Exploring the depth and complexity of musical experience is a tricky business. As for many, if not all, other qualitative aspects of life, this involves navigating a constantly evolving conceptual landscape along with the conventions of social and cultural meaning this entails. Among others, a major challenge for such an enterprise is to describe in detail the what-is-likeness of our engagement with the phenomenon in question, and compare with great accuracy the range of explanatory models developed from different epistemological traditions. In recent years, the school of thought that falls under the umbrella term “embodied cognitive science” contributed to this research avenue a perspective that places a major emphasis on the bodily dynamics through which experience is thought to arise and flourish (Chemero, 2009; Varela et al., 1991). Music research inspired by such an approach holds that categories such as body, action, and movement constitute an arsenal of conceptual tools that can be used to examine from a deeper perspective the various layers of significance that (making, perceiving, composing, etc.) music involves (Iyer, 2002, 2004; Leman, 2007; Schiavio et al., 2020).

Enacting musical time is a wonderful example of a book that combines sophisticated philosophical discussion, insights from musicology and musical analysis, and themes from recent trends in embodied cognitive sciences to achieve such an objective. This interdisciplinary liaison is realized through a focus on the multifaceted notion of “musical time.” The latter, understood as a dynamical interaction between musical sounds and listeners, is examined through a series of explanatory cases extrapolated from contemporary Western classic music, and through a number of evocative descriptions rooted in phenomenological philosophy. Addressing the connection between time, perceptual experience, and contemporary music from multiple angles would be already more than enough to make the book original and fascinating; it is, however, the quality of the writing, the coherence of the proposal, and the rich variety of concrete examples offered throughout the text that make this volume an outstanding contribution.

Kozak expands on the work by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and on the ecological psychology of J. J. Gibson, to problematize existing views on musical time (as, for example, put forward by composers such as Boulez, Carter, or Grisey), arguing the thesis that “the body enacts time by actualizing the potential inherent in a given situation” (p. 7). One after the other, the chapters alternate critical reflections on our listening and bodily capacities with concrete musical examples to develop innovative ways in which said claim can be addressed.

The book begins with a fascinating description of how sounds and bodies become ultimately indissoluble in the continuous process of sense making at the core of our listening experience. It is argued in this first chapter that the temporal dimensions of such a process, as well as its musical significance, are not best captured by the notion of “absolute time” posed by Newtonian physics, where time (like space) is conceived of as “an invisible, homogenous, and potentially empty” (Hatfield, 2006, p. 62) category that arguably stands at an unbridgeable remove from physical motion. Although the latter position largely dominated the scientific discourse at least until the development of the theory of relativity, other approaches may be better suited
to illuminate how musical time shapes, and is shaped by, our situated, embodied musical experience. This is the case, according to Kozak, of the phenomenological notion of “lived time,” which describes “time as it shows up in human lives” (p. 34). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of time as a “network of intentionalities,” it is thus proposed that (musical) time spans the bodily and the sonic/spatial; it is seen to emerge from sets of organism–environment synergies in which the possibilities for meaning making offered by the music are realized in the act of listening. Accordingly, the notion of musical time need not be approached a priori; it rather necessitates a kinesthetic grounding—one that also allows us to delve into a “pre-linguistic, non-representational significance, which discloses music as a temporal object by retaining the dynamical nature of time” (p. 10).

A key notion to explore such a dimension is that of “affordance,” discussed in Chapter 2. Interpretations and usages of this term, originally introduced by J. J. Gibson as (broadly speaking) the set of physical qualities of an object defining different action possibilities for the observer, are first compared across a range of music-related contributions (e.g., Clarke, 2005), and then reorganized in a novel fashion. Indeed, building on such a scholarship, the author develops a framework based on the notion of “temporal affordance,” which aims to capture not only what kind of action possibilities are afforded by music, but also when these can be performed (p. 90). The move is insightful, as it helps us to focus on the temporal sphere that permeates musical experience and its perceptual mechanisms of bodily resonance and action planning, thereby characterizing the process of musical signification as an interplay between music’s temporal depth and the opportunities for meaningful engagements it extends to the listener. It is therefore suggested that if musical meaning making can be manifested in such action–perception couplings, then “movement in general [can be understood as] a kind of knowledge, a kinesthetic knowledge of how ‘music goes’” (p. 107, italics in original).

