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Audio-graphy: Meaning and Irrationality in Music

Until the second half of the 18th century meaning in music did not exist as a separate problem because music was simply treated as a practice illustrating the meanings of texts. Although at the turn of the 15th century purely instrumental works began to appear – that is, musical material gained a kind of autonomy – it was a limited autonomy, because they were still considered to be dependent on language.¹ In other words, they were seen as expressive of conventional (linguistic) meanings – music was taken to be a rhetorical discourse, which was confirmed by a large number of published handbooks of such rhetorics that taught how to produce an intended effect of meaning by using particular technical devices. Therefore, music was considered to be an art of representation whether it be social (music serving power by means of representing its idealised image) or emotional (music illustrating feelings, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about it).

The problem of separate non-literary musical meaning appears only at the end of the 18th century with the so-called “absolute music”. Although illustrating the whole problem by referring to only one figure is to simplify, one can say that with Ludwig van Beethoven the basic question is no longer how to objectivise familiar feelings and emotions in

¹ Only “practical” music is being considered here. Ancient and medieval purely theoretical treatises, which take *musica practica* as a lower kind of practice belonging to a separate sphere pose a different set of problems.

music, but how to use sounds in order to create unknown emotional states that only music can produce (Chanan, 38). However, with this understanding of the task of instrumental music as entirely autonomous, its status becomes radically altered – it turns into something which Umberto Eco describes as “a semiotic system apparently without a semantic plane” (qtd. in Chanan, 28), that is, a system of signs which works but does not result in meaning. In other words, a riddle is posed: music moves us, it moves even those who know nothing about its “technical” (structural) content, but what does it move in us, if it has no “semantic plane”? When a new question appears, new theories which try to answer it spring up, yet one should perhaps remind oneself that most of the 19th and 20th century philosophers, including the greatest ones, have not had much to say about music, although they speculated profusely on other arts. This deafness of the thinkers is quite puzzling.

Two famous exceptions to this peculiar indifference are Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. The former (who is said to have been a good flutist), in his opus magnum *The World as Will and Representation* (1818, expanded edition 1844), claims that music is the highest art because it is the immediate expression of will unmediated by representation. A variation on the same subject by early Nietzsche, who still considers Schopenhauer as an educator and who is enthralled by Wagner, is *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872) in which Apollo and Dionysus represent two opposing principles roughly corresponding to representation and will. A rather vulgarized continuation of this dualism, in the form of various pop-cultural versions of psychology and psychoanalysis, is still with us: musical material speaks or expresses our “primeval instincts,” which at the same time it “disarms” by means of enforcing form on them, which allows them to become sublimated rather than repressed. However, in spite of the popularity of this take on music, an obvious problem appears here: even the most “primitive” music is always already a form of socialization and therefore its effect is always the establishment of at least a rudimentary social space, that is, it is in no way just an expression of “nature.” Therefore the idea that the meaning of music lies in its giving cultural expression to pre-cultural living “substance” without the mediation of the alienating idea

(as in writing) or image (as in visual arts) does not seem to be very convincing.²

In the concept of music as sublimation, form as such (and with it order as an effect of rationalisation) is valorised positively, so the next step in theorising on musical meaning is the one taken by Eduard Hanslick who announces that there is no extra-musical content in music: its meaning is perceptible solely as the development of its structure, that is, it is strictly formal and has no extra-musical references. Although people often ascribe to music some extra-musical content, this is simply a popular weakness in which the sacred purity of music is polluted and abused by the dilettantes. However, in spite of the continuous popularity of Hanslick's position and certain advantages it undoubtedly possesses (for instance, it rids us of the rather obscurantist idea of a "natural" foundation of music), one can have serious reservations about it. For instance: if a composer like Claude Debussy is taken into consideration, one can say that in his works extra-musical content (images, atmosphere) is turned into the constructive elements of a composition:

