

Article

The Familiar Unknown: On the Essence of a Musical Idea

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Abstract: From a Platonistic perspective, ideas are eternal and unchanging, constituting the foundation of reality. An idea itself does not change; it is a principle, immutable in essence. This approach inherently establishes a hierarchy, valuing the world of ideas—understood as objective truth—over the sensory world—seen as deceptive and unstable. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the nature of musical ideas as they emerge from Marcel Proust’s work, exploring their potentially antiplatonistic implications and the philosophical insights they inspired in influential 20th-century thinkers.

Keywords: creation; musical idea; virtuality; Platonism

1. The Platonistic Background and ‘Proust’s Way’

From a Platonistic¹ perspective, ideas are eternal and unchanging; they are the foundation of reality. An idea, an essence [*eidōs*], does not change: it is immutable in principle. However, there can be infinite variations of that idea or essence in the sensible shapes that participate in it. The idea itself is not and cannot ever be fully sensibly realized within the sensible world. Finally, such an approach also clearly implies a difference in value between the world of ideas, which stands for the realm of objective truth, and the sensible world, which is characterized as an unstable and possibly deceptive domain. The sensible world lacks permanence and, therefore, cannot by itself provide a solid and reliable foundation for knowledge (what is true?), ethics (what is good?) and aesthetics (what is beautiful?). In light of this inaugural and general account of the Platonistic distinction between the sphere of sensory experience and the realm of ideas, I would like to tackle the question of the nature of musical ideas. In this paper, an attempt will be made to philosophically address this topic by taking Marcel Proust’s work as a starting point.

In this regard, a brief clarification might be in order. Indeed, having specified the philosophical nature of the present inquiry, one may object that Proust is not strictly speaking a philosopher [1]². Raising this issue may indeed be superfluous; after all, the crucial question should be whether his work generates any philosophical implications, regardless of whether he can be seen, strictly speaking, as a philosopher. Nevertheless, given that the literary nature of Proust’s work might lead some to limit or downplay its philosophical significance, it is worth highlighting a few relevant points in this regard.

In any case, addressing this potential objection allows us (1) to underscore that, while Proust cannot be seen as a “professional” philosopher, his masterpiece has undoubtedly provided a seminal source of inspiration for some of the most significant philosophers of the past century. Despite the absence of explicit philosophical claims [2]³ upon its initial publication, the impact of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) was immediately acknowledged. A work of unparalleled theoretical value, it had a great impact on last-century philosophy—as well as on the first part of the 21st century.



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Along these lines, the objection also enables us (2) to articulate the philosophical originality of some of Proust's positions—despite being rooted in an artistic context. In the wake of Proust's ideas, several philosophers have sought new modes of expression capable of accounting for experiences and essences that exceed rigid conceptual frameworks.

The list of authors who have significantly revised their philosophical perspectives in response to Proust's seminal work is considerable. Only to mention a few: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze (who made the overthrow of Platonism his philosophical battle). As regards music, in his brilliant essay on Proust, the young Beckett states that “a book could be written on the significance of music in the work of Proust, in particular of the music of Vinteuil: the Sonata and the Septuor” [3] (Beckett 1978, p. 70).

In the *Recherche*, the question of the nature of musical ideas assumes a pivotal position. Over the course of 3000 pages, the narrator as an “apprentice” grapples with self-doubt regarding his talent, his calling, and the intrinsic value of a life devoted to writing. He is perpetually beset by a singular and anguishing doubt, namely that art may ultimately prove to be somewhat inferior to reality. In that case, it would make no sense to dedicate time—or even one's life—to it, forsaking more certain and attainable pleasures. In this regard, in the novel, three precursors appear to suggest that art is the sole means of “developing” a value from reality that would otherwise remain unknown and forever lost. One such artist is the musician Vinteuil.

The encounter with Vinteuil's work provides the apprentice with the opportunity to *feel* the essence of music and its value, thereby allowing him to dissolve his personal doubt concerning the literature. Specifically, his engagement with Vinteuil's septet offers him the ultimate proof concerning the “reality of art” *versus* the “unreality of life” [4] (see Proust 1983). Against this background, one shall even go as far as to claim that, in Proust's narrative, all doubt concerning the decision to devote life to the literature is dispelled by the compelling (alogical) ‘argument’ of Vinteuil's musical ideas.

