Nationalism and intonation
Jacques Amblard

To cite this version:
Jacques Amblard. Nationalism and intonation. Nationalism and romanticism, Oct 2003, Corfou, Greece. hal-02293594

HAL Id: hal-02293594
https://hal.science/hal-02293594
Submitted on 20 Sep 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
Nationalism and intonation

Jacques Amblard (Aix Marseille Université)

This lecture was delivered at the Ionian University (Corfu, Greece), the 17th of October 2003.

Abstract: Some composers of the late 19th century seemed to be interested in musical translation of the intonation of their own language, for example Mussorgsky in Russia and Hugo Wolff in Austria. We shall study the Hugo Wolff’s Lied Wieviel Zeit verlor’ ich dich zu lieben, and see if it’s possible to find the trace of intonation of German in the singer’s melody. If we find such a correlation, then it will be possible to conclude that Wolff has written, perhaps not typical Austrian music, but typical ‘Germanic’ music. Then, the shadow of intonation of speech, found in vocal music, can generate not a precise nationalism, but a nationalism created by a common language, as a matter of fact, a common intonation.

When children, confronted by a musicianship exercise, try to solfa the rhythm (and just the rhythm, without singing the pitch of the notes) of a piece, they usually mark the note coming on the beat (the first note of each beat, for example the first eighth-note or the first sixteenth-note of each beat) in two different ways at the same time. The first part of the beat is accentuated with a stronger intensity of the voice, of course, but also with a higher pitch (the other notes taking the same lower and monotonous pitch). This natural procedure comes from a characteristic of the human voice, the concordance of the stress (intensity) accent and the pitch accent. It’s difficult for the voice to sing loudly in a low register, or softly in a high one. As a matter of fact, this concordance isn’t obvious. It doesn’t rule all the sonic phenomena: even if one finds an equivalent stress/pitch concordance in the technical characteristics of many wind instruments, like the flute or the clarinet, some other wind instruments reverse this concordance, for example the bassoon and the oboe. It’s problematic for the bassoon to play piano in a low register or forte in a high one (as it is for the oboe). This correlation is first a phenomenon of the voice, any voice, not specially the singing voice, also the voice of the speech where the accent is generally higher and louder at the same time: the stress accent (as the linguists call it) corresponds to the pitch accent.

One has often noticed the shadow of intonation of speech in the German lieder of the 19th century (Cohen-Lévinas, 1987, pp. 29-34). The Austrian composer Hugo Wolf seems to respect particularly the lexical accents of German when he sets poems to music. Mosco Carner insists on this fact, and moreover entitles the first chapter of his Wolf’s biography: “In the beginning was the word” (1988, pp. 13-23). About the song Wer rief dich denn? (1890), Carner even employs the term recitativo accompagnato (ibid., p. 82). Henry Baraud, about the lieder of Wolf in general, doesn’t hesitate to find a “musical notation where the succession of values and pitches reproduces the tiniest inflexion of the speaking voice”. As a matter of fact, these “inflexions” of the speech are
the characteristics of the lexical and/or prosodic German accents, which the composer respects and even emphasizes in the setting of the text to music. The concordance of pitch and stress must be correctly translated by musical notations. But in the case of German, the accent is not only louder and higher than the other syllables, it’s also longer. Then Wolf has to respect a triple concordance of the accent (stress, pitch and duration). The beginning of the song *Wie viele Zeit verlor' ich dich zu lieben* (1896) shows such a triple correlation. When a German says the sentence of the title, he might mark a light accent on “Zeit”, and a second accent, stronger, on the “ie” of “lieben”. Thus, “Zeit” is placed on the melodic summit (the highest pitch) of the bar (admittedly also attempted in the three first syllables) and above all on the first beat (the strong beat of the bar). Consequently, Wolf respects the concordance stress/pitch. But the composer also gives to the syllable “Zeit” the longest rhythmical value of the bar (a pointed eighth-note, while the other notes of the bar are just eighth-notes or sixteenth-notes). The concordance is triple, as it must be in the setting of a German text to music, according to Wolf. The phenomenon is even clearer in the long “ie” of “lieben”. Placed on the first beat of the next bar (consequently on the strong beat, once again) and on the melodic summit that this time it alone occupies, it lasts twice as long as the previous syllable (“zu”).

Perhaps that’s the way Wolf’s songs become national music. It’s not only the words (and thus the language that they carry) that represent cultural specificities, but also the intonations of German. Intonation of speech may be the deepest bond between people of the same culture, of the same country (and sometimes more precisely of the same region). This bond is affective. Thus, Diderot calls intonation the language of “feelings” (1970, p. 171) and Rousseau calls it the language of “passions” (chapter II, in the beginning). The linguist Ivan Fónagy specifies that “the emotive intonations reveal above all national […] secrets” (1971, p. 562).

