

‘The Third Song’ – Anonymity as an Avant-garde Archetype

Occidental historiographies share a tradition of teleological thought. Bearing in mind that European political environments have adopted an enthusiasm for progress in the 20th century, the histories of the so-called avant-garde movements of both the inter-war and post-war years display an understandably antagonistic relationship with the music of the past. The counter-argument of post-modernity has also been based on an iconoclastic impulse so much so that in place of a free progress of things, 21st century composers face the boundaries of historiographical trivia.

This paper will propose that a series of value judgements is necessary in order for an event or quality to become an archetype, or a work to be considered a prototype, and will seek to prove that contemporary archetypes are market-induced objects and that their inherent value is determined by their cultural modification and their economical attributes. To conclude, a very short but very crucial reference will be made to anonymity, as a possible poetic archetype of archetypes for the future.

The veneration of novelty as dominant political environment is a fairly recent phenomenon. Even though we can trace the negotiation of discovery as a virtue in the beginnings of our historiographies, in the Homeric Epics and their Indo-European counterparts, it is only with the establishment of musicology itself as a science that linear progress in musical thought has become an unquestionably natural condition.

Discussing this condition is not a matter of negative criticism in this particular case. But it will be of some interest to examine what the influence of the historiographical apparatus is on the creation of any new music which is not immediately concerned with its placement on the chronological map. No examples will be discussed, but the meaning of the paragraphs below will be suggestive of what the fate of non-compliant new music can be.

Let us commence this inquiry abruptly, by ascertaining the axiom that no music is written in the 21st century without a desire, secret or stated, to occupy some space in the collective historical memory of our society. This suggestion is somehow presumptuous, in that it presupposes a general and complete knowledge of all music that is written – no excuse will be offered here, one often deduces the general from a plethora of particulars, even if such deductions are academic taboo. Still, even if we were to concede that such a knowledge is attainable, what qualifies the second part of the statement, that we can identify the causes and desires of music writing?

The answer follows logically to an extent: Music is not “written down” – one could write an Ionescan play on this physiological metaphor. Rather, directions for the performance of music are written down; a linguistic but necessary remark. This means that notational practices, from their neumatic beginnings to the complexities of the fully armed “Sibelius factory” and the phantasmagoric limits of handwritten scores, are only a delusion of sorts. Musical notations are incomplete, very much like a functional interior of a building without any access from the outdoors, for want of a better simile.

Indeed, with the exception of some impractical, impossible scores of an experimental nature, the vast majority of scores are written with the communion of performance in mind. The process of realising the score is the purpose of the score, even if the purpose is to question the very directions of the score. Therein, in this theatrical ritual of music writing and the necessity for signifier, signified and receiver to cooperate we discern that scores are still written with a communication pattern in mind. This is, in turn and self-evidently, an attempt to occupy historical space or one might have chosen to not record these directions but simply improvise them himself or with a group of people for a communion with an audience.

If we accept the above, although there is no true reason why we should¹, we already identify the causes and desires of music writing as those which characterise any historical event. Whether this event be recorded publicly or only witnessed by two people, the signifier and the receiver, the process has been completed through the validation of its assigned historical proportion. These are the true limits of a music score. If a score is written – whether it be an academic exercise with little chance of a performance or a popular piano piece known by every pianist in the world – thus requiring the transition from the ideal to the

¹ A proposition is not a fact, nor is a fact a proposition.

corporeal, then, in fact, the score is a utility and it serves a specific purpose. The social rhetoric espoused by many composers from the Baroque era onwards suggests that this was not always the case. Invariably, nonetheless, musical practice suggests that it was.

What is it in the score that enhances its utilitarian purposes? In the commodity-led cultures of the Occident we witness an obstinate intuitivism. Historical placement appears to be a measure of virtue. An ethical evaluation, which judges the utilitarian worth of both objects and subjects, permeates most critical thought. And so, identity as mercantile investment, emerges as the single most valuable trait in a quest for originality and a distinct placement in the mosaics of value, the visible surfaces of musical activity.