2. The “Little Phrase”

My argument develops based on the assumption that Proust's insights in *In Search of Lost Time* can pave the way to a philosophical investigation of the essence of a musical phrase. In Proust's description, a musical idea comes to express the qualities of an entity that appears to possess an autonomous existence; indeed, it can come to be recognized as a phenomenon that has its own unique features. The issue emerges with full force as early as the first volume. In the context of a musical performance *chez les Verdurin*, the character Swann is struck by a “little phrase” and feels an immediate attraction to it.

He is compelled to acknowledge it as something mysterious and significant, which seems to reveal seminal aspects concerning life. The “little phrase” imposes itself as a value to be followed, it is experienced as having intrinsic worth: “the year before, at an evening party, he had heard a piece of music played on the piano and violin [...] without being able to distinguish any clear outline, or to give a name to what was pleasing him, suddenly enraptured” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 292). What is at stake is a value that is deeply felt, without requiring an explicit intellectual argument for its justification. The only thing Swann knows, comprehending without being able to intellectualize it, is that the little phrase “had opened and expanded his soul” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 292).

This musical phrase represents an appeal to which Swann, at least initially, tries to respond in some way: “he had tried to grasp the phrase or harmony—he did not know which—that had just been played” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 292). This is a crucial point. On the one hand, what manifests itself in this experience appears to possess sense, existence and intrinsic value. On the other hand, while recognizing it, Swann experiences the inability to

conceptualize this peculiar nature. A specific mode of recognition is hinted at, in which something appears to have some kind of identity and yet, as we have just read, one is not “able to distinguish any clear outline” in it.

In other words, what is at stake is an essence that cannot be wholly circumscribed by that which, in Kantian terms, one might call a determinate concept [*Begriff*]. This essence cannot be grasped [*begreifen*] by the regular meter of our intellect. Proust’s text attempts to account for this nature in the following way: «Swann had regarded musical motifs as actual ideas [...] impenetrable to the human mind” and yet “perfectly distinct from one another” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 478). Attention is drawn to the nature of the musical idea and its ontological consistency. And regarding this appeal, the narrator agrees with Swann. It would not be an illusory call, nor the manifestation of something insubstantial. In this respect, Swann is on the right track. He “was not mistaken in believing that the phrase of the sonata really did exist” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 480).

However, one should emphasize that this may give rise to doubts. Indeed, this first characterization of the musical idea, via Swann, ultimately seems to leave room for a Platonistic development of the issue. In fact, a dichotomic approach seems to be applied as Swann insists that ideas “belonged to an order of supernatural beings whom we have never seen, but whom, in spite of that, we recognise and acclaim with rapture when some explorer of the unseen contrives to coax one forth, to bring it down, from that divine world to which he has access, to shine for a brief moment in the firmament of ours” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 480).

Undoubtedly, the Proustian vocabulary here seems to allow for a Platonistic construal, according to which Vinteuil appears to have *brought to light* the little phrase rather than *create* it. More generally, when describing artistic creation, verbs such as “unveil”, “uncover”, “bring to light”, “unearth”, etc., all implicitly suggest that the artistic object already exists in some latent or pre-existing form, waiting to be revealed through the act of creation—which would then amount to a mere realization. This approach implies that the artist does not generate something partly or wholly new but instead only facilitates the emergence of what was previously hidden, making it visible, audible, etc. Along these lines, the narrator stresses how “Swann felt that the composer had been content (with the musical instruments at his disposal) to unveil it [*scil.* the little phrase], to make it visible” [5] (Proust 1984).

Following this line of thought, the artist is construed as a merely passive seer who is able to uncover what was not visible but, in principle, was already there before the gesture that unveiled it. Seen this way, the invisible musical theme was already at disposal, so to speak, for any eye or ear able to grasp it. Moreover, this approach would ultimately risk disqualifying the sensible dimension. The idea must come to terms with matter (here: with sound), a matter that, in principle, is unable to attain the purity of the idea or, at any rate, always second in value to the idea.

Through a Platonistic lens, the musical phrase is construed as a preexisting essence waiting to be discovered by the artist. One should probably add that this is equally compatible with a rigid form of “Aristotelianism”⁴, according to which potentiality would essentially predetermine actuality as its own goal to attain. In this case, the form serves as the pole of attraction that makes movement toward it (the process) possible. In any case, it is worth emphasizing here that when the idea is conceived as a preexisting essence, the fact that it is placed at the beginning (as an origin to be realized) or at the end of the process (as a goal to be achieved) does not substantially modify the scenario. In either case, the process remains subordinate to the law of the preexisting idea. This perspective clearly prioritizes the ideal-formal world—understood as the immutable truth—over the transient, ever-changing sensible world that lacks permanence.

