

18. COMPOSER AND PERFORMER: RATIONALE, AIM, ACHIEVEMENT OF A COLLABORATIVE PATH IN THE MUSICAL ARENA OF THE POST-WW2 AVANT-GARDE

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Abstract: *Part of the academic and musical world still blames the peripheral sociological role of “contemporary music” on the laziness of the audience. Yet, there is evidence to realise that the audience is not precisely the only entity to refer to in order to have an exhaustive view-point on the role of post-WW2 avant-garde on our musical horizon. In fact, what, in the last 60 years, most performers of the highest level have shown through their approach -or lack thereof- to new music, clearly reminds us of the necessity to scrutinise the reason of this stalemate from the joint perspective of two different and equally competent musical figures: performer and composer.*

Key words: *atonality and musical discourse, avant-garde music, Boulez and Bernstein, Es muss sein, Massimo Di Gesu*

1. “Music has disappeared”

‘Music has disappeared [...] because its core essence has been obliterated. Music is made by a human being for a human being’ (Celibidache, 1974)

What does Celibidache mean by stating that music has disappeared? The TV lecture he was giving focussed on the “phenomenology of music”. On this occasion, the legendary conductor acutely illustrated the dynamic process by which music creates significance. This is possible thanks to a system of sound relations, which are accurately harnessed into the definition of an arch of tension reaching an apical point (at both phrasal and formal level), after which the aforementioned tension decreases. At this point, another cycle (arsis-thesis) can start again. The result is what could be exemplified through the phases of systole and diastole in the breathing process (the most eloquent of metaphors for a language based on “beats”), and for which the adjective “human” by all means fits.

2. Nature of the problem

But what led Celibidache to utter his rather concerning statement? What was the situation or phenomenon he bore in mind when pronouncing such bewildering words? Had there been other professionals expressing opinions of this kind on the topic in question? The subject triggering Celibidache’s tirade was evidently that of the post-WW2 avant-garde, manifesting itself in what is called “contemporary music”. The phenomenon of contemporary music has always been divisive: part of connoisseurs (scholars, composers, some of the most informed listeners) have always pleaded its cause with strenuous fervour; another part has often shunned the topic itself, and great part of the audience has never managed to accept it as music in the first place.

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3. Listeners or composers?

This latter attitude was once attributed exclusively to the audience (for either narrow-mindedness or laziness). Still in a 2013 interview, Pierre Boulez, one of the most revered figures of the avant-garde, blamed the peripheral role of contemporary music on the listeners' passivity (Belgiojoso, 2013 – p. 20). Anyway, not only does the stance in question seem to be literally shared even by some supporter of the avant-garde (see architect Andrea Branzi, talking of “music which is not music any longer” [Branzi, 2003 – p. 12], but, although more vaguely, its content is concerningly echoed in the opinions which have been expressed by various authoritative musicians and scholars in the last sixty years.

4. Performers

As regards the perplexities about post-WW2 avant-garde music, the opinions of professionals from various fields (which will be explored in section 5 and 6) are not less destabilising than another, and even more perceptible and concerning phenomenon, which seems to corroborate them. In fact, as regards the last 60 years, the scores which have been performed in the most renowned concert halls and opera theatres, i.e. the works which both artists and impresarios (and conservatory syllabuses) refer to as “repertory”, do not include music written after the birth of the Darmstadt School (the cradle of post-WW2 avant-garde), if not sporadically (and, in such case, the scores are often by authors who have never been associated with the category of post-WW2 avant-garde).

In other words, the fact that contemporary music is a peripheral phenomenon, may not be due to audience's “laziness” (as also Roman Vlad maintains [Vlad, 2006 – p. 9]), but, actually, to technical characteristics of contemporary music itself, in terms of musical discourse, which have caused great part of the spectrum of artists (and, evidently, the most renownedly skilled and culturally equipped performers) to divert their attention from music written according to post-WW2 avant-garde criteria.

5. A significant example: Benedetti Michelangeli

In this respect, besides the thunderous names of the aforementioned skeptical artists, we could mention the case of another musician of Olympian stature: Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. The Italian pianist, in 1938, proved to be a most insightful performer of Schönberg's works, from the most aphoristically enigmatic ones to the dodecaphonic *Suite* op. 25 (in a country, like Italy, where the Austrian's name was only starting to be heard): according to Luigi Rognoni, one of the most proactive heralds of the Second Viennese School, Benedetti Michelangeli's performance of the *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke* op. 19 inspired “enthusiasm” (Rattalino, 2006 – p. 34).

After WW2, Benedetti Michelangeli confirmed his fervent interest for new repertory by lavishing his energies (and the offer of personal financial support) in the organisation of a most daring event featuring, in 1947, the performance of both *Pierrot Lunaire* and the *Ode to Napoleon* under the auspices of the Società dei Concerti Sinfonici “Santa Cecilia” in Brescia (Vitale, 2015 – p. 91-95). Years later he also performed Mario Peragallo's Piano Concerto, a vigorously muscular

dodecaphonic work which had been dedicated to the pianist from Brescia (Rattalino, 2013).

