First Reading of Psalm 42

When our scriptural reasoning group first met, we found it difficult to let the yearning of verse 1 be, to let the deer thirst for flowing streams without that thirst being quenched somewhere in the psalm. Doesn't God always satisfy the thirsty soul? Much of our group's initial conversation involved searching the psalm for some kind of water: in the expression of grief and tears (v. 3), in the memory of the psalmist celebrating with the "multitude keeping festival" (v. 4), in the landscape of the Jordan (v. 6), or even in the act of prayer itself. But the psalm ends with the soul still cast down (v. 11) as if all those sources of solace ultimately failed. Somehow, it was easier for us to look for the soul's gratification, to find words for that, even if they rang a bit false. It was much harder to put words to the soul's yearning.

We were also struck by the differences between the two primary metaphors for the soul's relationship to God in this psalm. In verse 1, the soul is to God as the deer is to water. In verse 7, the soul is to God as deep is to deep. Reflecting on those metaphors now, there's something easy and familiar about the image from verse 1. It suggests water is on the way. The soul's thirst will be quenched. The object of desire once invoked - whether flowing streams or God - seems already to satisfy the longing. However, the second image in verse 7 proved more difficult. God is no longer the object of the soul's desire. Instead, there is a kind of symmetry between the soul and God, each described as a "deep." It is not until the next verse that the psalmist makes distinctions, comparing the soul to the deep that the water rushes into and roars over. Perhaps God is the river and the soul is the cliffs and carved out places of the riverbed.

What is hard about both of these metaphors (verse 1 and 7) is that they are doubled, relational. That is, the vehicle of each metaphor is not a single thing but a relationship. In the first case, the relationship is deer to water; in the second the deep water to the deep recesses of the river. One anticipates satisfaction, quenching; the other is beyond quenching, an overwhelming. Though both are metaphors for the soul's relationship to God, the tenor feels very different in verse seven and, again, very difficult to describe, as if the psalmist himself was straining to catch in words what wanted expression.

Finally, we noted the shifts in addressee, in whom the psalmist is speaking to. The psalmist speaks to God in verse one, then to his soul in verses 2-6, then to God again in verse 7, and then to the soul again in verses 8-11.

Our group's initial discussion of Psalm 42 left me asking how we could stay with the yearning of verse 1, let it remain unresolved. It also left me wondering what to make of the metaphor in verse 7, of deep calling to deep. It left me wondering what we could make, if anything, of the shifts in whom the psalmist addresses.
First Listening of “Psalm 42”

Before Oded Zehavi played his version of Psalm 42, he briefly commented on the way in which yearning is not resolved in the psalm. He wanted to make a music of that yearning rather than a music of its resolution, and that comment, even before I heard the piece, helped to clarify our group’s conversation. We were looking in the psalm for the music of resolution, not the music of yearning. Zehavi also said that the psalm seemed unbalanced in its lower ranges, and he wanted to keep that sense of unbalance with the cello.

When I listened to the music, I felt right away the strained relationship between the cello and the piano. It's as if each instrument is calling out to the other, trying various notes to bring the other instrument into the song. Each stumbles in rhythm, not because the player is faltering so much as waiting for the other instrument to join. Sometimes the other instrument comes in, sometimes not. Sometimes they find a kind of harmony playing together, but more often they are dissonant.

Later in the week, Zehavi talked about the inhuman in his music, the sound that exists just outside the harmonic scale, beneath the low thrum at the bottom of the cello's register or above the flicker and screech at its top. It is hard for me not to hear that in his “Psalm 42” now, even though I wasn't listening for it the first time through.

Not only does Zehavi want us to be aware of what might be beyond the range of the harmonic scale, but he also wants us to hear the cello notes starting on the string, letting them screech and falter a bit before they find their proper note. Likewise, we hear the note of the piano decay, hear it long enough to remember that it's made of keyboard wires and a hollow wooden body.

What surprised me as I attended to Oded's music, to his letting wood, wire, and bow make their own sounds, was the way I felt the company of these inhuman instruments. There's a cello note in “Psalm 42” where the bow is pulled so slowly and steadily, at such a low register, that the sound of the bow and string disappear and all one hears is the air vibrating in the hollow body of the cello. It sounds uncannily like a human voice, inarticulate, impossibly low, without words, but somehow like our own. That sound did not make me think, “Right, the cello is like us after all.” Rather, it worked the other way: I could not pull that cello note into the register of familiar human sounds. Instead, the cello had a way of expanding my previous sense of human capacity, helping me feel how humanity can groan at those depths, too. The music brought me into the company of the inhuman, not the other way around.

First Reading and Listening Together

How does the psalm read differently after listening to Zehavi's music? The emotional subtlety and range of the relationship between the cello and piano helps me to again feel various relationships in the psalm. In other words, attending to the complex, strained, changing relationship of piano and cello
helps me to recognize changes and tensions in different relationships within the psalm. For example, one could say that the cello is to the piano as:

*The soul is to the self.* Here one could listen through the song and hear the various ways in which the self tries to reassure the soul, calling it into the song, while the soul tries but falters, keeps bottoming out, screeching, etc.

*The self is to the congregation.* Here one could listen to the piano as the representative of the group (perhaps the accusing "people" of verse 3 or "festive throng" of verse 4) trying to bring the cello into its song. There are a number of variations on this relationship: the individual to the tradition, the instrument to the symphony, the lyrical voice to congregational song.

