

Cantio. Aesthetics of Music

I was asked to write about aesthetics. Do we really have a real or concrete object that we can talk about? Or is the word “music” just a “pointer” to something, without any *specific* content? Specific in the sense that we have the same thing in mind, like a stable essence for all kinds and forms of music. Can one really “understand” music? Do you “understand” it better if you can analyze it? Can a musician talk about music? Does a musician have a real “understanding” of music, or is it just another version of it, a position from inside that he only manages to make workable? Can a musician talk about music with a non-musician?

I have thought about it. But is it fruitful enough to state only my point of view? Maybe my position could be compared with a different perspective. Vlad Ionescu studies philosophy; he wrote his dissertation on the concept of the figural in contemporary aesthetics, and is working on a doctoral thesis on the concept of form and its relevance to contemporary arts. I asked him to collaborate.

The starting point for his reflections was a written dialog between Sharon Joyce and me about *Cantio*, a music-theater piece written for the Munich Biennale in 2004. We were talking about the process of creation of *Cantio*; about all the difficulties a composer has to deal with when it comes to external input (text, story or anything else that does not directly belong to music). This dialog is not a description of the piece, but rather a discourse about the difficult relation between music and text. Some relevant parts are quoted here; however, the entire dialog can be found in the brochure of the Munich Biennale (2004) and on the Internet.¹

As Vlad Ionescu’s reflections form only a part of this article, they are followed by my own response. He refers to my composition *Cantio* and offers, besides reflections on contemporary aesthetics as such, a comment on this piece as well as a comment on the dialog between me, the composer, and Sharon Joyce, the librettist. My comments follow his, the result being not so much a dialog moving toward agreement as a comment on a comment ... on a comment. To us it almost has a musical structure.

Back to the main question: is music a cloud or a stone?

Vykintas Baltakas, October 2006

1 http://hometown.aol.de/Baltakas/works/pieces/cantio_files/cantio_dialogue.pdf.

Vlad Ionescu

The composer asked me whether—when it comes to aesthetics—we have a real object that we can talk about. I stand astonished: maybe this is the very question anyone interested in contemporary aesthetics has to ask. Can philosophers nowadays talk to artists, to composers, performers, painters? Can they still mirror their narcissistic selves, themselves creations of reason, in the latest compositions, performances, and galleries?

Vykintas moves on with his questions, his glasses are sliding down his nose. This time he really flirts with philosophy: is the word “music” just a “pointer” to something, does it have a specific content in the sense that we all have the same thing in mind, that we all share the same stable “essence” which does not change for any kind or form of music? Hasn’t this been the nightmare of all philosophers for ages? Is it now exasperating even the souls of contemporary composers who prove more philosophical than ever? Vykintas sighs, troubled, and uses his nose to correct the position of his glasses—they are back where they belong.

In all his unrest and throughout all his conversations with philosophers, friends, and concrete sounds, Vykintas struggles to find out what is communicated through music. Is there a concrete content? Is he “understood,” can he really “talk about” (his) music?

As a composer you are ceaselessly forced to talk about music! The music industry is still living in the age of “modernism,” of the 40s-60s: only after everything is explained and understood is the public allowed to listen. As if the music was some kind of a concept which—after all the theoretical work—could be tried out just for experimental purposes ...

So many questions, whose answers Vykintas already has, in my view. So many paths he has followed, with words or notes, and yet still he is unsatisfied. So many affects he ventures to convey to others, to communicate—maybe the torture suffered by all composers. Maybe it is not, as most of them make clear, that the composition is there to communicate anything, at least not in the way a text does.

Vykintas reached a high note when trying to express the possibility of communication in music, even talking about music, even with philosophers—the people who are most difficult to satisfy, but also the least credible when they try to satisfy the artists. Vykintas—a composer and still following the tradition of his musical parents. Again, a traditionalist, in the sense that he follows his artistic forefathers:

the composers—Schoenberg, Berio, Boulez; and the philosophers—Nietzsche, Adorno, Cage ...

The music theater *Cantio* composed in 2004 is one of the forms Vykintas gives to the issue of communication and music. Does one need to just listen to the piece or also to read about it? Consult the composer's dialog with his librettist, the textually present Miss Joyce.

No, no, no—listen and nothing but listen! Only if you need to discuss thoughts you need to read thoughts.

