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The eclipse of listening

by [Roger Scruton](#)

The third in a series on “The future of the European past,”

Music exists in every human society. In its primary forms of dance, march, and collective song, it is a participatory activity whose purpose is often religious or bellicose. The throbbing drum of the war dance is the spirit of the tribe, in which the warrior loses his identity so as to become one with the collective will. The hymn is the collective voice of the congregation as it communes with its god.

In Western civilization, music of a quite different kind has gradually pushed the old participatory forms to one side. Our musical culture depends on a radical divide between performer and listener. For us the act of listening takes place in silence, often in the hushed and reverential atmosphere of a concert hall. To sing, hum, gesticulate, or tap your feet in time is not just bad manners. It is a violation of the sacred ritual, which merits nothing less than expulsion from the divine presence into the cacophonous street ...

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