The marquee of a composer can be a number of things: intellectual impenetrability, personality disorder, psychographic affinity, the secrecies of depth, the transparencies of “breadth”; at any rate these traits are all of very little importance. Economical prowess transpires as the sole true merit of any composer, text, or activity which functions as a musical identity deserving historical attention. With the absolution from tonal theory, the abstractions of mathematical limit and the passage into the abyss of free sound, these identities became ever more the property of the economically powerful; the hierology of technical capacity – flawed and artificial as it might have loomed in the first place – became irrelevant and was replaced by purely economic identities.

Let us illustrate in simplistic terms, for this is a simple paper:

A young boy screams at the top of his voice for a short while at a family meeting and is subsequently threatened and criticised violently by his family². The behaviour of the young boy is deemed intolerable, unsocial and problematic.

The very same act is carried out by a young boy in a concert hall at the request of a venerable composer of 21st century music theatre, common decency permitting that there be such a figure! The context is much different admittedly: to contextualise, historicists say, is to be alive. To comprehend *in vacuo* is to be dead. There, the mottos of the merchant order. This second, blessed boy, so early absorbed by the sonic-warrior ranks of new music, is met with rapturous (if clearly forced) applause, in the premiere of this rather original (prototype) work. The work’s score reads: “A boy is to scream at the top of his voice for a few minutes. Then to look down. Never rehearse.”³ A political statement exhumes from the every breath of this young artist.

The operative difference, in true context, since we *must* contextualise, is obvious: the first boy cost his surroundings a pleasant social interaction by disrupting it, the anomaly of his behaviour being incompatible with the norms which are required in society. The cost is higher than the gain. The second boy produced profit. His screams were scheduled, advertised, attended and meant to be. The market-place validates their use. They were a utility and as such they were welcome. The two boys performed exactly the same action, whilst the economical context alone changed, varying the reception of their acts dramatically.

Still, what of the third boy, or rather the third song? This is a creature which shouts at the top of its voice in the absence of society so that the absence of bargain is irrelevant. History does not punish or reward those screams. They are anonymous. They are heard perhaps, but they do not belong in transaction and so they are not evaluated.

We shall now move on to consider what may happen in a world which witnesses the polyphony of anonymous counterpoints of this nature. Ironically, not unlike the thoughts of our ancestry, our thoughts ought to be queueing for their place in history!

Anonymity is the mightiest saboteur of literary economies. It negates the hold of market laws on dialectic activity, it is subversive and shows no respect for the notions of political and social responsibility. It will continue to be the weapon of the underclasses regardless of regulation adjustments and the sophistication of identity allocation. This is not a eulogy, nor a criticism; simply an observation and an historical one at that.

Further to the piracy and social resistance or usurpation which anonymity breeds and serves, being a hiding place of secret identities, there is another aspect to assuming it.

We examined, briefly, the nature of musical artefacts and commented on their role in history. There are, nevertheless, those extremely articulate and abstract scores which do not grant social hermeneutics an interpretation conducted through the prism of purpose. They are the anonymous, undated scores of the pre-

² A common sight and sound in provincial Greece, where this essay is being written.

³ The archetype for this fiction is well understood by educated musicians – others are not as unfortunate.

Enlightenment era, not ascribed to any one person in particular. For all that musicologists, palaeontologists, archaeologists and all logists can prove, these pieces were written by some living creature in a Monastery: this could be a monk, a monk's wife⁴, or a miraculous, literate donkey. Thankfully, no conclusive proof can be drawn and so the author may not become a bust, a book, a portrait or an emblem; the music exists in its performance which is not directly disturbed by extra-musical context. The singers sing the words, the listeners listen to the sounds and the only immediately discernible context outside the performance itself, is that someone, somewhere, wrote this at some point in history. Perhaps it was forged. Perhaps it predates everything that looks and sounds like it by a stunning 10 centuries and it is in fact the first scored piece of music preceding all other Western music. Perhaps not. The audience can evaluate the text for what it is, what it could be, what the audience wants it to be, what the music wants the audience to be, what the music sounds like. Musical communion has been restored. History must, this once, be vague and unable to cast its shadow on the sounds of music.