An interesting dialog, platonic in its form, seductive to the core ... Forgive my arrogance if I dare to write my comments between their lines and, following these lines, to reflect on the issues that bother Vykintas, composers and philosophers, past and present.

A certain composer, asked to write an opera, refused completely to compose using a story, a completed text that already existed. "If the text is good, it gains nothing by adding music; music can even detract from it. If it's not good, it doesn't make sense to have music either, it will only make it worse," he said to a librettist.

In this affair, a librettist is such a philosopher, apologetically looking for a text for the music to refer to, a text to which the composer can bind his music: a lovemaking relationship, two different elements, music and text, star-crossed lovers, have to meet. After all, the librettist knows that the piece has to be *about* something ... there is no one who looks more fanatically for a text, a story, a history, than the librettist. In that sense, he is a sage trying to seal the surface of nature with sense, to stabilize and tame the surplus of dubious sensitivity emerging from the surface of the earth, to sterilize the heterogeneity of sounds.

"Does that mean there's no possible text that would work?" wondered the librettist, a little anxiously.

Composer: What I mean is this: there are difficulties with any existing, completed stories. I see the music itself as a story. This musical story will have a certain development, along with other modes of expression, and the totality of them all will be the real story.

Librettist: Then what should I provide as a structuring 'text'?

A distinction: if there has to be a content, a subject, a story ... for the librettist this story is a narrative, a "structuring text" (she insists), a skeleton on which the com-

poser can organically mould the music he writes. For the composer, the story is the totality of modes of expressions. It has no specific structuring form and it has surely no pretension to be like a text.

I would rather say it does not have to be only in the form of a text. The possibility exists, but it is not the only one.

Music is not a linear series of events but rather a collection of affects that sprinkle in all directions, towards the composer, the interpreter, and hopefully to the sleeping or listening (or both) audience. The central difference between the reception of music and the reception of discourse is that, in music, there is no common grammar for the composer, interpreter, and listener that all apply to receive it. Each has his or her own way of entering what he hears, what touches his or her ears. Listening to music is radically distinct from the manner one approaches a written text. In the latter case, one follows a specific direction and applies a grammar that one masters. This is also possible in the treatment of a musical score. But when one experiences music as an affect, sounds can literally touch the listener on all parts of his body. It affects the ears, the brain, the heart, the hair, often the skin—all organs. The specificity of listening to a score vs. reading is this: the latter works according to the application of the same rules as when reading a linguistic text—its purpose is knowledge. Parts of your body (eyes, ears, etc) move to arrange ideas, to comprehend. The listening experience can hardly be said to be analogous with reading. The ears are central as an organ, but the sounds penetrate your body through every possible entry. During this experience music has to affect you, it is a wonder to your skin; it pierces the synaesthetic body. This body is a desiring one and it is differently adjusted in every single person. Some do not even have one—others have too much of it. If aesthetics is able to arrive at concepts in a broader way than merely “reading” music, then it cannot avoid this way of experiencing it. It is not being prudish when I say some experience music merely as a text, doubling in their minds what is on paper, as compared with the decadence of the synaesthetic body literally open to music. It is a fact: music works if it is received by a body (*Leib*) and each body is different. You do not only cry if you hear *Im Abendrot*, but there must be a vein somewhere ready to explode, you do not only crave for infinity during a Bach suite, but the latter should be a frenzy to your senses, a delirium of your own limbs, multiplying to infinity.

Composer: Concentrate on the act of speaking. The speaking itself is the story, and everything can grow from this point - the story will result from that effort, that desire to speak. The essential, substantial desire for expression becomes much more important than the content of that speech.

Otherwise put, the composer needs no story to make sense of a series of events, but looks for the event in what forms a story. And that event is not determined by the possibility of having a story to narrate, but by the force of the emotions emerging from it, from certain gestures, movements, anything that relates to the composer.

In the process of creation of a musical piece I see two main forming elements: “state” and “form.” “State” is a sort of context where certain dynamics could happen: it sets rules how particular elements could behave. For example, if we “compose” a fall of some heavy object: the state “of falling of heavy object” makes impossible to fall up or suddenly stop falling. It sets some limitations. “Form” is rather a linear succession of events. Since music is art in time, it cannot avoid this linearity. If the dots can be connected, we have a dynamical line in time which then could be seen as a “story.” These dots can be anything: some musical elements, some non-musical thoughts, notes, structures, emotions, etc. Is it impossible to see instrumentation as a drama? Why not: coming and going of instruments, dominating each other, regrouping or becoming individualized... Even the evolution of a pure philosophical thought (not the content itself, but the dynamical change of the content) could be seen as a drama.