Richard Wagner's harmony had promoted the change in the logic and constructive power of harmony. One of its consequences was the so-called *impressionistic* use of harmonies, especially practiced by Debussy. His harmonies without constructive meaning, often served the coloristic purpose of expressing moods and pictures. Moods and pictures, though extra-musical, thus became constructive elements, incorporated in musical functions; they produced a sort of emotional comprehensibility. (Schoenberg, 104)

Hanslick would probably have answered to this reservation that Debussy's music was French and degenerate and that his theory applied to the great musical forms created by Germanic classicism. However,

² A more sophisticated version of this theory, proposed by some psychoanalysts, may claim that music is a symbolic language of the unconscious whose symbolism we are unable to fathom. But it is absurd to speak of the existence of a symbolic language about which we cannot say anything. One can just as well claim that sparrows are very intelligent birds, because they have created a sophisticated symbolic logic, but unfortunately it is inaccessible to the human mind for unknown reasons.

when one has a closer structural look at a classical symphony or sonata, one will find that they are *narrative* forms, and that they are narrative in a specific way: their narration is of a type which we also encounter in realist novels.

While the 18th century novel is most often simply a mixture of various genres in which the narration concerning adventures of the main protagonist is not necessarily the most important (the most extreme example of this, and a kind of parody at the same time, is Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*), the basic pattern of the realist novel, reigning supreme in the nineteenth century, focuses on the education in life of the protagonist (or a small group of them) who beginning from the original state of harmony passes through conflict and chaos in order to recreate the harmonious state but on the higher level of consciousness. In the process, the strength of his character is tested while he learns about himself and the world.³ Therefore, in order to concentrate attention on the presentation of the modern odyssey of the newly autonomous bourgeois individual, all discourses inessential to the central psychodrama, which earlier added to the colour of the novel, have to be discarded. The same kind of narrative structure can be found in the great classical forms of western music. Moreover, if one takes into consideration the fact that these musical forms are addressed to the ideal listener, that is, the ideal cultured bourgeois who is well-read in literature, philosophy, politics and music, one can be sure that he will "insert" the odyssey of the new self working out its spiritual (and economic) autonomy into the music (Chanan, 45). In other words, the subject identifies here with what is happening in the music by means of importing into the music an extra-musical meaning, yet this meaning does not appear in the guise of some external superadded content (e.g. music as expressing certain emotions) – it is the very form of a musical work which produces the identification. Meaning is not located here in the structure as such (the formal juxtaposition of notes is meaningless), but in what the structure itself is the expression

³ Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World* argues quite convincingly that the rise of realist novel, which focuses on this particular kind of social education, can be seen as a reaction to the great trauma of the French Revolution.

of: the ideal image of the dynamics of the autonomous subject as the “upward-moving” spirit in the process of self-overcoming, which is at the same time the process of self-realisation. In the final analysis, the appearance of the new 19th century subject in music can briefly be described thusly: the form, which without any “programmatic” content is already ideological in itself, brings into existence a certain kind of subject and its particularly structured desire – the desire to rise up to one’s heroic image, which appears to the subject as its most profound content.

Should one, therefore, treat music (and art in general) as (among other things) one of the disciplinary practices analysed by Foucault? In other words, can one rationalise music the way it is done by this kind of ideology critique? Even if such a critique may be inevitable and necessary (as in fact it is), it should be rather obvious that it constitutes only a preliminary stage in the understanding of the nature of musical meaning for the very obvious reason that the aforementioned description of the coming to existence of the imaginary subject in music is the description of a fully *successful* ideological operation of identifying with the ideal image incarnated in a musical structure. However, one has to note that such an identification (together with the rationalisation which explains it) can never fully succeed, which results in all kinds of contradictions in the ideological form which is being described here. One can say, for instance, that although the epoch prefers (in music, though not necessarily in literature) tragic themes, the form which it uses (harmony → conflict → higher harmony) is essentially *comic* (in the sense of being the inversion of tragedy). Therefore we return to the postulate that apart from form and content (whether we consider them as ideological or not) there is something else in music, some mysterious surplus, something which cannot be described in rational categories. One of the aspects of composition which clearly points to this issue can be the fact that even on the strictly technical plane nobody has been able to rationalise music whether we take into consideration traditional harmonic systems or even such a hyper-rationalised way of composition as serialism. Even Pierre Boulez speaks about an irrational component in music:

