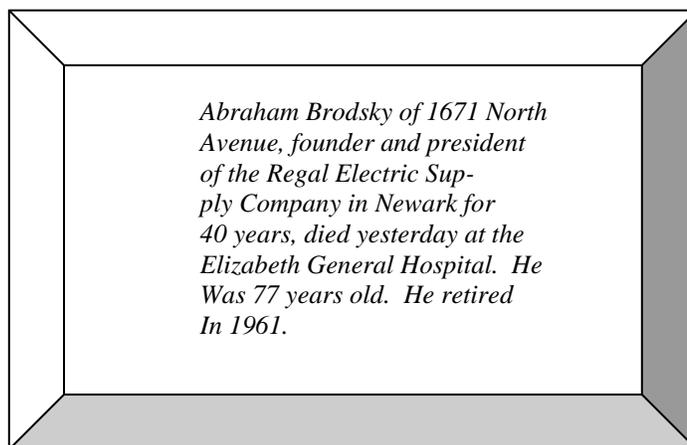


*God Save the Queen*

Same music different frame. Cone's theory is that our framing of a piece will alter our perception of it. By looking at this music within the frame of American society

we see a distinct picture. On the other hand, someone with a British background will see something entirely different. It seems that these musical frames function like glasses or a lens, which, colors the way we look at art. What's more, this lens can be crafted by social and cultural factors.<sup>4</sup>

Claus Cluver cites an example by Ronald Gross who takes an otherwise mundane obituary and re-frames it into what some might call "art". This is accomplished by first giving the "art" a title. In this case Gross calls his work *The Elegiac Verses*. Second, he makes it "look" like a poem with the left margin justified. Does this new frame make this poetry? Art? If it were read by William Shatner or James Earl Jones would it become even more poetic? Again we see that the sometimes the content is defined by the frame.<sup>5</sup>



Elegiac Verses

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<sup>4</sup> Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> Claus Cluver, "Musical Train Rides in the Classroom." *Indiana Theory Review* 12: 165-166.

### *A Fantastique Idea*

Perhaps you are not convinced by either Cone's or Gross's example. The addition of text does tend to easily redefine the meaning of the music or art. Let's examine another famous work of art: *the Symphonie Fantastique*, by Hector Berlioz. Could one somehow put this into a new frame while keeping the same music and storyline? Paul Ignace did just that by altering the title and using his name as the author in place of Berlioz. Ignace states:

*When I was first asked to compose a piece for orchestra I had no idea what they wanted, except an experience of some kind... when I discovered that the concert preceding the night of my premiere included Berlioz's Symphony Fantastique, I made up my mind. I insisted that my work be unrehearsed... Imagine the shock when the conductor and players opened the music to find the work they had performed the night before... But they performed it, much to the anger and horror of the audience and reviewers. They were angry of course, not at the sounds but at my plagiarism but few realized that they listened to the sounds in an entirely new way- something very good, very creative in my way of thinking....<sup>6</sup>*

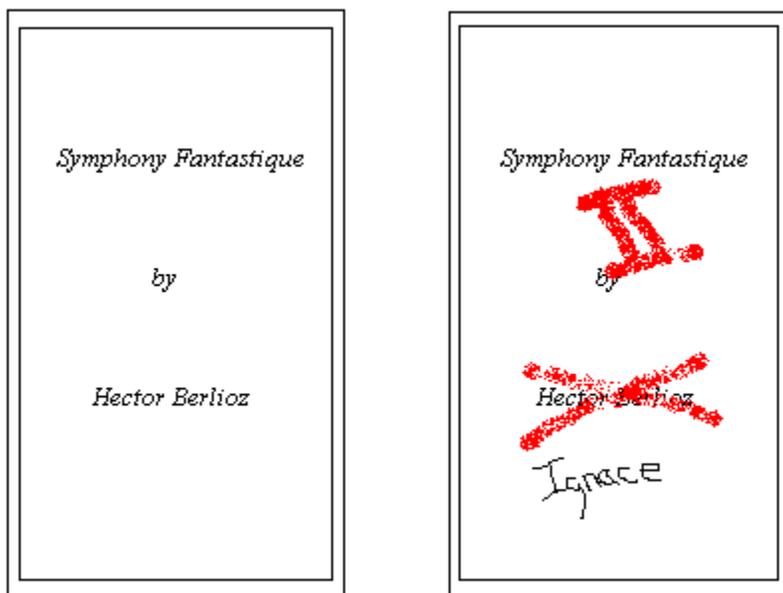
The point is that, much like Cone's example of viewing (or in our case hearing) an identical work with a different frame can result in different possible perceptions of the work. Ignace proves this point in spades by creating an instant hatred and hostile environment. Think about it. Ignace's audience now hears the first movement, Passions, with its lush beautiful sounds and washes of color, as a terrible travesty! Injustice!

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<sup>6</sup> David Cope, *New Directions in Music*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2001), 103-104.

Robbery, plagiarism, theft, or the destruction of one of the world's beloved treasures!

And so we must ask ourselves; what piece are we listening to? Perhaps they ARE two separate compositions.