That event can be nothing more than an affect breaking loose from a self-conscious subject who arranges statements about the world or, better said, who sets the world into statements. Music is not a texture relating to something else existing independently of it; the story that it sings, the emotions it lets loose are musical as such—any other object we may ever add to music (story, emotion) spring from a different discursive order that is already foreign to music as such. Whether music is about something and this about-ness is to be communicated (already a statement based on a communicational, discursive model) music as such has nothing intrinsically to do with it, as it knows no other manner to refer to any about-ness than musical form. Any discourse arranging images, emotions, and stories that are recognized in a musical piece is of a different order to the logical discursive one.

Back to *Cantio*: when it comes to comprehending the notion of story, the composer and the librettist-sage lose themselves.

Librettist: But there has to be content—a subject, a story! It can't be sheer expression for its own sake. A strong expression needs an equally strong motivation. All I see is that you want a very dramatic situation, in which a voice (not really a “character”) speaks and sings. With a definite sense of urgency.

The subject of the librettist—exactly what the philosopher, with more or less sense of taste, has always tried to accomplish, i.e. to reintroduce the subject in all forms of expression. The subject: virile, broad-backed, and masculine in the sturdy curves of his self-consciousness. And rightly so, what else can one expect from an ambitious, life-long dedication to the subject, to the story that has to be present and recognized. Follow the librettist: expression has to be linked (by what?) to a “motivation,” “an urgency,” (a phantasm?) or the expression has to be motivated or initiated by something.

The librettist or philosopher needs to decode this motivation, to word the urgency of this phantasm.

Is that sage?

The alternative would be sheer madness and even though the artist is much more diligent and at ease with this romantic mistress, the philosopher can't even flirt with her.

The composer finds the “act of speaking” important. I'd like to stress *the act of...* Here I find a place to write on the margins of these words = composer and librettist find a fulfillment of their desire in two meanings of the notion “story;” for the librettist it starts as a narrative, a course of events to be linked to a “motivation” (intention, intention, intention, she shouts). For the composer the story is the music itself—the sounds themselves are the event of music—speaking itself as a story independent of any course of events. Or better said, the course of events, the libretto, is relevant as long as it plays the role of an intersection of forces and affects. Throughout any story, the composer relates to this intersection of forces that have the potential to emit affects. Naturally we do not divorce music from the story; we just believe that the latter is important for the former as long as it provides affects, fields of forces and not just a novelistic development.

The story is not separable from music, just as the walking person cannot be separated from the sound of his or her steps.

The composer's desire is not fulfilled by finding a series of events, real or imagined, but by finding the musical structure which can unfold his desire; and the musician is the first to know that sounds and desire are indistinguishable (or distinguishable only in a separate discourse, academic, epistemological, self-conscious), that desire is that which cannot be determined according to a set of rules, according to a syntax.

This makes us think of what a contemporary dancer, Frédéric Flamand, said of dance: it is one of the few places of the "re-appropriation of the body." This should be said of music, too—it is not so much the story that interests us, the unfolding of its intrigues, but how, in which specific forms, the affects that it contains fall back on our bodies.

Composer: I think the importance of the language was overestimated in the history of music theater. The story should be comprehensible, yes, but the text alone can't make that happen. Musical expression, mimicry, gestures, choreography—all that should also be considered as a part of the medium of theatrical language. It's a mistake not to see that literary language is good for writing books but not for music theater. The story has to be translated into the language of the music theater if we want people to understand it in that context.

Apart from looking for a subject for a composition, thinkers have tried for ages to think of emotion as related to music. Again, one can see that the composer and his librettist feel, think, conceive emotions differently: the latter tends to bore the former with a notion of emotion as something that can be put into words, in a stable definition on which, of course, variations are possible, just as in rhetoric. The musician, on the contrary, needs not make use of these terms, as between emotion and music there is no conjugation—and here again, the rules of writing fail to help us.

Emotion/ music/ singular expression of both, a composer would say. Speaking itself carries emotions, it carries a story.

