

Attending to Attention in Descartes's *Musicae Compendium* (1618 / 1650)

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In the initial pages of his first treatise, the *Musicae Compendium* (1618 / 1650), René Descartes famously lays out a series of eight psychological axioms pertaining to sensory perception, and continues with a remarkable passage describing the experience of perceiving and synthesizing musical rhythm, meter, and form. These introductory pages have garnered considerable scholarly attention, and writers have interpreted them as reflecting the young Descartes' thought on topics ranging from geometry, proportion, representation and resonance to material culture and the body. But it is not only the treatise's opening that is striking: the rest of the work contains significant novelties as well, particularly with regard to the psychology of the listener. Surprisingly, however, the work's subsequent innovations have thus far attracted little notice (perhaps in part as a result of H. Floris Cohen's rather casual dismissal of the treatise as "Zarlino, more *geometrico*").

As I show, a close reading of the *Compendium* demonstrates that Descartes was concerned with cognitive and processual aspects of musical perception centuries before these topics would move to the forefront of music-theoretical discourse. Specifically, I argue that Descartes consistently differentiates between the faculties involved in acts of perception at short, mid-range, and long-term scales, and that clarifying this tripartite distinction allows us to recognize that the *Compendium* in fact provides a psychological and subjective descriptive account of the experience of music in time, not only with regard to the perception of musical form, but also, albeit less explicitly, in its treatment of more elementary relationships in the domains of rhythm and pitch. The significance of this treatise thus lies less in its association with the emerging physico-mathematical science of its age—as has so often been claimed to its detriment—than in its startlingly prescient character as a harbinger of the modern field of music cognition.