

THE OVERSIGHT

An ergological critic of philosophy of music



by

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1. INTRODUCTION : MUSIC AS... SOMETHING ELSE THAN MUSIC

MUSIC AS A « PENDING » PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECT

This essay is caused by a deep disappointment. Indeed, it seems to us that *continental* philosophers never took music seriously, that they never really got the measure of it. Anyone would think that music is an experience which is really difficult to grasp, more difficult anyway to conceptualize than painting's or literature's experiences. As proof, most of the *continental* aesthetics are "picturalists" or "poeticalists" ; but little of them holds music as a real object of their investigations. And when these exceptions deign to pay attention to it, these so-called "philosophies of music" seem to be more away from scholarly music's discourses – i.e. musicologist's discourse –, than philosophies of painting are away from scholarly painting's discourses. The lack of musical technique in the philosophical texts devoted to music is a real proof of our assumption ¹.

MUSIC AS « A METAPHYSICAL EXERCICE » : SCHOPENHAUER

For instance, the intuitions of Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* ² are going far in the understanding of music's singularity : according to him, "music is not as the other arts, a reproduction of the *Ideas*, but the reproduction of the *Will*, in the same way as the *Ideas* themselves. That's why the influence of music is more pervasive than the influence of the other arts" ³. Insofar as Schopenhauer holds the *Will* as the essence of *Being*, we understand how music – as a direct representation of the essence of the world (the *Will*) – can be ontologically and logically far superior to other arts which are only the reflection of the reflection of *Being* (i.e. pictures of the *Ideas*).

Nevertheless, the strict correspondence that the **metaphycian** Schopenhauer tries to establish between the four parts of the ordinary harmony (bass, tenor, alto, soprano) and the four kingdoms of Nature (mineral, vegetable, animal, human), leads him to questionable statements which are taking him away from a genuine understanding of musical experience.

¹ Music as a philosophical object which is "pending".

² A. Schopenhauer. *Le Monde comme Volonté et Représentation*, Paris, P.U.F., 1978.

³ *Ibid.*, p.329.

For instance (among many), Schopenhauer claims that “bass and the intermediate parts of an harmony are not executing a continu melody as the higher part which is executing the singing ; only the latter can running free, doing modulations and scales ; the others are slower and are not following a proper melody” ⁴. But, when Schopenhauer holds as a **metaphysical tenet** that bass can’t by essence execute a melody, he is getting things confused ; namely he is mistaking the whole musical artworks for a mere school exercice in the “*chant donné*” genre, where the student has to reconstitute the complete chord from the bass notes...

Then, how can we explain this gap between a philosophically creative intuition – music as singularity – and so much basic perception of the musical phenomenon? A sentence puts us on the track : that one where Schopenhauer takes up Leibniz’s famous phrase “music is an unconcious arithmetical exercice, in which the mind doesn’t know it is counting” ⁵, and changes it to “music is an unconcious metaphysical exercice, in which mind doesn’t know it is doing philosophy” ⁶. Victim of his obsession for metaphysics, the author of the *World* systematically takes back music to something which is more serious ; music is obviously ever taken for something else than itself. Even if Schopenhauer criticizes Leibniz’s phrase when he takes it up again, he is still remaining faithful to its inspiration and falling back – as most of the *continental* philosophers – into what we can consider as a kind of *pythagorism* ; namely a reduction in musical to numerical : “music is a good way to make perceptible rational and irrational numerical ratios, but not as in arithmetics, with the help of abstract concepts, but by an immediate knowledge, simultaneous and sensory” ⁷.

MUSIC AS A « GOOD WAY »

If we are stopping so long on Schopenhauer, it is because his philosophy perfectly exemplifies this tendancy of continental philosophers – in fact, most of the continental philosophy – who always consider music as something else, under the pretext that music could be from a metaphysical viewpoint, a **good way** to reach some intelligible tenet. Even if that could be true for certain metaphysicians, the immediate experience of performing or listening to a piece of music is firstly definitively not lived as a good way to reach the platonics’ heaven...

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.331.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.327 and 340. The Leibniz’s phrase is from the *Letter to Christian Goldbach* (17 april 1712), in Patrice Bailhache’s *Leibniz et la Théorie de la musique*, Klincksieck, 1992, p.151.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.338.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1192.