However, the result that we have analysed may not be specific to German or Austrian music. Italian or English composers, for example, might also respect a triple concordance of the speech accent *a priori*, because the accentuation also produces longer syllables in their respective languages. Therefore, we can only notice, in the example of Wolf, the composer’s *effort* to make his music culturally specific. We can just conclude that Wolf distinguishes his music, for example, from French music (the accentuation is not a matter of duration in the intonation of French, as we’ll see further), or from Russian music.

Before Wolf, Mussorgsky tried to translate the intonations of his language into music. Around the1870’s, Mussorgsky writes: ”Whoever speaks and above all whatever he says, my brain immediately works on the musical reproduction of what I hear” (Samagnac, 1992, p. 861). When Marcel Marnat reveals that in *Pirushka*, Mussorgsky uses an archaic Greek melody (1962, p. 85), it’s because rudimentary tetrachords can be found in it, those that Odile Vivier (1973, p. 111) sees in *Ecuatorial* (1933-34) by Edgar Varèse. For us, however, these tetrachords might instead be
those restricted scales (often with four degrees, “fuzzy” or not; for all these questions, see Amblard, 2002) that one can analyse in the intonation of speech.

This interest of Mussorgsky in the musical transcription of Russian prosody begins “at the end of the 1868-1869 season” (Rimsky-Korsakov, 1938, p. 79) when he writes the Marriage. The Circle of Five is immediately impressed. Theorist and best technician of this group, Rimsky-Korsakov straight away notes in his diary: “All of them were touched by Mussorgsky’s work, and enthusiastic about the originality of its recitatives” (ibid.). Myriam Samagnac confirms: “In The marriage, the recitative follows the incidences of speech so closely that one might think about a style exercise” (1992, p. 861). During the 1868-1869 season, according to Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky also outlines his Boris Godunov, in which he emphasizes his peculiar sense of recitative, and then composes the first songs of the cycle The nursery. In this cycle, the singer plays the role of a little boy; thus, a spirit of lightness arises which seems to authorise all liberties, including a modern transcription of speech intonation. In To the corner (1870), the singer sings in a traditional way only when his character, the little boy, is supposed to cry. Elsewhere, his singing is almost a recitation. In effect, Mussorgsky has noticed that the child’s crying voice is high, melodic and, in fact, very close to singing. In The evening prayer, the child integrates numerous names in his prayer to Jesus in a monotonous tone, on two notes separated by a minor third, the interval that certain French phoneticians find very often in intonation (specifically, intonation of French, but apparently this interval is common in other languages as well; see Rossi, 1981, p. 117). As early as in the first song, Oh tell me a story, Nianiasbka (1868), Mussorgsky imposes this shrewd distance, perhaps characteristic of every successful work, between the lightness of the subject matter and the modernity of the technique.

We notice a technical progress since The marriage in the treatment of the stress/pitch concordance. Likely the first to try this procedure in the history of savant occidental music, Mussorgsky juxtaposes bars with different numbers of beats. Some of those bars are already “irregular” (e.g. 5 or 7 beats per bar, see Ex. 1). Even long before Stravinsky, each bar contains its own number of beats. Bars 4 and 6 are irregular, containing 5 beats. The irregularity exists, therefore, both between the bars and within certain bars. If the simple irregularity of the bar itself (bar with 5 or 7 beats) is quite modern in savant music in 1870, it has its precedents, especially in the music of composers coming from Slavish or Finno-Ugrian cultures. Traditional songs aside, one can quote the 17th century canticle composed by the Hungarian duke Pál Esterházy, Az földi állatokroll (“About the beasts of this earth”) which contains bars of 11 beats, or Chopin’s larghetto of the First sonata in C minor op. 4, containing bars of 5 beats (then the irregular bars will still be particularly attached to Eastern Europe; consider the scherzo in 5 of Rimsky-Korsakov’s Third symphony (1866-1873), that “Hans von Bülow liked”, according to the composer, and that announces the other scherzo in 5 of Tchaïkovsky’s Pathetic symphony (1893), and later the coda in
5 of the third movement of Prokofiev’s *Second violin concerto* (1935), or certain dances in 7 of the sixth journal of Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos*). Perhaps there is a correlation with the Slavish “subjective lyricism” that Adorno noticed (1976, pp. 115-116; this concept would be specific to the “pre-bourgeois East” in which Adorno precisely integrates Hugo Wolf, Mahler, Mussorgsky and Janáček, in a way that is especially relevant to this work).