*Help! I've lost my Voice!*

Another one of Edward Cone's thought provoking insights is that of the composer's voice. He believes, as many do, that music is a language. It communicates, makes statements, conveys messages, emotions, has its own syntax, rhetoric, and semantics. However, one question is never asked: If music is a language, then WHO is speaking?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 1.

What? That's an easy one you say. The composer speaks? Ah, but Mr. Cone would beg to differ. He reminds us of three literary models: the lyric, dramatic, and narrative. In the lyric the author uses their own voice; in the drama it is through the voice of character personas; in the narrative it is a combination of both. Just as Cone has made us aware of these musical frames that alter our perception of sound, he now presents us with another enigma: is our perception influenced by this use of voice and if so how?

In the previous Berlioz/Ignace example it seems that though the music (notes, rhythms, etc...) is the same, but the voice, soul, and personality of Berlioz do not shine through in Ignace's work. Or perhaps Berlioz's voice is present but drowned out by Ignace's loud and overbearing blasphemy. Cone also points out that a composer's voice is not always present and that many times the composer has to assume a persona in order to deliver an effective musical idea. These personae may come in the form of physical characters (opera, musicals, film scores), story characters, or a narrator. In some works the composer must don multiple personas and assume a variety of voices. Cone gives some great examples, so why don't we go to the recital hall and listen?

On the program is Schubert's *Erlkonig*. You are familiar with the text and the story that accompanies the music. The pianist and singer come to the stage and begin the concert. So who is speaking? Is it Schubert? Perhaps, but only if Schubert himself is the storyteller (and the text is by Goethe). More likely it is a narrator persona whom Schubert speaks through. So is it Schubert or a narrator? As you contemplate this dilemma Mr. Cone would like to boggle you further by reminding you that the story

contains characters as well. These characters may have a distinct voice of their own as well. So now we have several voices to contend with.

*Keep Your Voices Down!*

The father, the son, and the Erlkonig are the characters. There is also a narrator at the beginning and end that frames the text of the characters (yes, another one of those blasted frames!). But Cone goes further to say that the narrator at the beginning may be a different one than at the end. This means the possibility of two narrators, which Cone describes as the interlocutor and responder. This presents the possibility of five voices- and we haven't even mentioned the voice of the composer! Here are the possible voicings according to Cone:

- One Voice: Narrator, who quotes three characters.
- Two Voices: Interlocutor and responder who quotes the three characters.
- Four Voices: Narrator and three characters who speak for themselves.
- Five Voices: Interlocutor, responder, and characters.

With all these voices shouting to be heard you realize that only one singer is on the stage. Perhaps it is the simple answer: one voice. Yes that must be it. Besides, what's the difference? The performance will undoubtedly be the same. But as you listen,

the singer's physical voice seems to take on the shape and semblance of the other characters. The father's voice is deep and stern whereby the son's is notably younger, lighter, but ultimately fearful of the dreaded supernatural villain that stalks him. The Erlkonig's voice starts off sweetly as he tempts the boy with elven delights. But after he is rejected, he becomes angry and shows his true voice as he rages "and if you are not willing, then I will use force!"<sup>8</sup>

All of these emotions are portrayed throughout the performance. True, it could be done without the inflections. In fact, multiple vocalists could have been used. But the composer has stayed true to the poetic form and allowed the one singer to embody all of the voices including that of the narrator(s). What then of Schubert? Has the composer been silenced by his own music? Perhaps the composer's voice is defined by the way he defines his persona(s). Then again, maybe the composer's voice is silent. Well, unless you want to sit through another hour of pondering the "voice" in Schubert lieder, let's get out of here. Besides, today your publisher is buying you lunch at T.G.I.M. Monday's.

*It's my Birthday and I'll Cry if I Want to.*

You walk into the restaurant and.... SURPRISE!!! Your co-workers greet you with a rousing rendition of *Happy Birthday to You*. In your confusion of Cone's confounded philosophical riddles you have forgotten your own birthday! You smile as the voices ring out (mostly on key because your friends are musicians too) in celebrating

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* 5-8

another year. Wait, did I say voices? "No, not now!" you think. "Whose voice am I hearing?" Suddenly the familiar tune, sung to you every year, has taken on a serious mystery as to the voice.

Cone explains this as a functional song where the performer expresses himself as a member of a specific community, engaged in performing a task or taking part in a social ritual. The song *Happy Birthday to You* is a social ritual that is commonly observed by society members. Everybody who sings it means it but they do not suppose themselves to be the voice or persona of the composer's voice. So what voice if any do we hear? Mildred J. Hill's (the composer's) voice does not reach out nor pretend to use any persona. Cone points out that this type of music has no "voice" or poetic value, but is used as a ritual symbol.<sup>9</sup>

### *The End Frame*

Are we any better off than when we started? Perhaps Cone's ideas give composers an idea on how their music may be perceived. Although pure factual knowledge and empirical data cannot be derived from these philosophical ideas, one becomes cognizant of the unseen forces that are at work. This may help composers and listeners alike to be aware of the frames being imposed and what voice, if any to listen for in a work. A composer that is aware of and can skillfully manipulate these invisible

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p 49-50

factors can affect a listener's perception of their music. I'm afraid that this article is over... I have to get back to work on my new piece: *Symphony Fastastique No. 3*.

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