As if the attempt of continental philosophers who tries to organize arts into an ontological hierarchy has sterelized their discourses about musical phenomenon... As they are always taking back music to some transcental tenets, as they are always considering music as a good way to reach metaphysical tenets, many of these continental philosophers are loosing sight of the task they wanted to do : reflecting on music as music – and not as an expression of some metaphysical tenets.

2. GRASPING MUSIC

A « TOOL'S » PROBLEM

So, do we have definitively to give up trying to understand the musical experience in itself ? Or more precisely, do we have to abandon the ambition of looking music from a different point of view from the “music as a good way to reach metaphysical tenets” point of view ? Maybe not if we turn the things back, and firstly examine, not the musical object in itself, but the “*tools*” with which philosophers are used to think about such a phenomenon... Here is the assumption : *if most of the continental philosopers are failing in grasping music as music, it is maybe because of their conceptual gear which is inadequate to grasp such an object ; and as this conceptual gear is inappropriate, it finally distorts the object it had to grasp. In order to give a picture, it is as if these philosophers tried to apprehend water by the way of a solidifying chemical product... Armed with their metaphysical concepts, it seems to us that they are making on this point the same kind of mistake that the economist Renato Di Ruzza denounces when he thinks about social sciences and the “social reality”, their object.*

THE « EPISTEMICAL MODE »

In *La dernière Instance et son Ombre*⁸, R. Di Ruzza criticizes the political economy – and the whole human sciences in general – for holding as a real object of its investigation some mere « tracks », for focusing on mere « residues », instead of considering the « gestures » which gave birth to these « residues » ; and according to the author, this confusion is due to the fact that these so-called human « **sciences** » – and obviously philosophy which belongs to this kind of « sciences » – are reflecting on their object by the same way as physical sciences :

⁸ R. DI RUZZA. *La dernière Instance et son Ombre* ; Eléments d'Epistémologie pour Economistes, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1987.

they usually analyse their object by the way of the « epistemical mode »⁹. But the object of the social « sciences » – the « social reality » – needs to be analysed by a different way that chemistry analyses oxygen ; referring to the economist S. Latouche, R. Di Ruzza claims that the « social reality » is « made up of the practices of man [...], made up of his gestures », i.e. « a complex of behaviors, actions, fantasies, speeches, which exprime themselves by the way of material things, and cause material results »¹⁰. And the mistake of human « sciences » is precisely due to the fact that they only consider the « residues » of these « gestures », their perceptible results (i.e. goods for economy, a law for the Law...); but they systematically forget the History and the histories which gave birth to these « residues ».

MUSIC AS A PROCESS

But, it seems to us that a wide part of the continental philosophy is making the same kind of **oversight** when it takes music into account : namely continental philosophers are always trying to grasp music by same way that they usually analyse a painting or a sculpture ; i.e. as an inert object, a « trace » as the economist R. Di Ruzza understands it. Nevertheless, music is far from the two conditions that objectivity requires – i.e. music is far from being a material object as a table or a sculpture – : it's got neither matter – sound and time are not matters like wood or marble are matters for fine arts –, nor immediat conceptual signification – without text, music *says* nothing. So, if the musical « object » has got neither matter as a sculpture nor immediat signification as a poem, that is because it's not an object but **a process**¹¹. A process which, in the same way as the process « social reality », needs a particular conceptualization : not a conceptualization which deprives the musical process of its fluidity because of the conceptual cutting up of the musical experience in order to get an object similar to the object of

⁹ About the « epistemical mode » as a production mode of knowledge, cf. Yves Schwartz in « *Discipline épistémique, discipline ergologique : paidia et poleteia* », in *Manières de penser et Manières d'agir en Education et en Formation*, sous la direction de B. Maggi, Paris, P.U.F., 2000, p. 48-52. According to Yves Schwartz, the « epistemical mode » is « the norm of all scientific ethics... It is an epistemological posture principally characterized by the neutralization of the *hic et nunc* and the elimination of the « residues » which escape from the conceptualization ».

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.131.

¹¹ As a proof, we want to cite these words from **Miles Davis** about *Bitches Brew*, one of his famous work : « What we have done on *Bitches Brew*, we couldn't write it on a piece of paper [...]. That's why I didn't write it. It doesn't mean that I didn't know what I wanted, but **I knew that it could only emerged from a process ; not from a pre-arranged stuff.** » Miles Davis and Quincy Troup, *Miles, The Autobiography*, Paris, Presses de la Renaissance, 1989, p.258.