This is the central theme of Chapter 3, where examples from literature on synchronization and coordination, as well as from contemporary Western music, are systematically offered to show how the body essentially co-creates the temporal significance of music by means of the former’s animation: through actual and potential movement, the body is seen to bring into existence meaningful modes of engagement with the environment that permit the temporal coherency of music to be synthetized into a structured unity. While the general argumentative strategy may not appear entirely new, as other researchers interested in the phenomenology and embodiment of musical experience have already defended similar positions, it is the focus on musical time that makes the proposal refreshing and stimulating.

This becomes clearer in Chapter 4—probably the highlight of the book, despite the dense writing. Having described in the previous parts of the volume how musical meaning is fundamentally embodied, and how music itself may be understood as an emerging property of the interactive interplay between sounds and kinesthetic knowledge, the chapter engages with the latter claim in greater detail, focusing on the notion of “flesh.” Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, the term “flesh” is used to “explore the point of friction between a situated subject and an unfolding [sonic] environment as the source of time that shapes our [musical] experience” (p. 152). This is situated in an examination of the classical philosophical problem of what having a body and being a body at the same time entails for human existence. How does such double status allow rich musical experiences to arise and flourish into a coherent temporal dimension? As explained by Kozak, a possible answer can be found again in the analysis offered by Merleau-Ponty. According to the latter, the body “explicates the implicitly futurity and pastness of each present” (p. 169), hence becoming a “locus of temporal dimensions” (p. 161). From a musically relevant perspective, such an idea might be unpacked as follows: as music perception builds on a capacity to act upon the affective structures we co-create through skillful organism–world relationships, the said capacity can be conceived of as inherently “temporal” when it is rooted in the set of potentialities that the act of listening brings forth. Such potentialities, crucially, are actual possibilities for action, that is, manifestations of the temporally extended network of movement, perception, and meaning, at the roots of music perception.

In defining such a dynamical interplay—which, as anticipated above, involves both “objective” and “subjective" corporeal dimensions—the body becomes once again a central point of discussion: “the organism’s body extends beyond itself in order to generate something new, to create a situation that until then had existed only as a mere possibility, to clear out the space of all affordances and act on a single solicitation that materializes only at that moment” (p. 191). The “enactive” flavor of the latter insight clearly emerges in Chapter 5, where the living system is understood to navigate the complex horizon of possibilities it creates by means of its “lack of indifference” (Colombetti, 2014), or its “identity,” or “point of view” (see also Thompson, 2007). There is thus an affective dimension that cannot be decoupled from the action–perception–meaning network mentioned above, a dimension that is beautifully described by Kozak in these pages.

Chapter 6 concludes the book with a focus on “verticality.” We are told that while this term “is typically used to designate a sonic phenomenon that involves several sounds occurring simultaneously [it is used here instead] to describe the direction of time itself” (p. 233). At this point, I have had some difficulties to follow the argument in its entirety, as the idea of “vertical time”—here understood as “the time that inhabits the gap between Being and Becoming” (p. 233)—is further problematized through the
work of Deleuze and Nietzsche, with a particular focus on the latter’s notion of eternal return. Perhaps a slightly clearer treatment of vertical time can be observed when Kozak focuses on the main musical example of the chapter, that is, a Trio by Hosokawa entitled, indeed, “Vertical Time Study I.” The way in which the author analytically describes the piece—and its structural use of qualitatively different moments of silence—is remarkable, and offers a valuable way to concretize the subtle nuances of what vertical time entails for our perceptual experience. Vertical time, interestingly, does not dwell in musical sounds, nor in the listener’s focus on specific musical moments; it is rather predicated in the specific sense of inhabiting the present that characterizes what “being engaged with the flow of time” (p. 247, italics in original) means for a listener. Many descriptions and comments are offered to support this claim, allowing Kozak to return to the notion of “affect” previously described in Chapter 5, entangled with the focus on the body at the core of the volume.

To conclude, I recommend this book to everyone interested in exploring how musical time can be conceptualized from a range of recent perspectives, and to those enamored by the theoretical possibilities that embodied approaches to cognition may offer to musical research. The writing is personal and insightful, and where there are moments where the flow appears too dense, musical examples are offered to increase clarity and help the reader navigate the various conceptual issues in more familiar terms. As such, the volume contributes to cast interdisciplinary musical research within a landscape that reflects a renewed interest in the bodily bases of musical understanding, meaning, analysis, and perception, and is a remarkable example of scholarship suited for musicologists, philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists.

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**ORCID iD**

Andrea Schiavio @ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8109-9185

**Action editor**

Ian Cross, University of Cambridge, Faculty of Music.

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