3. The Platonistic Effect

However, the Proustian path to the ideal dimension is not merely equivalent to a Platonistic return to hidden ideas, which would be then made visible by providing them with the “lacking” material sound. ‘Expressing an idea’ is not tantamount to going back (or forward, for that matter) to a defined ideal dimension, which is by nature opposed to the sensible one. As we have seen, the narrator does highlight that “Swann had regarded musical motifs as actual ideas [...] of another order” [5] (Proust 1984, p. 478). However, this does not lead to a Platonistic outcome. In fact, he decisively underscores that such were “ideas veiled in shadow, unknown [...] unequal among themselves in value and significance» [5] (Proust 1984, p. 478).

This is the critical juncture at which Proust’s reflections open up the possibility of introducing a new way of understanding the ideation process we are investigating. The intellectual eye cannot grasp these musical ideas, and this is not because of some veil preventing our conceptual framework from capturing their forms. Unlike what in principle should happen within a Platonistic theoretical framework, here ideas cannot find a proper definition that circumscribes them. Musical ideas cannot be grasped through the “light of an *intuitus mentis*” only. The key point, here, is that, while not relying on a determinate concept, these ideas seem to hold an intersubjective value. This is precisely their specific force, that is, to be able to express a form that the clearness and distinction of Cartesian memory cannot outline.

Proust indicates the potential for music to express ideas that cannot be confined to the boundaries of logical reasoning or schemas and that exceed the scope of what he refers to as the “idea of intelligence” or “intellect”. Through his literary device, Proust elaborates a notion of idea that defies reduction to logical generality; the essence of the “little phrase”, for instance, cannot be entirely encompassed by rigid definitory reasoning or merely formal structures. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, despite their logical indefinability, these ideas can be recognized and distinguished from one another. They appear to possess a distinctive quality, which can be shared yet not conveyed through the medium of communicating well-demarcated: «In [the] little phrase, although it might present a *clouded surface to the eye of reason*, one sensed a content so solid, so consistent, so explicit, to which it gave so new, so original a force, that those who had once heard it *preserved the memory* of it on an equal footing with the ideas of the intellect» [5] (Proust 1984, p. 479, emphasis mine).

This is a crucial point, that introduces the question of memory. Not only are such “clouded” ideas recognizable, but, once recognized, they become our possession, our “captives”, as [5] Proust (1984, pp. 479) writes. Peculiar prisoners, indeed, since what is at stake here is a two-way possession. We possess them since in the first place they manifest themselves by possessing us. They are going to enrich our horizons, in Bergsonian terms, our *durée* as a sense operating at an emotional and axiological level. While they are not intellectual ideas, they manifest themselves in the realm of sense as part of our knowledge acquisition. We “preserved the memory of it”, much like intellectual ideas. This amounts to saying that sensible ideas are different, yet no less valuable than the ideas of intelligence. What is more, the question arises of whether there is a foundational relationship between these two types of ideas, particularly whether sensible ideas—as [6] Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 151) also calls them—precede and genealogically ground the ideas of intelligence. The latter, one might claim, can be construed as the “intellectual translation” of the former.

Along these lines, the musical idea cannot be reduced to a notion of the intellect. It is an expression of an ideal entity through sound—a “lived sound”, as Rousseau would put it [7] (Rozzoni 2023). That is why the music score cannot exhaust the *virtual* richness of a musical idea—and cannot tell us much about its essence, as Swann himself comes to

realize [5]⁵. Just as the chronological timeline one draws on a piece of paper or screen is merely a trace of an original *durée* [8] (Bergson 1913), the score line ‘representing’ a musical theme is just one way to retrace and capture some abstract points of an essence, rather than the essence itself. In this context, the sound is not the empirical dress meant to give exhaustive material consistency to a preexisting defined essence.

And yet, at this juncture, one might wonder: why does the Platonistic view seem, first and foremost, to be prevailing? Why do musicians, when asked about the creative process, often refer to the paradigm of unveiling and discovery? As previously made clear, this would mean construing ideas as existing independently of—and prior to—their sensible manifestations.

In fact, I would like to suggest that this is due to some sort of “Platonistic effect”, a type of illusion clarified by the insights provided by a contemporary (and relative) of Proust, namely Henri Bergson. According to his influential essay about the “retrograde movement of truth”, the Platonistic approach—which suggests that an ideal musical idea exists before its sound realization—can be seen as stemming from an illusory movement created by our intellect. Bergson explains that, driven by a tendency inherent in the very nature of our intellect, we are usually inclined to project acquired truths retroactively onto the past.