Speaking itself as heard and played by the musician is what a thinker once called the figural (not the figure), the event before it is translated according to a set of rules, the event before it becomes a figure of speech, before it is transformed by the librettist (or rhetorician) into a "structuring text." The figural is at work in any composition, and certainly in *Cantio*; the figural as the figure without a psychoanalyst, without a librettist, without a philosopher ... *pas encore* ... as the system of recuperating any event, is always at work.

And here we land near the “structuring text,” *Cantio*’s apopemtic hymn:

Menander, On Display Oratory

Apopemtic hymns (i.e. hymns of farewell) are like some of those found in Bacchylides and contain a valediction since someone is leaving his country... Apopemptic hymns, as the name shows, are the opposite of hymns of invocation; the type is very rare, found only in the poets. They are performed at departures, imagined or real, of gods [...] Hymns of this kind have as their basic material the land or cities which the god is leaving behind, and similarly the city or land to which he is going, descriptions of places and suchlike. The text must run pleasantly along, since one may dwell longer on the topics: in hymns of invocation one spends less time on them, since we want the gods to join us as quickly as possible; but in apopemptic hymns we want them to take as long as possible over their departure. There must be a prayer for a return on a second visit.

The hymn to presence (I dare say), begging for presence in all its force, a superlative of delirium in all its splendor and figurative energy: the gods are in the world and they decide to leave. We humans, at the peak of our delirium, boiling with ecstasy, try to prolong their departure, begging again—as always—for presence. *Cantio* as a piece on a hymn, *Cantio* as a reflection on whether history with its deification of facts and places is nothing but an appeal to presence, a figural expression dedicated to a phantasm of union, of origins, of a desire to “return” to the divine, to innocence, to beginnings, etc.

The librettist is attracted by tensions, in this case the “tension between the urgency of the event on one hand, and the need to stay light-hearted about it, to “run pleasantly along” ... Again I am tempted to defer for a while, if not on the tension itself, at least on this event that the apopemtic hymn embodies. We like to see a tension between these two states, two feelings, two reactions; but isn’t the retreat of the gods and the human attempt to postpone it nothing but the desire to postpone death?

This is another good example of the “state” I was talking about

Isn’t the urgency of the event of the gods’ retreat itself a light-hearted musical figure of the desire not to vanish into nothingness? Isn’t the constant murmur, the mumbling of lands and places nothing but the frivolous attempt to seduce the inevitable, to resist the final note, let us name it—the final breath? And being more courageous in my speculations (what else can there be between a composer and a philosopher?): isn’t art this very struggle against an inevitable end, not the end of a lifetime but an end that we don’t dare think, the end with nothing behind it?

Isn't *das Künstliche in der Kunst* itself that very delirious emotion, that very seductive movement, taking us aside, embracing us with intensive forms, sonorous phrases as a consolation against "the retreat of gods," which is synonymous with our delirious way of saying "death"?

Too speculative a thought to dare think, preferably to be set in the experimental kitchen of white-collar metaphysicians; but who knows ... it is an interpretation. People sing to gods, a composer dialogues with his librettist ... the latter looks for the text to motivate a piece, maybe to communicate it, to be able to talk about it, to transmit it to the public: the phantasm of a union, of fusion between text and music (as if they were two different elements) and between the piece and public (hope for, desired). The musician knows that the words themselves sing, that meaning cannot be detached from its form, that the meaning (if there is any in the same sense that there is meaning in descriptive sentences) is intrinsic to music as it comes, that an emotion and its sonorous form are not two distinctive segments, but that the notes forming the sounds are a singular and material epiphany of a feeling *tout court*. Is there the possibility of a fusion between the libretto and the music? Only *post facto* maybe, and only for the theoretician in us. The musician knows there is no distance, no empty territory between the two.

We could talk here about different types of libretto: a libretto that presupposes the sound of the "story" (a beautiful example is *The Great Dictator* of Charlie Chaplin) and a "dumb libretto" that doesn't have any sound in mind. The composer here is only needed because the tradition, conventions or contract rules require it (whoops, it seems that we have just arrived at the film industry now...)

Talking about music is of a different order than music as such, music as practiced by the musician. The composer follows sounds, he follows his ear, which knows no plasma that distances it from his intellect—it is useless to ask a composer what he thinks of when composing, or worse, if his musical phrases stand for an emotion and what that emotion is. There are no two sides, two divorced means of expression that meet somewhere. Only later does the theoretician explain the figural event, translate it, present it in terms of emotions "represented."