As music is here a collective activity (indeed, Miles is not alone on this recording), Miles really envisages it as a « there and then » collective creation ; according to him, music is from the interaction between the musicians, specially when they are improvising in the same time like on *Bitches Brew*. That's why musical experience can't be analysed as an object : music belongs to Life, to the living. Thus, we understand why Miles didn't want to resort to scores : providing a precise harmonical framework, the scores could suffocate the musical process.

the physical sciences ; but in contrary, a conceptualization wich could give support to the musical phenomenon in its own movement.

MUSIC AS AN ACTIVITY : INTERPRETATION

But, because they are systematically paying attention to the accomplished and finished musical work in the ear of the listener, these « philosophies of music » are completely missing the Life of the musical experience. They are missing a wide part of the music : the fact that **music is an activity**. None of them are analysing the « gestures » wich shapes the musical work. Most of the time, the reflections about the interpretation of a piece of music are absent in the continental philosophy. As if the action of performing a musical work – this « gesture » as R. Di Ruzza understands it –, buried beneath its mediating function between composition and listening, could be summed up in this transmission operation ; as if interpretation was ontologically lower than composition and listening, under pretext that the performer is only executing the score in a mechanical way... Nevertheless, as a place where tempo, attack or style of playing have to be chosen, the performance of a piece obviously adds some determinations to the musical work. Thus, we have to wonder if the interpretation – the action of performing a piece – is not a kind of creation ? Because it seems to us that analysing music as an « **activity** » could help the continental philosophy in its attempt to grasp the musical experience.

FROM « EPISTEMICAL » TO « ERGOLOGICAL » MODE

But as we saw, the problem is to analyse music in its shape of process – i.e. holding music as a living entity – : that means that we have to grasp the musical Life by a different means of the « epistemical » concepts which are cutting their objects in order to categorize them. For sure, they could distort the musical phenomenon which is too alive for this kind of conceptualization. Incapable of reconstructing the music's Life, we could fall back into the same kind of Schopenhauer's mistake : **taking music for something else than music**.

Thus, if we want to analyse the musical experience without giving in the « epistemical » concept easiness – wich are cutting their objects in order to categorize them – ; if we want to reconstruct in their unity the « gestures » which are shaping this experience, we have to change of knowledge production system. We have to move from « epistemical » to « **ergological** » mode. As « ergology » is an « in-discipline », is an epistemological posture

which is always trying to give support to the society's movement ¹² – instead of cutting the society's Life discipline per discipline like in the « epistemical » mode – , it seems to us that « ergology » is the appropriate posture in order to grasp music under its shape of process (i.e. as an activity) : because it is using « soft » concepts which mould the curves of the objects they have to grasp, the « ergological » reasoning gives support to the « gestures » of the human societies, follows them in their development. According to R. Di Ruzza, « knowledges which are produced from an « ergological » viewpoint are changing themselves in the same time as their object is changing » ¹³.

3. PLAYING MUSIC

THE PROBLEM OF THE INTERPRETATION

So, the first thing we have to do from an « ergological » viewpoint is to start from a real problem ; to start from a problem that people who are playing music really meet each time they are taking their instruments – i.e. not the problem of « authenticity » for instance, which seems to be a problem for some philosophers only –. And a problem of this kind is for us the problem of the status of their own activity : the problem of the interpretation. Why ? Because if you take a look at any encyclopedia, interpretation is defined as « an act by which an **executant** makes perceptible what is only virtual on the written scores » ¹⁴. But, as the french jazzman André Hodeir remarks in his famous *Hommes et problèmes du jazz* ¹⁵ : « musicians usually never confine to the strict application of the orders » ¹⁶, i.e. they never confine to the mere execution of the score ;and when it is a great musician who is playing, A. Hodeir claims that « we've got a kind here a kind of transfiguration from within of a material which is in itself, devoid of melodic interest » ¹⁷. So, « only by means of elongation of some notes, or the delation of some silences [...], it happens that Armstrong, without changing a single note, manages to transfigure the most colourless musical text » ¹⁸.

¹² R. Di Ruzza. *op. cit.*, p.64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁴ Grand Larousse Encyclopédique. « *Interpretation* » article, volume 6.

¹⁵ A. Hodeir. *Hommes et problèmes du jazz*, Paris, Editions Paranthèses, 1981.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.151.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.149.