More specifically, regarding the issue at hand, the claim that an original melody revealed by a musician would precede its discovery—that is, that the musician merely unearthed or unveiled it—is generated by a kind of superstition. Indeed, when a genuine creation is at stake, the melody that emerges in its originality was not possible prior to the gesture that manifested it. To the question: “When a musician composes a symphony was his work possible before being real?”, Bergson replies: “Yes, if by this we mean that there was no insurmountable barrier to its realization” [9] (Bergson 1946, p. 21). In other words, all we can legitimately say is that the melody was not impossible. However, negating impossibility does not equate to affirming a definite possibility. Yet, we inadvertently take this step: we deduce the latter (possibility) from the former (not impossibility).

Indeed, from the fact that an original melody reveals itself to a musician in the here and now, we deduce that, as a possibility, such a melody must have already been available beforehand and in another place. Otherwise, as the advocate of a Platonistic approach would put it, how could the musician possibly discover it? However, such a question results from an undue projection at play. The presumed possibility is molded on the very outcome it should generate. The outcome is taken and projected backward: its shadow—already reflecting its form—is cast toward an indeterminate point, which is then assumed to be its origin. In other words, one often fails to notice how, ultimately, the very possibility, which appears to be pre-existing, is fundamentally derived from the form of the result one seeks to account for.

More generally, one should make clear that, according to Bergson, based on the outlined typically human approach, everything that “occurs could have been foreseen by any sufficiently informed mind” [9] (Bergson 1946, p. 21). After all, what happens must already have been present, “in the form of an idea” [9] (Bergson 1946, p. 21)—hidden in the unknown, so to speak—waiting to be realized. It is also worth emphasizing that, concerning the creation of a musical work of art, for Bergson, this approach is all the more “absurd”, “for from the moment that the musician has the precise and complete idea of the symphony he means to compose, his symphony is done” [9] (Bergson 1946, p. 21).

However, it is equally important to stress that this possibility of projection is not inherently mistaken or harmful. This type of cognitive retrospective movement does not need to be outright labeled as detrimental. Instead, what can be problematic is that we often engage in it unconsciously. It is not merely a matter of condemning it, but rather of

understanding its significance and exploring its potential legitimate uses. Our intellect specifically possesses the ability to “analyze” our experiences. It can “melt” the flow of life into discrete components, representing points on a physical medium. For example, we can depict a musical phrase—like Vinteuil’s—on a musical score, and once again, we can represent the creation process itself as a linear sequence of states.

Now, these representative gestures are not “innocuous”; they are laden with consequences. Indeed, such representative translations can give rise to illusions. One might believe they faithfully represent the unfolding of our experience, and yet they instead betray the concrete *durée*. In fact, they represent the discrete parts as spatially simultaneous on a single line. On the one hand, *once the process is complete*, we can describe it through a sequence of states. We observe the timeline from an alleged external perspective and view these stages as distinct, self-contained moments. Take the sequence A, B, C, D, E, where the musician leaves their home (A), enters the studio (B), takes up their instrument (C), and, as they begin to play (D), at a certain point (E) “discover” a musical idea (i) that captures their attention as both novel and valuable. If reality were a film already written and formally “shot”, a “well-informed” mind, as we have seen, could, in principle, have anticipated its manifestation before it unfolded in time. We may not know its plot, but its moments—both past and future—would already be formally available, like the frames of an analog film: determined and simultaneously accessible before the projection. In this regard, it should be added that in *Creative Evolution* [10] Bergson (1998, chapter 4) describes the kind of deceptive approach at stake in terms of a “cinematic illusion”. We tend to think that at the moment (A) the idea (i) discovered in (E) was formally present in some other dimension, waiting for someone (some artist) to pick it up. However, as we have seen, the original idea—believed to have been covertly present in A (as well as before and after, for that matter)—is merely a replication of the idea manifesting itself in E, namely (i).

At this juncture, however, one might object: if (i) did not already exist as a possibility, then where does it originate from? If it does not descend from the Platonic realm, might it then arise from nothing? Are we dealing with creation *ex nihilo*?

4. Nocturnal Ideas

In order to make headway on this issue, I would like to refer to the course on Cartesian ontology that Merleau-Ponty taught at the Collège de France during the 1960–1961 academic year—shortly before his untimely death in May 1961. There, Merleau-Ponty extensively addresses the question of logically elusive ideas. Unsurprisingly, the source of inspiration is Marcel Proust. According to the French phenomenologist, the philosophical significance of Proust’s literary work provides a seminal hint for developing a mode of thought that, in his view, contemporary philosophical discourse—still heavily influenced by Cartesianism—had failed to fully embrace.