Today, anonymous musical practice is very much more likely to inform similarly fortunate musical experiences. The archetypes of our music are artefacts with a narrative form to be replicated. They are the emblems of a progressive and evolving identity. The prototypes are artefacts which escape the fate of the replicant but fail to become archetypes for subsequent works.

Furthermore, the social narrative of an anonymous work has always negated the necessity for reference to archetypes or the desire to be a prototype, for it is not valued on account of its historical placement and it is conscious of its independence. The anonymous work is a pseudotype in that it does not typify its essence; rather, not unlike a virus (or a blessing, to read less polemical), it changes the nature of the relationship between listener and sound.

To conclude, anonymous music does not belong; it exists or subsists. Perhaps, before historiographical obsessions oblige the writer of this essay to operate the *lapsus calami* of authorship over something so oecumenical and valuable as the invaluable purposes of anonymous Art, it ought to remain to the reader to declare whether this text ever really belonged to any one writer; the undersigned carrying a pseudonym more than a name. Or perhaps to end with the authority of historical quotation "we may be the servants of musical traditions, but we are not quotations, footnotes, archetypes, prototypes or slaves"⁵.

Santrauka

Anonimiškumas kaip tikrasis avangardo archetipas

Rytietiškomis istoriografijoms būdinga bendra tradicija pagarbiai žvelgti į progresą ir teleologinį mąstymą. Turint omenyje, kad ir XX a. europinėje politinėje aplinkoje ši tradicija buvo entuziastingai vertinama, vadinamųjų tarpukario ir pokario avangardistinių judėjimų istorija atskleidžia savaime suprantamą antagonistinį ryšį su praeities muzika, visų pirma siekdama kopijuoti tai, kas formavo praeitį, būtent „atsiribojimą nuo praeities“. Postmodernizmo ir neoromantikų kontrargumentas taip pat ikonoklastinis, juolab kad XXI amžius, regis, yra įstrigęs cikliškai grįžtančioje ikonoklazmo situacijoje, kai ikonos vaizduoja istorines figūras, naikinančias ikonas. Užtuot laisvai progresavę, kompozitoriai dažnai yra varžomi nereikšmingų istoriografinių detalių.

Techniškai originalumo yra siekiama per notacijos sudėtingumą ar iki tol nevertotą notacinę praktiką, akustinį nesuvokiamumą ar kraštutinumą, beprecedentinę organologinę ir morfologinę praktiką, kultūrinį įvairialypiškumą ir – ypač dažnai – per asmeninį originalumą. Tačiau kad ir kiek visa tai turėtų reikšmės, norma ir pusiausvyra turi būti išlaikyta.

Siekiant suvokti tikruosius sėkmingų naujosios muzikos pavyzdžių privalumus, pranešime aptariamos šiai muzikai būdingos klaidos. Kad geriau suprastume, kokios XXI a. muzikoje vyraujančių archetipų savybės yra veiksmingiausios, analizuojami nenusisekę kūriniai, vertintini kaip būdingi šios muzikos pavyzdžiai, lyginant juos su neabejotinai sėkmingais darbais. Pastarieji kritiškai analizuojami įvertinant jų retorinį, semantinį ir sociologinį lygį, nustatant jų privalumus bei reikšmingumą. Kadangi tam, kad kokia nors ypatybė ar reiškinys taptų archetipu arba koks nors kūrinys taptų prototipu, būtina nemažai įvertinimų, tai šiuo pranešimu siekiama įrodyti, jog visi šiuolaikiniai archetipai iš tiesų yra sukurti rinkos, o jų tikrąją vertę lemia jų kultūrinė modifikacija.

⁴ They are said to have existed unofficially, but also officially in Medieval Europe.

⁵ An anonymous quotation found on the writer's desk.