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Three Avant-Garde Masterpieces: Atmosphères, Aura, Stimmung

Can Music Suggest an Original Interpretation of These Themes?

Giuseppe GAVAZZA¹

Abstract. Thinking about the predictable in-presence 4th International Congress on Ambiances 2020 I wrote: “I will propose to the listener some significant fragments of these three compositions to trigger a discussion that will focus on the core of my intervention: single-word titles that have implications that reach far beyond mere musical fact. My question will be: ‘Can music offer an original interpretation of these themes suggesting new research perspectives?’” An unpredictable situation forces to rearrange the sequence: the proceedings will precede the other actions. My question remains and, since I am a composer, I feel comfortable purposing this text as the draft of a score. A score is an imagined memory of a musical event to come. I propose here a two steps participative process: a de-composition and a re-composition.

Keywords. *Atmosphères, Aura, Stimmung, Participatory Music Project*

Introduction

“In the beginning there were only sounds which, little by little, transformed themselves into matter”² (Schneider, Marius).

Analysis comes from the ancient Greek ἀνάλυσις, *analuō* (unlink) and ἀνά of *ana* (top) and λυσις *luein* (release).

Etymology: term derived from two Greek verbs meaning solve, untie, break, de-compose. *Synthesis*, from the Greek σύνθεσις *synthesis* (join, compose), is an operation of the rational mind inverse of the analysis, by which it gathers in a homogeneous whole, various elements from a field of knowledge.

The *analysis* is a method that is opposite to *synthesis*: it aims at understanding an object by decomposing it into its components. So, it must first establish criteria to identify the components.

Several disciplines and techniques use the word *synthesis* to refer to an artificial product, deemed synthetic or synthesized, or even a manufacturing process.

Analysis and synthesis are the two poles of various processes. Music analysis has, as the object of its research, musical compositions: composition comes from the Latin *cum ponere* (put together). To compose therefore means collect, combine, synthesize sounds. The word synthesis is generally associated with electronic music; a frontier between

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2. ‘All’origine vi erano soltanto dei suoni che, a poco a poco, si trasformarono in materia.’ p.85. Personal translation.

the fertile lands of art, science and technology where analytical theory and analysis techniques are closely interconnected. An acoustic analysis is, to a certain extent, the micro-formal analysis of a sound. Finally, each musical composition is nothing but a sound: a long, complex, articulated and organic acoustic event organized for artistic/communicative purposes.

Analysis as De-Composition

I will not enter into analytical details: these three masterpieces have been extensively analyzed. Seminal works, I analyzed them during the course of my studies, and I interiorized the analysis through listening memory: sound and form are one. Luciano Berio said: “The best way to analyze a score is to compose a new piece”³. “The reasons for the *oeuvre* are already in the *oeuvre*, including all possible ways to show the need, to analyze the technique and the sign”⁴ (Debray, 2014).

Let me go to the limit: the only possible analysis of a work is the work itself.

I will start with my listening, trying to narrate, in an analogical and synthetic way, my perceptions and inviting you to an open listening, in the spirit of what Terence McKenna calls: “The felt presence of direct experience”⁵.

Synthesis as Re-Composition

I listen to these three compositions as the perfect exemplification of how it is possible to intend music composition not so much as composition with sounds but as the composition of a sound. “One of my early desires as a musician was to sculpt and organize the sound material directly, so as to extend compositional control to the sonic level, to compose the sound itself, instead of merely composing with sounds”⁶ (Risset, 1990).

The three compositions are:

- *Atmosphères*, for large symphonic orchestra, György Ligeti, 1961;
- *Aura*, for large symphonic orchestra, Bruno Maderna, 1967;
- *Stimmung*, for six voices and six microphones, Karlheinz Stockhausen, 1968.

The exploration of electronic music began in the second half of the 1950's: Stockhausen founded the *Studio für elektronische Musik des Westdeutschen Rundfunks* in Cologne, where Ligeti worked during the years of composition of *Atmosphères*. In Milan, Maderna and Berio founded the *Studio di fonologia musicale Rai*. These three compositions show how the electronic experience influenced instrumental and vocal writing. *Atmosphères* and *Aura* were composed for large orchestras in which the traditional subdivision into sections is transfigured: each instrument becomes a sound generator in a dense and varied texture, functional to the construction of a composite and composed sound. *Stimmung* uses voices that employ unusual vocal techniques: the amplification of single voices allows the spatial diffusion over several speakers. The microphone-speaker chain is conceived as a musical instrument in itself, adding space to the other compositional dimensions.

3. A personal memento of a dialogue.

4. ‘Le ragioni dell’opera sono già nell’opera, compresi tutti i modi possibili di mostrarne la necessità, di analizzarne la fattura e il tratto.’ Personal translation.