Notably, in this course, he elaborates on Proust’s treatment of the musical idea, a topic previously explored in *Phenomenology of Perception* (see for example Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 168, 212, 454 [11]) and further developed in his philosophical (unfinished) testament, *The Visible and the Invisible* ([6,12] Merleau-Ponty 1968)⁶.

Clearly referencing the Proustian passage mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty writes that “Proust’s musical ideas [...] [are not] intellectual ideas”. In fact, they are “veiled by darkness; opaque to the intellect”; their “surface” is “obscure”. At the same time, in alignment with our preceding discussion, he emphasizes that they are “nevertheless resistant; distinct; unequal in value and signification” [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, p. 117). I would like to emphasize that this difference in value and signification is not grounded in argumentative elements and is not conceptually shaped. Such signification and value are

recognized on an emotional level. We experience an affection that is felt as valuable and meaningful, even if it is not strictly logical.

Certainly, as previously made clear, a creative process is not a matter of forms that are objectively defined to be discovered in a hyperuranic dimension. However, it is also not simply a matter of eliciting subjective forms or preformed emotions that would reside within a subject, which music, considered a vehicle, allows us to “bring out”. For this reason, as well, these ideas are very difficult to bring to life at will. Any sufficiently talented musician could deliberately forge excellent—yet not original—compositions, but only by following already defined styles and rules [14] (Bertinetto 2012). The moment it seems new ideas are born—when the music appears genuinely productive—is actually marked by a kind of productive passivity, a blind spontaneity. In the end, the new idea must surprise musicians; how could it surprise them if they already possessed it and they already knew its valuable form?

This is why, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes with reference to Proust, musical ideas seem to “‘descend’ into the piano and violin which are hurrying to join them” [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, pp. 117). In the same vein, just a few years earlier, also at the Collège de France, in the *Notes for the Course on the Concept of Nature*, Merleau-Ponty writes: “When we invent a melody, the melody sings in us much more than we sing it; it goes down the throat of the singer, as Proust says. Just as the painter is struck by a painting which is not there, the body is suspended in what it sings: the melody is incarnated [*la mélodie s’incarne*] and finds in the body a type of servant” [15] (Merleau-Ponty 2003, pp. 173–174). Even though one can certainly agree that the musician becomes “the servant” of the music, this perspective risks reintroducing Platonist tendencies—similar to those described in *Ion*, where the Muse possesses poets and dictates their creations to them.

It is clear that concerning Proust, Merleau-Ponty is treading a fine line, balancing on the edge of Platonism while trying to avoid falling back into the illusion of the retrograde movement of truth. In this regard, one key point should be emphasized: in invention, the role of the musician is not merely passive; rather, it is passively creative. The servant becomes the producer. When it comes to the invention of melody, as Merleau-Ponty points out, what is involved is a kind of passive activity. The “faculty” at play, if one may use this term, is a form of *cogitatio* that is neither deterministically conceptual nor operates solely in an active manner. It is through a *cogitatio caeca* that one can creatively recognize ideas “veiled in darkness” and lacking the radiance of the “intelligible sun”.

Now, in response to the issue raised above, these ideas do not emerge *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Rather, they always arise from the articulated horizon in which our existence has always been situated and to which it has always been called to respond. This horizon, moreover, can be continuously enriched through the notions, styles, and ideas we encounter—elements that, as we have seen, may be preserved within our *durée*.

In this, we always act and think from and with such a state of perspectival “implicitities”, continually engaging with it. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty also talks about a kind of “latency” within us: “‘keyboard,’ preexisting ‘keys’ [*touche*s] in us that they [*scil.* the ideas] come to touch [*viennent toucher*]; latent within ourselves when we do not think about it, exactly like the significance of the Pythagorean theorem” [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, p. 117).

This “latency” referred to by Merleau-Ponty can be interpreted as a dimension that constitutes us, a *durée* that must be continuously rearticulated. Such a *durée* is neither a repository of fixed ideas nor a consciousness linked to a universal library that has already cataloged all possible forms. The very notion of such a universal library is something we construct ourselves, projecting back into this imaginary space the forms that instead manifest over time—as if they were “preexistent”.