Let me refer to Diderot who once wrote very strikingly about how to approach the work of art. First, it is unknown to you, and you are in the dark – you just have a certain feeling for it. Second, you analyze it and therefore become familiar with its structure. But if you go further than that, you again find yourself in darkness because you did not really find an explanation for the irrational aspect of the work. Many people have analysed Mozart's music, for instance his melodies, but nobody will tell you exactly why one of his melodic lines is better than that of any other composer of his time. You can give reasons but these reasons are always profoundly inadequate. For instance, you can judge that Debussy's rhythms are terribly flexible and very interesting because of their flexibility; you can analyze the successions of time divisions. At the time, everybody was making approximately the same time divisions – but Debussy's were very new and different. So you approach the work in the dark, you become familiar with it, and then you lose it again. You know, and finally, you do not know. That is encouraging, because if analysis could lead to complete knowledge I think both of you [you and the composer] would soon be in despair. (Boulez, 111)

But where does the irrational come from? Are we doomed to explain it (but what kind of explanation is this?) by once again having recourse to the unconscious as the site of primeval instincts?

When one speaks about the unconscious, the automatic association is psychoanalysis. But is this really the case that psychoanalysis defines the unconscious as the site of unbridled biological forces? Certainly not the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. Hence, we can perhaps use some Lacanian concepts in order to theoretically approach what is beyond meaning in music. Actually, we have already loosely used his early theory of the mirror stage in our attempt to describe the constitution of the bourgeois subject in music as the narcissistic relation with the ideal image of oneself. The theory analyses the way in which a stable image of the ego is created: "falling in love" with the ideal image offered to it, the imperfect subject tries to rise up to the level of this image and therefore identifies with the values of a given society (my ideal image is an image which I consider lovable, but I know it is lovable because I have internalized what is considered to be lovable by the society in which I live). In other words, we are dealing here with a narcissistic stage which is

necessary on the way to socialization because it teaches us what we should desire.⁴ However, we know that Narcissus' story does not have a happy ending. That is: such identification is never completely successful – the ideal image always turns out to be a failure, it always lacks something impalpable, this something which actually makes me who I really am. And so, paradoxically, the ideal image becomes a source of aggression directed at everything which confirms that something is lacking.

In his 11th seminar Lacan revises his earlier mirror stage theory in order to emphasise the mechanism which makes identification impossible. To do this, he introduces probably his most famous theoretical concept “object *a*” (Lacan 1979, 67–121). Although Lacan's explanation is mainly devoted to object *a* as the gaze (*regard*) in relation to the field of the visible, I think that this discussion also allows one to draw certain conclusions concerning the field of the hearable/listenable, especially because object *a* is a generic name given to what psychoanalysis also calls “partial object,” and which can take various forms, not only of the gaze but also of the *voice*. Without going into the theoretical intricacies connected with the central place of this object in Lacanian theory, we can just say that it is, among other things, precisely the paradoxical object which is lacking in our ideal image, the lack the subject ultimately identifies with: I really am this something inexplicable which cannot be seen in any image and which makes me desirable.⁵ Therefore object *a* is a paradoxical object which does not exist but whose effects (the effects of its lack, which is taken to be the presence of something inaccessible) can be perceived.⁶

Theorising about the visible, Lacan speaks about objects which are traps for the eye or the gaze (Lacan 1979, 89). In a similar sense, we can

⁴ In fact, the process of the formation of the ego and its desire is rather more complicated in Lacanian theory because it involves both the Imaginary (image) and the Symbolic (language). For our purposes here, however, we do not have to go into all the complications.