Such activity and achievements objectively portray an artist who is as talented as insightful, culturally equipped, and eager to explore the repertory in its most daring and enriching expressions. Therefore, the question (which could suit Benedetti Michelangeli as well as other musicians of comparable magnitude of his and younger generations) is: why did this artist admire the most challenging atonal and dodecaphonic output by Schönberg, while never showing any interest in post-WW2 avant-garde music?

After pondering on Benedetti Michelangeli's devotion to Schönberg's music (and other comparable cases could be mentioned), it can be objectively said that the dissonantic factor has little or no pertinence whatsoever to this question. The answer evidently lies elsewhere, and precisely in the discursive factor, i.e. in the more specifically dynamic aspect of music as "discourse".

6. Other authoritative voices: Ruwet, Gould, Bernstein, Vlad

Many and unmistakable are the opinions which converge to corroborate this answer. Linguist Nicolas Ruwet, at the outset of *Langage, musique, poésie*, stated that avant-garde music, score-wise, appears as very complex, it is indeed referred to as the epitome of complexity, yet it often sounds like a nebula of mutually interfering elements which result in utter stillness, where "nothing happens" (Ruwet, 1972 – p. 5). He also added a reason grounding such observation: the series had been contrived in order to grant uniformity of role to the 12 notes, but such uniformity, if projected to any parameter of the composition, can easily turn into syntactic and formal undifferentiatedness, i.e. discursive haziness, hence the aforementioned stillness (Ruwet, 1972 – p. 13).

In 1956 Glenn Gould had referred to the same topic in *The Dodecaphonist's Dilemma*, where he regretted being too optimistic when, five years before, had foreseen a luminous future for the successors of Schönberg (Gould, 1984 – p. 347). Besides, and specifically focussing on the linguistic factor, Gould added that, in Boulez's *Second Piano Sonata*, the French author showed little awareness of the "relative dissonance", unlike Webern: as the "relative dissonance" is an element of paramount importance with a view to creating a harmonic environment dynamically devised, the stillness mentioned above -in the case of Ruwet- seems to be here periphrastically anticipated (Gould, 1984 – p. 359).

And the staticness is once again at the basis of his conclusion, when, almost giving explicit object to the elliptical sentence by Celibidache, he referred to post-WW2 avant-garde music by resorting to the category of calcification of creativity, generating that indifference which led people to reject similar works (Gould, 1984 – p. 359). Taking once again Boulez as the paragon of post-WW2 avant-garde music, it is worth mentioning the view of Leonard Bernstein, who said something confirming the dynamically neutral discursive path of Darmstadt School-related scores.

In 1960, introducing his performance of Boulez's *Improvisation I sur Mallarmé* to the audience of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, he was keen to describe the features of the work in programme, which, among others, included:

«lack of any rhythmic feeling [...]; there is nothing in this piece you can feel as a beat, nothing to tap your foot to, nothing can be recognised as symmetrical or asymmetrical» (Bernstein, 1960).

Needless to say, the eclipse of the beat is tantamount to the cellular disintegration of the body of music, and the impossibility of discerning symmetry from asymmetry is the periphrasis of that sort of highly entropic nebula which aforementioned Ruwet referred to. On the other hand, no musical “syntax” (from Greek: “putting in order”) can thrive where no point of reference is given. Composer and musicologist Roman Vlad confirmed the discursive factor as the element at the basis of any discussion on the avant-garde music’s status within our music world.

In fact, on the one hand he mentioned Adorno, stating that the achievements of an actually “liberated” dodecaphony could come only after a long process of cultural assimilation of its logic, on the other hand Vlad went as far as to state that Stravinskij’s *Sacre* is the epitome of a “liberated” extra-tonal idiom (Vlad, 2006 – p. 14). In so doing, he clearly showed that the artistic success of an idiomatically ground-breaking work is not a matter of time (or dissonantic coefficient), but of technical method aimed at discursive clarity.

7. “Genuineness and truth”: *es muss sein*

Interestingly, Vlad went on to highlight the stark contrast between the outcome of the avant-garde (characterised by the supremacy of the method over the work which should be its purpose, as Boulez little periphrastically asserts in *Schönberg is dead* [Boulez, 1952]) and the notion of genuineness and truth of music. In this regard he explicitly stated that, in order to be genuine (unlike a composer working *ex nihilo* [Vlad, 2006 – p. 9] i.e. implying the *tabula rasa* of any discursive principle [Lanza, 1991]), a composer has to aspire to truth and shape his method of composition accordingly (Vlad, 2006 – p. 13).