Along these lines, we can maintain that these ideas do not simply “fall from the sky”; rather, *they manifest as a qualitative difference that emerges from latency*. As previously noted, in the case of the musical process of creation, it is not intellectual ideas that come to light (Pythagorean model) but a different kind of idea. Inspired by Proust, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between two different processes of ideation: (i) through *intuitus mentis*, grasping clear and distinct ideas (in the wake of Descartes), and (ii) through *cogitatio caeca*, detecting ideas “less positive than not absent”, which are characterized by an “obscure surface” [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, p. 117) and are “related to notions of the sensible, notably light” [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, p. 115). Were the creative moment conceived according to the first model, then, as Gilles Deleuze remarks, “to create” would be tantamount “to remember[ing]” [16] (Deleuze 2000 p. 111). As for the second one, we might refer to this second kind of ideas—including musical ones—as nocturnal ideas, distinguishing them from the “intellectual” ideas grasped in the Platonistic sunlight⁷. In this sense, the very notion of light—referred to by Merleau-Ponty as a sensible idea—would be regarded as a nocturnal idea as well.

Nocturnal essences certainly emerge through a recognition of meaning and value, only without relying on a logical structure. This is no plain recognition. Rather, such a recognition seems to be paradoxical, since we recognize something that was not there, something new. It is a *creative recognition*. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty revives Plato’s Meno eristic argument to reconsider the possibility of accounting for “what was before creation”, avoiding both Platonistic and Creationist (*ex nihilo*) outcomes. On the one hand, he asks, “how is it creation if what the writer [in our case: the musician] says must be understood? On the other hand, how can one pretend that what he says [in our case: plays] preexists?”

For instance, suppose I am a musician and that, *while playing*, I recognize a “phrase” I have never heard before. Now, if it has truly been created—that is to say, if it presents a differentiating element—how can I expect others to recognize it? And how could I, in the first place, have recognized it myself? Should I then say that it preexists? That the differentiating element was simply hidden, and somehow I discovered it? Then, once again, we would lose creation in favor of mere recognition. Caught in the dilemma between an inexplicable production of novelty (*ex nihilo*) and an inexplicable preexistence of the idea (Platonism), Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to suggest a “solution”, which seems to take into account Bergson’s warning about the risk of falling under the unconscious influence of the “retrograde movement of truth”. While discussing Proust and the creation of the literary sentence, what Merleau-Ponty claims equally applies to the “nocturnal” musical phrase:

Solution: the world that he [Proust] says is a visible, sensible, mute World onto which we are all open. What he says comes to join the “keyboard”, “keys” of our life *preexisting in a sense*. But there is precisely no preexistence as thing said [played, painted, and so on] [...] this phrase is creation because signification only existed as the mute frame of the visible, hieroglyph, and these are the words [sounds, colors] that make it exist for itself [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, p. 122, emphasis mine).

Regarding this “hieroglyphical” preexistence, it may also be useful to refer to Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of Bergson’s aforementioned warning. Deleuze examines the creative act through the lens of the relationship between the virtual and the actual, which is meant to replace the distinction between the “possible” and the “real”—the latter still being imbued with metaphysical assumptions. Following Bergson, Deleuze notes that understanding creation in terms of the “possible” and the “real” implies that the “possibility” of, say, a musical idea already defined before the artist gave it “reality”, that is, prior to its *realization*.

This is why, “from the point of view of the concept, there is no difference between the possible and the real”. [17] (Deleuze 1988, p. 97) From a conceptual standpoint, the idea would already be predefined before its realization, and bringing an idea to life would be nothing more than giving a physical existence to that concept, which, consequently, would not undergo any essential modification: the possible and the real are distinguished only by the attribute of existence, which applies to the latter but not to the former (see [18] Deleuze 1988 p. 97). Within this framework, the realized musical phrase—manifested in concrete sound—would be conceptually identical to the possible phrase.

Considering what has been said about the retrograde movement of truth, this should come as no surprise. Indeed, “the possible” would be nothing more than an effect of the retrospective projection of the result. Thus, in the wake of Bergson, Deleuze provides valuable insights into the specific sense in which one can speak of the pre-existence of a work of art. This might be construed as a further development of the above-cited “solution” proposed by Merleau-Ponty. In this regard, Deleuze distinguishes between the notions of “virtual” and “possible”. He explains that “the virtual”, unlike the possible, “does not have to be realized, but rather actualized” [17] (Deleuze 1988, p. 97). Clearly, the key point is the distinction between realizing and actualizing, especially concerning the different understandings of the creative processes these terms denote. In this context, Deleuze highlights that the process of actualization, unlike realization, must involve producing a difference. Actualization does not occur solely through the principle of similarity, which would instead govern the transition from the possible to the real. Rather, actualization unfolds according to the principles of “difference or divergence” [17] (Deleuze 1988, p. 97).