However, the irregular number of beats between the bars is a much more modern phenomenon; according to Marie-Claire Mussat, Bartók himself will wait until his violin *Sonatas* (1921-22) to make them widely used. Above all, this juxtaposition of bars with different numbers of beats comes, in the work of Mussorgsky, from the will of the composer to correlate the stress and the pitch accent. In the Ex. 1, one notices that the changes of the bar type mostly occur in order for the high pitches to be placed on the first beats (thus the strong beats). Those high pitches are obviously used for the lexical and/or prosodic accents. The irregularity of the bars, then, mirrors the fact that Russian words all have one lexical accent, but not the same number of syllables. Finally, we notice that Mussorgsky does not treat the accent with a longer duration. The syllables of Russian words, according to Mussorgsky, seem to be pronounced in a very regular rhythm (a quarter-note for each syllable). In this way, Russian and German music (as it appears in the mentioned Wolf’s lied) find different melodic features which reflect the intonations of their respective cultures. But setting more specific intonations to music, like intonations of Moravian, could create more of a national identity. The case of certain pieces by Janáček, then, could be interesting to study.

From *Jenufa* (1894-1994) onwards, i.e. in almost all of Janáček’s important pieces, one can notice a modern and repetitive aspect in the melodies. These melodies often seem built with the repetition of some very short cell of three or four notes. We can find an example of this in *Jenufa* itself. The second scene of the first act (Wien, Universal, 1917, p. 31) showcases, with the low strings (reinforced by the bassoon), the tireless repetition of four notes on three degrees (B flat, C, E flat, C), always in the same order. Such continuously repeated cells, built on three degrees, can be found in many works of Janáček. Those cells are often tri-polar, contained in a fourth (one successively hears a second and a third, or the contrary), the degrees always mechanically visited in the same order (which depends on each cell). For example, consider *The Diary of one who vanished* (1917-19, Praha, Státní Nakladatelství Krášné Literatury, 1953, p. 11), the second act of *The cunning little vixen* (1922-23, Wien, Universal, 1977, p. 63), *Mládí* (1924, Praha, Hudebné Matice Umelecké Besedy, 1947, pp. 27-28), or *Capriccio* (1926, Praha, Státní Nakladatelství Krášné Literatury, 1953, p. 23, bars 7-8.). The first movement of *Sinfonietta* (1926, Wien, London, Universal, 1954, p. 6, bars 1-3 of number 3) uses different types of dipolar or tri-polar cells, contained in fourths or fifths (and, as mentioned, the tri-polar cells contained in fourths).
Of course, we’re talking about tonal music. Before analysing these cells as translations of intonation, we must consider the harmony, the mode and all the tonal concepts which also explain the presence of these cells. However, these cells seem to be of little tonal interest. They seem all the more monotonous since they come in the foreground, not in the background as they do when they’re used as simple accompaniment (in the works of so many composers of the two previous centuries). Thus, the reason for their existence might not be purely musical. Perhaps they are more an imitation of very repetitive sonar phenomena, existing in nature or in the human, such as intonation of speech. As a matter of fact, the composer himself has explained his interest in intonation of speech (2000, pp. 54-57): “At the time I was composing *Jenufa*, I was also absorbing the melody of the speech […]. Discreetly, I was listening to the words of the passerbys, reading the expressions on their faces, observing their environment, their companions, the time it was, whether it was clear or dark, cold or hot. I was feeling that all these things were mirrored by the melody I was noting”. About the repetitive cells we have been discussing, Guy Erisman claims that these “notes grouped in little packages”, mechanically pronounced, are effectively the musical translation of a “jerky and economic” Moravian language (1992, p. 882). Thus, what we hear as mechanical in Janáček’s music might betray, more than an evocation of modern machine noises, a subtle reproduction of a specific and particularly jerky intonation, that of the Czechs.

In the first fifteen bars of the sixth number of *The diary of one who vanished* (see Ex. 2), a recurrent cell appears (sometimes truncated, see the piano part at the 4th and the 15th iteration of the cell, the singing part at the 4th and the 8th), all the more interesting because it’s exposed by the piano and then by the singing, coming thus in each moment in the foreground. Moreover, the piano plays the cell three times on the same degrees (C, G and B flat, then these degrees become E flat, C and D in the singing part, but the rhythm and the melodic shape stay the same), reinforced at the octave and non-harmonised (this phenomenon comes back in the piano part, no less than six times in a row between bars 9 and 14, in the same way for the piano and for the singing, then for the piano alone). The monotonous result of such repetitive procedures, then, might translate an intonation and more precisely, as we shall try to show, a Moravian intonation.