But what is “truth” in music? Or, in other words, what is significant in music, i.e. when does music “truly” make sense and generate Beauty? In this regard, a short lecture-interview featuring Leonard Bernstein seems to get to the point in a magnetising way. On the occasion of a TV series on Beethoven’s Symphonies, while introducing the *Pastoral*, Bernstein tells Maximilian Schell that, of all the qualities which Beethoven had, one was practically divine: the sense of “inevitability” he could give to any note he wrote (Bernstein, 1983).

Now, not only is something “inevitable” something which is firmly reliable and steadfast as such (in analogy to the root “deru-” of *truth* [Harper, 2024]), but the correctness of such keyword is confirmed by a motto whose memory it vividly triggers, and which was a sort of catchphrase for Beethoven (whose work is, of course, epitome of true value in music): *es muss sein!*, i.e. “it must be!”.

The motto in question must surely have been the distillation of an ideal at the core of Beethoven’s mindset. In fact, not only does it enigmatically appear on the score of the String Quartet op. 135, not only does it also appear as the title of Beethoven’s Canon WoO 196, but it was also an expression which the ineffable composer resorted to rather frequently, as his Conversation Books confirm (Beethoven, 2022 – p. 377). But the most incontestable evidence of the motto in question being the kernel of Beethoven’s “truthful” aesthetics, is the magnificent

work shaped by Beethoven's genius and willpower.

8. Human, relational, gravitational basis of a method of composition

Italian composer Massimo Di Gesu, whose compositional process I studied in the minutest detail, thanks to a collaboration which yielded 23 recordings of as many piano works of his, is the only professional I personally know who has a whole Weltanschauung based on a personal equivalent of the *es muss sein*, which he calls "principio di necessità" (principle of necessity).

Di Gesu asserts that «if, in a musical work, we feel "moved" [*as opposed to the aforementioned "stillness" – Ed.*] by a note which is perceptible as "necessary" to the one which precedes and the one which follows it in the space-time, it is because we existentially vibrate by "sympathetic resonance" with this phenomenon. This may likely happen by virtue of a state of things which sees any individual being "necessary", i.e. consubstantial, to what is beyond his bodily perimeter in space (ethics) and time (teleology). This is the core message, the fundamental answer of music to the ancestral "why?", and the reason why, in its revealing power, we cannot help calling it Beauty».

In the 25 years of long-distance conversations, and, above all, of rehearsals, I could see his compositional method gradually honing its process (in his case, the means is to an end, not to itself), always aiming at the most profound and limpid understanding of his score on the part of the performer: a functional insight on the part of the performer, is in fact of vital importance with a view to deciphering the breathing dynamic arch carved by his complex rhythmical demands and mesmerising polyphonic nets, within a harmonic jargon of the most unequivocal atonality, and yet of a dynamic-gravitational versatility rarely experienced in the post-tonal era.

sempre lirico il canto, sempre nitido il tessuto polifonico

1a

1b

p

cresc.

mf

The picture above refers to the beginning of *Rima petrosa* (Di Gesu, 2019a; Di Gesu 2019b)

Many of the characteristics of Di Gesu's approach to composition can be inferred from these few bars. His harmonic language features chords based on the whole tone scale, interspersed with alternately two and three notes from the complementary set: the whole tone scale (which can actually be rearranged into a sort of multi-altered Dominant chord) grants a dynamically flowing and mellow effect; the interfering notes (often creating frictions within which the major 7th interval is more frequent than the minor 2nd) are most useful with a view to either propelling the harmonic entity or stabilising it (as it can happen in the case of the

major 7th, which can easily turn from harshly vehement into liquidly contemplative according to its melodic-rhythmical placement).

Needless to say, the problem Di Gesu had to tackle, as regards the intelligibility of such harmonic system, was intrinsic to the richness of its constituting entities, which could be an obstacle to the detection of their discursive role. The solution he found was in counterpoint: the more accurately carved (both at rhythmical and intervallic level) are the lines, and the more they manage to reciprocally sculpt each other in their kinetic relationship, the more intelligible within the ensuing net is their profile, i.e. identity.

This is the process thanks to which “identity” achieves its etymologically essential and dynamic connotations, confirming Di Gesu’s assertion at the basis of the principle of necessity: identity of any individual entity is, at the same time, its identicalness with whatever entity is beyond its individual perimeter. Besides, this is the process whose results led Quirino Principe to define Di Gesu’s string quartet, *Verdigo*, as “strong music” (Principe, 2013), where the adjective radiates all its kinship with “inevitable” and “true”.

9. Conclusions - A constructive path

In other words, Di Gesu’s works stem from an existential urge (the universal “why?”) fuelling an ethical insight (consubstantiality revealed by the *es muss sein*) nurturing an aesthetic achievement (the breath of the significance of woven sounds, i.e. music). His output is a worthwhile example of a factual and constructive answer to Celibidache’s remark: Di Gesu’s music is by all means made by a human being for other human beings.

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