In other words, to be actualized, the virtual must change and become something other than what it originally was. Thus, the musical idea does not pre-exist in its sensible manifestation as a defined possibility. Before manifestation, there is a dynamic state of virtuality, in which forces, directions, orientations, and tendencies continuously accompany our present without implying in a defined manner the subsequent developments.

5. The Familiar Unknown

Thus, the phrase played is not simply the sonic realization of a possible wholly implied phrase; rather, it manifests itself as the actualization—through difference—of virtuality. This difference, as previously suggested, is recognized as valuable, i.e., worth preserving and worth repeating. The musical phrase of Vinteuil, just like the literary phrase of Proust, does not, so to speak, “descend from above” (or, more broadly, from a metaphysical “elsewhere”). It emerges from a *durée* as a created actualization. In the flux of the *durée*, we are ceaselessly encountering opportunities for development that can be suggested without being predetermined. This is what I would call the “polyfuration” of every moment, which can unfold in several ways, complying with—yet not forced by—what has already been.

The musical sense of a minimal theme is perceived through a passage, a sonic path through which a sense is produced, originally affective and axiological. Thus, we can say that a musical idea emerges when—through the musician—a *differential variation* arises, an element of novelty that is emotionally recognized as bearing a valuable (“alogical”) meaning. Musical ideas develop over time and, once recognized, can expand and enrich our *durée*. And yet, to be contemplated again, musical ideas cannot be simply observed as a whole: rather, they must be reproduced over time, with the inherent potential to give rise, in principle, to further variations and stimulate, in turn, the creation of new ideas.

Significant in this context is a section of the recently released footage from Peter Jackson’s *The Beatles: Get Back*. John (Lennon) is late. Paul (McCartney) is humming a motif in a repetitive form—like a “rule” he already knows. Nothing new—everything sounds far too ordinary. George (Harrison) yawns. At a certain point, a variation occurs, and a

different musical sense is recognized as valuable, delineating the birth of a musical idea. This situation parallels our previous example concerning the sequence A, B, C, D, E. Paul surely left his home (A), we can see him in the studio (B), taking up his bass (C), starting to play and hum (D) and, at a certain point (E) “producing” a vocal variation (melody) that is immediately recognized (felt as both *novel* and *valuable*). From that moment on, he will hold on to it as a core idea (y) to preserve and to develop through new repetitions.

Actually, when disposing of documentary footage, we might understandably think that we can break this *process* down into frames or sequences. We can go back in the footage to the moment (D: humming and playing the loop). According to the argument presented here, there is nothing, at that point in the process, that can *determinate* in advance as a defined possible result that in a moment Paul will recognize the differential variation as constituting the valuable idea (y) that, through further developments, will become the song “Get Back”. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. Paul McCartney creating “Get Back”, still from *The Beatles: Get Back* [18] (P. Jackson, 2021).

As we have attempted to demonstrate, it would also be incorrect to claim that “Get Back” was already “hidden in the past” in the Twickenham studio or “elsewhere” prior to its manifestation in the process. Indeed, given the same conditions of actuality (and their implied virtualities), the favorable condition may not have emerged at all, or it could have emerged unnoticed and unfixed, only to be lost, or, alternatively, it might have led to something entirely different. In principle, this is true for every frame. From the perspective of “creative evolution”, each frame “presentifies” a moment in which a “polyfuration” of developmental lines is virtually at play. However, this tendency cannot be fixed or captured by a frame, or through a multiplication of frames, for that matter. What is primary here is the process. In the original process, there are no absolute instants that are separate from it. The process can never be reconstituted by merely summing up the frames, not even if they were an innumerable quantity. Each “moment” is not only originally developing the previous one, but it also involves the entire *durée*, which teems with other implicit ideas.

At a certain phase of the process, a development generates a new relationship that a “transformative agent” recognizes as valuable in an active–passive way. Paul plays that development, but he did not know what he would play until a moment before. Transformative agents must perceive the value (“valueception”) of what they are doing in order to feel it—before any explicit assertion—as worthy of being “retained” or “saved”. Not every variation results in a creation, and simply altering or deforming something is not enough to be considered original.