... For the composer, there is no semi-permeable membrane between his notes and what they stand for—as it would be put in a discourse already strange to the musical ear.

Is contemporary music less accessible in communicating than other kinds of music? This reminds us of what Adorno writes about the complaint that the new musical idiom is “cerebral.” This is a sign of incomprehension not only of the new music, but of the old music as well—first, it is not as if the old idiom of composition was more “natural” than the new one.

Interesting question: pop music is still using basically the same harmonic and formal structure as classical music, only in a simplified form. Could one think that there is something natural in it? Or is it that over many centuries and uncountable performances of classical music we have created some kind of Esperanto, a musical language that is now understood by any garage boy? That would be such a compliment to Mozart and Co.!

And secondly, it also shows that the listener is simply resisting any form he fails to recognize. Music has never been an issue of whistling an enjoyable tune.

... but maybe that is exactly the core of the problem: “whistling” presupposes listening, hence active participation in the act of music. However the attempt to “understand” kills this activity. The difference is just like between trying to “understand sunshine” and “feel sunshine.”

If we listen well, musical phrases (old and new) were never meant to simply be reproduced, but rather to invite us to perceive figural forms, singular in every one’s performance, forms that do not stand for an otherwise definable emotion but which problematize that “definition” of an emotion and give it a unique musical form. If we were to follow the analysts that look for one specific emotion in a musical phrase (to be detected, listened to, written down, and thus reduced to discourse), music would come down to a representative art form, a representation of the world. As long as we agree that the point of painting has never been to realistically represent the real, we have to agree that the point of music has never been to represent emotions. In both cases, it is much more interesting to see art as a problematization of the real, as a continuous formation and reformation of it, not its representation but a reflection on its internal tensions.

Isn’t there a third perspective between representation (classical position) and problematization (modernistic point of view) of the real? Both views presuppose that we cannot create, but only arrange some given elements—again and again rebuilding a new Minotaur according to the rules or transforming

them. Is it really impossible to create? To create something new, a physical or acoustical object which would have its internal set of rules and live there like in a mini universe: self-sufficient and independent of the outside world?

Or maybe we could see creation as a particular way of looking at things: a possibility to discover certain details/ aspects of objects or phenomena that we otherwise treat pragmatically and forget that it has an independent way of being, maybe independent of our perception. In this way, “seeing” is at the same time both representation and problematization.

To go with Deleuze’s less orthodox interpretation of Bach’s music, the latter’s composition can be seen as an act of resistance to the division of music into secular and religious. The direct reaction is: Bach himself never thought of that. But think about it: did he have to for us to see that from any of his cello suites the same kind of force, the same melancholy, despair and nostalgia emanate as from “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen”? Regarding the issue of the text in music, the title of this cantata proves, as *Cantio* does, that the figural expression lies in the sounds of the words themselves more than in the rhetoric of the libretto ...

Does the composer expect to be “understood” and in which sense? In my eyes it is definitely not in the sense of expecting the audience to be able to translate his musical phrases, to decode the idea or the emotion he may or actually may not have even thought of ... Maybe as a composer one could expect that the listener can empathize with the composition, but not as in an organic fusion, but rather that the tune will act on the listener.

Whether—as in *Cantio*—music is the figural expression of a strong affect, that of postponing departure, separation, death, or whether it is an object on its own, created, with its own internal logic, both descriptions have a relation to earth, the only place from which we relate clouds and stone, divine or quotidian emotions—fall in love / *tomber amoureux*, oh Sir Newton it was all in the words—the only place where we feel, the only place for aisthesis.

Composer: So, is it finished yet?

Librettist: The ending is a little tricky. The song describes a trip to the end of the world, and then? Really, we can't have an ending, can we? It's supposed to be endless, this singing voice that continues, that needs and wants to continue, it's the only link to the departing gods. Do you have any musical ideas?

Composer: What about a sort of loop, which repeats?

Librettist: No way. I'm not writing another version all over again.

Composer: You don't have to. A real loop follows from what is already there, the song ends with a dream of the men at the end of the world, the men who (like the singing cicadas) only drink dew, who sleep in the unbroken night and have unbroken dreams. What can he dream at that point, if not of the departure of the gods? The departure of the gods and the need to sing as long as possible and the description of a voyage which goes to the end of the world, etc.

Librettist: Another version of our song. It's implied, but never-ending. Like those cicadas which never stop singing.