5. McKenna, Terence. *Reclaim your mind*. Accessed June 21, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eu9GfHCpVo>

6. Risset, Jean-Claude. *Computer music: why?* Accessed June 25, 2020.

https://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/france-ut/_files/pdf/resources/risset_2.pdf

In the newborn forges of electronic music, the new instruments offered unheard sounds but they were scarce and of limited capabilities. The authors applied the principle of 'to compose the sound itself, instead of merely composing with sounds' to the most versatile and well-known accessible instruments: the orchestra and the human voices.

Atmosphères

In 1956, György Ligeti escaped from Hungary and reached Austria: interested in the new musical perspectives of electronic instruments, he collaborated with the *Studio für elektronische Musik des Westdeutschen Rundfunks* in Cologne. This studio experience, more than the experience of the few electronic pieces he composed, had a fertile impact in the instrumental writing of which *Atmosphères* is the first dazzling example. Composed and performed in 1961 the piece calls for a large orchestra, fragmented according to a technique he called *micropolyphonic texture*. The orchestra, split in almost a hundred real parts, becomes a system of sound generators. Each instrument has its own part written in counterpoint with the other instruments: a reticle of rapid notes, rhythmically and melodically complex, which build a dense and whirling sound texture evolving in time following a compositional shape.

Under a compact sonic surface, thousands of frantic micro-sounds built the material density of the music, generating an aural texture. They are atoms of matter, insects of a swarm, fish of a shoal, a flock of birds changing shape, becoming a single expressive body. Droplets of a spring that grows, continues as a placid river, becomes tumultuous in a tight gorge of smooth rocks, throws itself into a waterfall, slows down in hourly and anti-hourly whirlwinds which slide, blend, intersect in a seemingly placid lake sliding towards the sea. Listen to the breath of nature, to the elusive voices of precision machinery. Clocks and clouds. The molecules penetrate the earth, soaking grass and moss, enter the veins of the trees, quench the thirst of the animals, rest for centuries in dark underground caverns. Cycles are repeated, with a geological rhythm. They evaporate and come back upwards to draw clouds floating in the sky: fluffy cumulus, cirrus blades in the stratosphere, dark of waterfalls of a thunderstorm, of light and hazy rain that cloud the view, flake in snow crystals, frozen in opalescent blocks that tell us thousand-year-old stories. Endless energy is exchanged between the molecules that collide and find common flows.

The motion delays, calms down, a quasi-silence falls, a night of subtle voices and murmurs, which prepares the rebirth.

Aura

In *Aura*, we have a large orchestra that does not hold back an unspeakable desire for singing. A poignant communicative tension vibrates: melody⁷ becomes a meta-melody, a melody of melodies; web of expressive lines, which cancel each other out, intertwine, emerge in fragments. They are a thousand voices of the forest in which each voice launches its own message which becomes inextricable. The tension of this crowd of voices is more lyrical than any single voice: it is a powerful and new expressive lyricism. A new consonance of voices, a renewed counterpoint that tends to infinity,

7. I give to the word melody a larger sense we can find in Arnold Schönberg's definition of *Klangfarbenmelodie* and the one we can read in Messiaen: "The melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign! And whatever may be the complexities of our rhythms and our harmonies, they shall not draw it along in their wake, but, on the contrary, shall obey it as faithful servants; the harmony especially shall always remain the 'true' which exists in a latent state in the melody, has always been the outcome of it." (Messiaen, 1956, p. 13).

rise towards high-pitched sounds, to the sky, the stars. Sounds of bowed or plucked string instruments. The percussion is soft, woody, metallic, dry, resonant sounds. They are voices of nature with their echoes, shadows, reverberations. Sounds of wind, wood and metal instruments that accumulate, thin out, add up again in a tumult of signals. Sudden sounds, rings, flashes of distant thunderstorms, branches that break and slide to the ground. Noises of human work: a workshop of a hundred craftsmen with their instruments. Rings, sirens, voices of fighting animals come back: we shall start again. Aerial islands of high-pitched, medium, aquatic, low, deep, telluric sounds: everything calms down.

Several cycles are repeated: different answers give an ever-new sense dialogues. The voices of trees are moved by more forces than just the wind: terrestrial animals, large, small, microscopic: squirrels, insects, fungi, lichens, underground micro-organisms, cells. Other invisible but audible living creatures. And then the mineral world and the inanimate elements, animated by sound. Now we hear the voice of the lagoon with its reflections. We listen to the city and the city listens to us: comments, whispers, unpredictable stratifications, fragments, which come and go at different distances and depths.

The musical writing of the score is extremely structured, divided into several short sections that return, repeat in mirror, come back not identical but identifiable. There are phrases, breaths, cycles, voices, interruptions, repetitions, returns...

Alea: at the end, a page of fragments without key or instrument indication. Reminiscences of melodies, fragments, remain to grow, to develop, to reflect. A flute stands alone to sing, to launch its unanswered question.