We might suggest that the musician, as a passive–active agent, is a *durée* (past) always projected through repetition toward rearticulation (future). Repetitions can either “follow the rules” already established or they can chart new directions of meaning (incidentally, for Kant, the genius is precisely the one who gives the rule to art, rather than merely following it). There is, therefore, a dynamic sedimentation of *durée* open to the possibility

of creating new relationships and links: in this sense unfolding, as a differential gesture, is to create. Such connections are neither purely subjective (as if duration were a private matter) nor purely objective (as if they existed independently of point of view or agency). Along these lines, the “author”—the one who will be called such—is not a seer in a merely Platonic sense but a nexus of forces. A creative passivity: on the one hand, such agents are traversed by forces (passivity); on the other, they might generate originality in their responses (activity). Every response is a possible “being in the world”, an expression that can be shared and resonate with other *durées*. “Paul” then becomes the name for original responses that renovate musical forms by “coherently deforming” (see [13] Merleau-Ponty 2022, p. 132) them, and such variations will influence other durations attracted—by their value—to those particular modes of rearticulation.

Video recordings capturing the birth of the idea of “*Get Back*”, along with any other audiovisual documentation of that creative moment, are undoubtedly of great importance in understanding otherwise unknown aspects of that particular process. However, they remain merely a representation of a process whose analysis cannot be simply reduced to its audiovisual presentification nor fully accounted for or recreated by audiovisual infinitesimal analyses. This is particularly true when investigating the differential moment in which an idea is born. One could break down the privileged moment into as many frames as desired, yet the essence of creative dynamics cannot be fully grasped through such hypothetical vivisection. It is worth noting, moreover, that while decomposition could, in principle, yield still images, it cannot produce “still sounds”.

This is because the differential point of creation is not a static point but an evaluative threshold in which creative improvisation takes place. As also the example of *Get Back* seems to show, creation necessitates improvisation. The differential path imposes itself as improvisation, in the sense of an *improvisus* element: unforeseen, unexpected⁸. While working, artists wait, so to speak, for the unexpected, for ideas that are not yet known since they have literally not yet taken place. The evaluative agents must be able to recognize the value of their deformation without ever knowing exactly when, or even if, the idea worthy to be preserved shall be created.

An unexpected leap that brings forth what was not there before and that, only now, we recognize as what we had been searching for—precisely because it had not yet emerged. Of course, “new” variations must be said to be compatible with the preceding phases, and yet they are not predetermined by them. As with any creation that can be called such, *Get Back* comes to the fore as inherently paradoxical: a familiar unknown, suddenly recognized as something that was not there before.

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Notes

¹ It is important to specify that ‘Platonism’ here refers to a form of thought derived from Plato, yet one to which Plato’s philosophy cannot be reduced. For instance, through the noun ‘Platonism’ and the adjective ‘Platonic,’ Gilles Deleuze—following Nietzsche—characterizes an interpretation of reality that originates in Plato’s philosophy and permeates the history of Western thought, ultimately becoming its dominant framework.

² For a discussion on the possibility, raised by Merleau-Ponty, of considering Proust a philosopher, see [1] Rozzoni (2010).

- ³ In fact, it is worth recalling that Proust, who held a degree in philosophy, deliberately chose to pursue philosophical truths by writing a novel (see, for instance, [2] Rozzoni 2016).
- ⁴ Clearly, the same considerations outlined with regard to the term “Platonism” should also apply to “Aristotelianism”.
- ⁵ Swann’s attempt to search for the essence of the “little phrase”, focusing on measurable and countable characteristics that can be translated into musical notation, is doomed to failure: “When, after that first evening at the Verdurins’, he had had the little phrase played over to him again, and had sought to disentangle from his confused impressions how it was that, like a perfume or a caress, it swept over and enveloped him, he had observed that it was to the closeness of the intervals between the five notes which composed it and to the constant repetition of two of them that was due that impression of a frigid and withdrawn sweetness; but in reality he knew that he was basing this conclusion not upon the phrase itself, but merely upon certain equivalents, substituted (for his mind’s convenience) for the mysterious entity of which he had become aware, before ever he knew the Verdurins, at that earlier party when for the first time he had heard the sonata played”. (see [5] Proust 2013, p. 478).
- ⁶ The composition of *The Visible and the Invisible* began in 1959, and the course on Cartesian ontology and ontology today developed alongside this work. Not coincidentally, the section of the course dedicated to Proustian sensible ideas is titled ‘The Visible and the Invisible: Proust.’ On Merleau-Ponty’s reading of “the musical ideas of Proust” see also [12] Wiskus 2013, chapter 8.
- ⁷ “We have said Platonism, but these ideas exist without intelligible sunlight and are related to visible light: a frame [*membrure*] of the visible. Secret, unveiled and veiled, ‘alogical’ (Scheler) essences” [13] (Merleau-Ponty 2022, pp. 116).
- ⁸ On the intimate relationship between artistic creation, improvisation and the unexpected see [14] Bertinetto 2012.

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