COLTRANE : THE « CREATOR EXECUTANT »

That's why we have to wonder if there is something here which could help us to revalue the performer's status which is too often crushed between the composer's prestige and the reduction to a mere executant – indeed an underling –. As the performer has the capacity to « transfigure » a trivial theme, i.e. to transform a trivial piece in a work of art, we have to wonder if the interpret could be considered as a creator, in the same way as a composer. In order to be convinced, we just have to listen to Coltrane's version of *My Favourite Things*¹⁹ : it is really amazing that this saxophonist succeeds in making such an extraordinary piece of music from an initial material which is so trivial – namely a little theme devoid of interest originally written for a show from Broadway²⁰... But, we still have to explain how this « transfiguration » of the original theme by the musician who is performing it is working ; we have to explain the gap between what the musician is playing, and what he should play : is this gap conscious ? voluntary ? Necessary ? open to criticism ? In Brief, by which process this « transfiguration » is working ?

THE TASTE'S SOLUTION

The *Universalis Encyclopedia* suggests a solution to us. Indeed, in the « *Musical Improvisation* » article²¹ P. Lacas resorts to the only and mysterious « good taste » to explain the gap between what the musician is playing and what he should play : « Execution never corresponds to notation [...]. For instance, a succession of eighth which are reading within a bar made of four quarter notes is close to [...] a succession of pointed quarter notes followed by sixteenths. The « good taste », this permanent guide invoked by the Ancients is the only way to know how embellishing a theme »²². Thus, if a pianist adds some notes when he is playing a theme, or stresses a soft time which was yet a strong on the scores, this could be due to the musician's « good taste », his mere « faculty of evaluating the beautiful »²³ as claims Kant. We agree that taste obviously plays an important role in the interpretation of a piece of music – choice of notes, melody's relief, rhythm... – ; but, referring *in fine* the gap between the score and the interpretation to the mere concept of beauty, that's seems to us really dissatisfying. Because once we have said that the musician plays an F instead of a B because he finds this substitution so beautiful, what can we say ? We can't go further : it is obviously

¹⁹ J. Coltrane. *My Favourite Things*, Atlantic, 1960.

²⁰ J. Andrews. *My Favourite Things*, original version.

²¹ P. Lacas. « *Improvisation musicale* », in *Encyclopédie Universalis*, p.1031-1034.

²² *Ibid.*, p.1032.

²³ E. Kant. *Critique of Judgment*, first part, § 1, footnote, Edition Vrin, p.63.

the dead end. By flooding the musical performance in the vague of a concept – the philosophical concept of « taste » –, P. Lacas avoids the problem of the interpretation as a creator activity.

THE SCORE AS A SET OF NORMS

In order to escape from this conceptual vagueness – the « good taste » as the cause of the gap between performance and score –, we suggest to resort to ontology, but with an « ergological » point of view, i.e. an « epistemological » posture which is focus on the human activity ; namely we have to see this gap from the performer's viewpoint, the man who is in activity. And from an « ergological » point of view the gap's problem is changing : the question is now « what could be a piece of music for a musician ? ». From Coltrane's viewpoint, we can be sure that *My Favourite Things* is not first and foremost a « pure sound structure » ; from a performer's point of view, the work is first of all a score, i.e. a set of instruction that he has to « make perceptible » according to the Encyclopédia. But, what is a score other than a set of norms ? Indeed, the performer always have to deal with a kind of procedure regulations ; he always have to deal with instructions in the same way as an operator has to deal with some norms of quality for instance. Like a worker, a performer must do with a set of norms ; but from his viewpoint, the norms he has to deal with are not about quality or productivity : his norms concern the tempo, the chords, the rhythm... As a human activity, performing is like working : it takes place in an univers « saturated of norms » according to Yves Schwartz (ergology's father).

« EVERY MAN WANTS TO BE THE SUBJECT OF HIS OWN NORMS »

But, anyone who had precisely dealt with some « working's situation » knows how Canguilhem's tenet « every man wants to be the subject of his own norms »²⁴ is relevant. According to this doctor/philosopher who has analysed the « man at work », the man in the factories : a human being is definitively not a « soft past » which norms could easily modeled or shaped. Man is not a « milksop ». Because as Life is « polarity and thus unconcious position of values »²⁵, the man – who is a living – can't escape from « the normativity of the living ». Canguilhem calls « the normativity of the living », this call within each of us from

²⁴ G. Canguilhem. « Milieu et normes de l'homme au travail », *Cahiers internationaux de Sociologie*, III, 1947, p.120-136.