Stimmung

The open notation score is a role-playing game based on a *Formschema* founded on the harmonics of B flat note. On infinite articulations of this spectrum an atmosphere is created: a single sound lasting over one hour. The *Formschema* defines 51 sections that specify which of the harmonics of the specter is to be sung. Four elements, six pages of syllabic patterns, six pages of magic names and a page of poetry. Magic names are deities from all over the world and days of the week. In the beginning, from the silence, the harmonics of the fundamental arise: each singer warms up the voice. The vocal techniques are explorations that include phonetic articulations of languages and overtone singing mediated by ancient traditions. Stockhausen wrote: "After a singer has 'called' a Magic Name, it is cyclically repeated [...] until it is finally incorporated into the currently dominant model inducing a reaction in which there is a perceptible change of atmosphere"⁸. *Stimmung* is a radical work that mixes sacred, profane and intimate experiences. In that period the composer was in Mexico walking through ancient ruins, sitting on stones to observe the proportions of architecture and landscape, becoming "a Maya, a Toltec, a Zatopec, an Aztec, or a Spaniard. I became the people" (Cott, 1974).

While playing with his children, muttering phonemes, words and phrases, he realized that the voice is an instrument and the body is a sounding board. "A good magician must be a good singer. [...] capable of reproducing all the sounds of nature. All it needs is for him to leave his mouth wide open and behave like the god evoked, for these to penetrate into him, to embody the movements of his dance and sing to him through his mouth. [...] musical instrument of the god who has invaded him" (Schneider, 1992, p.72).

8. Cott, Jonathan, accessed June 25, 2020. <http://homepage.eircom.net/~braddellr/stock/index.htm>

Whispers (*atmos*), voices, words, phonemes, morphemes, magic words: *Grogoragalli, Vishnu, Enion, Usiafo, Alleluja, Budda, Tangarao, Uranos, Isis, Piperipipi... Mary* (which is also the name of Stockhausen's second wife).

The first cognitive act is a sonorous imitation: by appropriating sound we can access the meaning. The name of God is invoked to evoke him: the child evokes things by pronouncing them. Fixity and movement: the harmonic stillness requires a huge phonetic mobility of timbre. The fundamental B flat opens like a prism opens a white light in a range of colors: each note is a color which generates its own spectrum, dissonant with the basic harmony.

Ritual music tunes performers with listeners and requires a long time: gradually the performers warm up their voice and the listeners warm up their ears. It is necessary to dig and be dug by sounds. Immerse ourselves in sounds as if they were an endless acoustic landscape. Each voice is amplified and diffused in space⁹: the listener enters the body of sound, becomes part of it.

Everyone reaches the D note and "that" *Stimmung* ends.

Listening

Listen to these three unique sonic events, as you would listen to a square, a desert, a forest on which the wind blows, a sunny street on market day, an empty stadium, a crowded theater, a rainy alleyway at night, the voices of animals, people, cars, water and air, a radio noise, our footsteps and our body that resounds with all. Listen to a sandy beach or a rocky coast with stormy water, to a calm shore, to a clod of grass that slowly dips into the deep waters of a gloomy lake. Imagine how you would hear the world hanging from a cloud or soaring like a seagull, an eagle, a glider. How does a whale listen to the depths of the ocean? Or an amphibian a black cave in the heart of the Earth?

Listen as you would listen to a soundscape: listeners/interpreters, moving, open new perspectives: we turn at the corner of a street, we cross a bush, a bus, an animal, a passerby passing by; the wind blows. We slow down to the echo of a well and stop at the ticking of a pendulum; here is a passage where an indecipherable mechanical sound comes from a little open window: or maybe it's an animal? We are near a spring, an underground waterfall, a gorge of rocks where the wind sings: but maybe it is not the wind!

Glittering sounds, like birdsong or metallic tinkling: gloomy and telluric voices; punctual sounds: a woodpecker, a carpenter's hammer, a child playing, the buzzing of a dying neon.

Re-Composing

Now I propose two collaborative actions to put together words and sounds.

Words: after listening, write down your personal interpretation of the words *Atmosphères, Aura, Stimmung*. I am curious to read your comments and will use these suggestions as sparks for future dialogues.

Sounds: I invite you to select fragments, lasting between 30 and 100 seconds, extracted from some of the numerous recordings available of the compositions. I will use these fragments for a collective 'granular' re-composition for a concert or an installation.

9. At the Osaka World's Fair, in 1970, *Stimmung* was performed 72 times in a 550 seats spherical hall, with 50 speakers that allowed a spatial movement of the sounds.

Record the selected audio files or send the references for online audio/video files.

For example:

Aura: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9fwwDnTW6c> from 3'44" to 4'33"

Please send this material to my email address: gavazza.g@grenoble.archi.fr

Many thanks for your contribution!

“The things I’ve done don’t interest me anymore. Only what I haven’t done yet interests me”¹⁰ (Savinio, p.393)

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10. ‘Le cose che ho fatto non m’interessano più: solo quello che ancora non ho fatto m’interessa’. Personal translation.