Bruno Nettl indicates that the Moravian intonation distinguishes itself with an obligatory accentuation on the first syllable of the word (and that this phenomenon, he continues, influences the Czech music, vocally as well as instrumentally, see Bright, 1971, p. 69). Thus, it’s primarily the absence of anacrusis, in our example, that seems to translate this phenomenon. Then, the singer strikes up the first syllable of the first word on the strong beat. In effect, the first syllable must be strongly marked because it carries the accent (as in all Moravian words, according to Nettl). Later, each strong beat (with the exception of bar 8) carries the first syllable of a word (see Ex. 2 again). For the same reasons, it’s on the strong beat that the melodic summit
is generally attempted; consequently, the concordance stress/pitch is respected. Even more specific to Moravian is the relative shortness of the accent. The accent makes neither a longer syllable as in German (or Italian and English), nor a syllable of equivalent duration as in Russian (and maybe also French as we shall see further), but a shorter sixteenth-note syllable, thus three times as short as the syllable carried by the pointed eighth-note. Does the “jerky” aspect of this language, which Erisman discusses, come from this sudden fall succeeding a short accent? According to Fernand Carton (quoted by Fónagy, 1991, p. 110), the vowel would also get shorter on the accent in the intonation found in northern France. But intonation of French, compared to that of other European languages, may sound particularly flat. Finally, the syllables seem to be pronounced in a very monotonous and regular rhythm, and the accent (lexical or even prosodic) appears almost non-existent, at least according to Debussy.

Consider Debussy’s *Pelleas et Mélisande* (1901-1902). In the second scene of the first act (Paris, Frommont, 1902, p. 27), the composer employs his famous singing/recitative. Thus, the melody juxtaposes numerous repeated notes, which is remarkable in such a moderated tempo. There’s almost no accentuation, no higher pitch or louder notes, and no longer values (all the syllables are almost isorhythmical). If the text had been in English, German, Russian or Moravian, that setting to music would have seemed strangely monotonous. But the fact that the language is French justifies the procedure and, moreover, creates a specific translation of the French intonations (particularly flat, “by default” intonations). That’s one of the reasons why *Pelleas et Mélisande* is understood to be a real national French opera. It’s a work that emphasizes the weakness of the French accentuations. In effect, as it is shown by the American linguist Ernest F. Haden (1972, p. 209), French does not even have an obligatory lexical accent. When Debussy completely suppresses it, he underlines this national particularity. As in Russian, the prosodic accent doesn’t have a longer duration. Séguinot indicates that in French, the vowel almost never gets longer (in only 2% of the pronounced vowels, see Fónagy, 1991, p. 110). We may finish with a peculiar comparison. English sometimes marks its accents with a longer duration. We know that the jig is born in the United Kingdom (in Scotland for some, in Ireland for others). Thus, the jig, a dance in three, is based on the rhythm half-note/quarter-note, in which the half-note comes on the first and strong beat and lasts two beats, and the quarter-note (lasting one single beat) comes on the third and weak beat. The fundamental structure of the jig respects the stress/duration concordance, as in the language of people who have invented this dance. Perhaps this fact is not a coincidence. Conversely, a typical French dance in three is the minuet. Therefore, this dance is characterised by the relative and strange equivalence of its three beats.

Thus, when Richard Strauss reproaches Debussy for his “irregularities” (see Fónagy, 1979, p. 171) in his settings to music, he might not be fully aware of the distinctions between German and French intonations. Perhaps he ignores this “heavy syllabic waist” that characterises French,
according to the linguist Mario Rossi (1999, p. 183). But if Strauss believes he can judge the way Debussy treats the problem of prosody, that’s because he himself is very concerned by the question of intonation, not only in vocal music, but also in instrumental music. The nationalism of the latter can not come from the use of German words (there are no words), but can notably proceed in the assignment of intonation-like melodies to instruments. In the symphonic poem A hero’s life (1899), the hero is once calumniated by his enemies. The intonations of this slander are then imitated by the woodwinds, in unceasing melodic round-trips (Leipzig, Leuckart, 1899, p. 28, number 19). The melodic curve, in a saw-tooth pattern, seems to translate the fact that German strongly marks each lexical accent (one per word) with great pitch differences between accented and non-accentuated syllables. We also notice that the high pitches come on the beat (or on the second eighth-note of the beat, each syllable having the value of a sixteenth-note), so that the stress/pitch concordance is respected. We now realise that Strauss couldn’t understand Debussy’s work. No other intonations seem as different as those of French and German, the French intonations caricatured as perfectly flat by Debussy, and German intonations as particularly mobile, almost instable, by Strauss. A certain “technical nationalism” seems to be reached, at least in some bars of those different works, as if France were accustomed to a sonar flatness, and Germany to the opposite.

Jacques Amblard
University of Provence (France)

Bibliographic references


ROUSSEAU, J.-J., Essai sur l’origine des langues.