²⁵ G. Canguilhem. *Le Normal et le Pathologique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1966, p.77.

the *health* which consists in « cracking old norms in order to institute new ones according to values which are our own values »²⁶. That's why Canguilhem claims that every man who is looking for health wants to be « the subject of his own norms » : « Each of us fixes his own norms by choosing his exercise's models »²⁷.

That's why living under norms which are not our own norms is literally unbearable ; Because « Life is opposition to inertia and indifference, and is fundamentally mobility, overflowing of established norms, reversal of the existing, the stopping on a norm and the impossibility to change it involves in contrary an ill life which feels itself as anormal »²⁸.

THE « RENORMALIZATION » OF THE SCORE

So, if we transpose now all these principles about the man at work in the musical world, it is easy to understand that the gap between the score and what the musician is actually playing is definitively not a mere « matter of taste ». Because if we follow Canguilhem and his « normativity's » theory, the gap between the score (i.e. the norms) and what the performer is playing resides in the « fight » that the musician has to do against the score in order to be « the subject of his own norms ». This kind of « norms fighting » is especially obvious when a jazz soloist takes a chorus, i.e. a technical word which means an improvised variation of theme : indeed, this « exercise » exactly consists in extricating oneself from the norms of the score in order to keep the harmonic structure only. And according to the « normativity's theory » of Canguilhem, the musician who wants to be healthy must « renormalize » this harmonic structure in accordance with his own values. In practical terms, in order to escape from illness, the performer has to fight against the « C-E-G-C » style as A. Hodeir understands it ; « C-E-G-C » style which consists in following the score strictly. For instance : on CM7, the ill musician will play « C-E-G-B » ; on Am7, he will play « A-C-E-G »... In these cases, the performer is not « the subject of his own norms » : in contrary, that is the logic of the harmony which is guiding the chorus, not the musician himself. That's why we claim he is sick. Following the score in a « C-E-G-C » style, that is really unbearable for an healthy performer : the call from the health within his own body drives him to create the gap between what he should play and what he is actually playing ; as each human norms, the score « offers itself as a unification possible mode of a *divers* [- the notes -]. [...] But offering one's service doesn't mean imposing upon something »²⁹. That's why the performer will ever

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.106.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.205.

²⁸ G. Leblanc. *La vie humaine*. Anthropologie et biologie chez G. Canguilhem, Paris, P.U.F. 2002, p.226.

²⁹ G.Canguilhem. op. cit, p.177.

« renormalize » the score in accordance with his own values ; and anyway, « where the rule is followed without the consciousness of a possible reversal, all pleasure is simple »³⁰ claims Canguilhem.

4. CONCLUSION

THE VALUE OF « LIVING TOGETHER » AS A CONDITION OF POSSIBILITY OF THE MUSICAL ACTIVITY

We would like to conclude this attempt to grasp the musical process by another way than the traditional questions of philosophies of music with the following remark : we claimed that the healthy performer « renormalizes » the score in accordance with his own values ; but it is not obvious that there is values in the musical experience.

It seems to us that the best proof of the presence of values in the musical activity is unquestionably the collective improvisation which is call « *Free Jazz* ». Grounded on « not very restrictive »³¹ formal indications – absence of pre-established harmonical structures, no rhythmical cutting out –, we could think that this kind of musical practice leads us to the greatest cacophony : indeed, let's imagine eight or ten musicians playing independently what they want... « Nevertheless [notices P. Lacas], a formalizing determination necessarily appears in the process of execution, arousing a perceptible structure, avoiding the unharmonious « discord ». For instance, the trumpet « commands » the shape in the band according with the language's laws of the trumpeter only. A psychological group's phenomenon happens when the trombone answers to it [i.e. to the trumpet], imposes its speech and causes the confrontation with the saxophone, while bass and drums are supporting its sentence or taking up its scream. A **common will** inspires its intentions and the musical ritual deploys its symphony. Thus, there is entente (concert), because a tacit dialogue leads the conversation »³². But, we have to wonder how this « psychological group's phenomenon » could happen if there was not, on top of the « good taste » of the musicians, the value of « living together » ? Indeed, how could it be « entente » – i.e. concert – if this collective improvisation wasn't grounded on such a value like « respect » or « being very attentive towards the other » ? The value of « living together » really appears as a condition of possibility of « *Free Jazz* » ; and it seems to us that it is the best exemple of the presence of values in the musical experience.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.179.

³¹ P. Lacas. « Improvisation musicale », op.cit., p.1032.

³² *Ibid.*, p.1032.

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