⁵ The soul has always been one of the figures of this something in me which is more than me.

⁶ Lacan calls it the object-cause of desire: it is rather a cause than an object because substantially it does not exist.

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speak about musical works as traps for the ear. Because, in the final analysis, the most important question we should be able to answer here is: why do we listen to something? As our quotation from Boulez already intimated, no structural analysis will ever answer why we want to listen to a given work rather than to another. It is well known that there are plenty of pieces constructed according to the best technical rules whose listening is simply boring.⁷ Therefore, what makes the work into an object awakening desire? One can suggest that it is precisely object *a* as semblance (Lacan 1979, 107). In other words, representation (purely musical structure) has to be constructed in such a way that it becomes a *screen* which seems to veil something behind itself, something which is not there and which cannot be there as Hanslick argued rightly. What he did not realise, however, was that in the split between the hearable and intelligible structure and the suggestion of something that lies beyond it desire appeared and with it the musical subject came into existence. Therefore, the *listening* subject (and not simply the subject hearing some acoustic phenomena) is the effect of this impossibility of hearing the meaning of what one is listening to.

What we encounter here is a phenomenon (musical structure) and its generative principle which one cannot find “in the notes,” but whose effect the musical structure is. The origin, the source of musical form is therefore *informe*: the unformed (what does not have meaning in music) and the inquiry (the question addressed to the representation about what it is the representation of) (Copjec, 35). In other words, the effect cannot appear without its generative principle, yet the generative principle does not have an autonomous existence which can but does not have to produce its effect (like, for instance, the state of “inspiration”) – the generative principle is simply the empty place in the structure which the effect indicates (Copjec, 9). It is not only that meaning has belonged to the “essence” of music for most of its history, but that, paradoxically, it presents itself even in its own absence in absolute music. The absence which appears here takes the form of a *lack*. The point is not that something is not there – if something we do not know is not

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⁷ Moreover, if we accept music as entirely autonomous, that is, limited to its structure, we make it into something resembling chess.

there, we do not know that it is not there; absence appears to us only as something lacking. For a man used to sound film, sound in a silent film is not simply absent, but even more present (its lack is the source of discomfort) by its very absence. We know, however, what is lacking in a silent film, while object *a* remains elusive. Yet, its elusiveness is not one of the impossible ideal which is determinate but unreachable (for instance, because as transcendent and spiritual it cannot be realised in the fallen material and materialist existence) but of the impossible (non-existent) Real which by producing desire disfigures the stable and familiar reality in which we live.

The consequences of the aforementioned characteristics are far-reaching: one can say that absorbing music (as any successful work of art) is inhuman. Music seems to turn its back on us in order to face its meaning which is for us inaccessible. In other words, it seems to enjoy itself in the way which is completely independent of us. We approach it and feel *guilty* because we do not understand. In our encounter with autonomous art it turns out that its function is to make us aware that we lack something and that in order to understand we have to overcome our miserable and limited self, that is, we have to become someone else. If we have to look for heroism in art, this is the place to find it.

There is one more consequence deserving mention: it is semiotics and not acoustics which sheds a proper kind of light on the problem of music. Because only the signifier can give things meaning, it is the signifier which makes listening possible (Copjec, 34).⁸ Therefore, there is no listening independent of language and meaning – music is *audio-graphy*. But it is “audiographic” primarily in the formal sense discussed above and not because people tend to impose all kinds of extra-musical scenarios on it. One has to add, however, that such scenarios are probably inevitable and they are precisely the outcome of music’s “audiographism.” Because music becomes the veil behind which object *a* is hidden, all kinds of private and social fantasies, which attempt to assimilate the inhuman in music and force it to become the expression of ourselves, are projected on such a screen. The screen then turns into Narcissus’ mirror.

⁸ Copjec argues a parallel point relating the signifier to the field of the visible.

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