*Mourning is to thanksgiving.* Here one could listen to the piano as the representative of the "song of thanksgiving" in verse 4 and the cello as the soul in "disquiet." Can any harmony between these two be found?

And how would the psalm sound differently if we were to switch instruments in these analogies and make the cello the representative of the earnest self, the congregation in praise, or the grateful affections?

Maybe what this psalm is doing is seeking God outside the social, not finding God, exactly, but looking for God in our most basic bodily desires and attachments, like thirst and the landscape. Another way of putting this might be that the psalmist is driven to widen the scope of his community, from people to animals and land. In doing so, he is not merely placating himself, assuaging his pain. Rather, he identifies with the deer's thirst, not its gratification through the river’s deep, gouged out recesses. Perhaps the riverbed in the psalm, with its recesses and caverns, is a kind of instrument played by the rushing water. After listening to Zehavi's music, it seems like the psalmist too might be working with sounds more than images. So one might hear the deer panting for water in verse 1, and hear the sound of the river in verse 7.

A final question. Where is God in the music and the psalm? In the beginning of the psalm, God is sought in the coming together of grief and thanksgiving, one accompanying the other in a kind of fragile, imperfect unison, but the soul remains downcast, disquieted, unbalanced. The psalm does not end with the resolution it seems to promise in the first verse, rather the longing is left unfilled, unmet.

Zehavi's music goes even further by shifting the role of the piano from the beginning of the piece to the end. It starts, I think, as a call for gratification. The piano plays toward a resolution, making room for the cello in its song, but at the end of Zehavi’s piece, its role has changed. Instead of pleading for the cello's accompaniment, for it to get in line with its song, the piano finally accompanies the cello, actually upholds and accentuates the plaintive, faltering last notes of the cello. It is not so that those last pulls of the cello string can live or sound by themselves, but so that they can be beautiful on their own terms, not cajoled into resolution or corrected by the piano, but sustained in irresolution. Words are hard here. The main thing one can feel and hear is the reversal, where instead of longing and its gratification, instead of piano and cello finally meeting in unison, the piano is there to keep, remember, and
accentuate the grief of the cello. Hearing that in the music, it is possible for me to see it in the psalm, and in a way I never could without the music. This raises the possibility that God is found in that changed relationship between cello and piano - not in the cello finally finding its place in the piano's song, but the other way around, in the piano accompanying the cello in its grief and unmet longing.

After Reading Randi Rashkover's and Mark James's Responses

I was surprised by how many connections there were between the three of us, in how we read the psalm and heard the music, even though none of us were in the same scriptural reasoning groups initially. In a sense, we're forming a new, temporary group here on the page through this process of sharing our responses.

Some similarities:

Initially, I heard between the cello and piano various conflicting relationships in the psalm: between the soul and the self, between the self and the congregation, and between affections like mourning and praise. Mark James describes this much more precisely and insightfully, I think, in his discussion of four different forms of "experiential discord" in the psalm: social, theological, within the self (noting how the psalm multiplies descriptions and images of the psalmist at odds with himself) and, provocatively, discord within God. James suggests that the piano and cello in Zehavi's music might be analogous to these different kinds of discord in the psalm, but when James goes on to analyze the music, he doesn't try to link it to any particular form of discord. Instead, he tries to listen to the music on its own terms, hearing a kind of progress from the beginning to the end of the piece: the initial discord doesn't diminish or give way to resolution so much as become meaningful against the background Em that emerges in the second half of the song. The way we hear the end of the music as sustaining and making room for discord is similar. I wonder now how James would connect his reading of the psalm and his hearing of the music.

Some differences:

I listened to Zehavi's piece as a version of Psalm 42, a kind of translation in music. Mark James listened to it more as a commentary, in which the commentator gradually learns to let the discord in the psalm be such that the psalm and its repetitions of discord can, like the liturgy, make our grief meaningful and more manageable. Randi Rashkover, on the other hand, hears the music as a divine response to the psalm. Where the psalmist tends to run over or bury the pauses and gaps in language, forcing answers with questions, the piano breaks such repetitions down, remaining discordant, telling the psalmist something about God. But it does not answer the psalmists questions, does not conform or squeeze itself to meet the psalmist's interrogatives. Meanwhile, the cello registers a different kind of response to the psalm in Rashkover's hearing. Where the piano takes up or invites comparison to language, the cello sounds outside the range of human language. It is interesting that Rashkover connects the piano to the deer in verse 1 and the cello to the deep in verse 7 while emphasizing the way in which the music does not conform to the images, cannot be accommodated by them. The discordant
piano tells the panting psalmist something but it does not give water; likewise the cello, but it is not an answering deep. Why this emphasis? To keep God from being reduced to merely the object of human desires, the answer to human questions. There are some similarities between my take on the music and psalm, as bringing us into the company of the non-human, and Rashkover's ruminations of the "non-relational relation" that the music brings to the psalm.

But Rashkover does not talk about the relationship between the piano and the cello, only about the relationship between each and the psalm: the cello a kind of amplification of the piano to the psalmist, sounding a divine order that is not human. I wonder what Rashkover would say about the relation between the piano and the cello. Staying with the non-relational relation she hears between psalm and music, perhaps she would hear between the piano and cello the fourth discord that Mark James mentions, the discord within God, or, in Rashkover's terms, between the divine order of the piano and the divine order of the cello.