

Silence in Music: L. van Beethoven and J. S. Bach. Aesthetic Approach

Petruţa Maria COROIU¹

Abstract: *Music can bring us to light, when it is not dissonant, not dominated by an aggressive rhythm, by a congestion of timbres or by... consumerism that consumes everything – including our values and tranquility. Spiritual tranquility is a sign of spiritual health; it influences our inner thoughts and emotions, representing an essential aspect in cultivating one's spiritual life. This is the whisper of the mystical and transcendental Arietta in the last Beethovenian sonata for piano, her secret, variational message: the last part of the last sonata which seems open, unfinished, concluded however with an evanescent melody which searches its identity at unsuspected heights. The aim of the work is to evidence a first analysis of the postures of silence in musical art, and its structure highlights the stylistic characteristics of Beethoven's masterpiece in this sense.*

Key-words: *tranquility, sonata, aria, harmony, spirituality.*

1. Introduction

In the Poems of light from 100 years ago, Lucian Blaga celebrated tranquility through an unequal poetic echo: "I am surrounded by so much tranquility that it seems I can hear/the moon beams crushing into the window panes" (Blaga 1968, 232). We need an escape: an escape from ourselves, from the incessant uproar of each day, from the darkness of the lack of faith. We need to reach the light, not this light which apparently belongs only to the human eye, but the light which knows no darkness, as Antoine de Saint Exupéry said: "It is clear that you do not see with your eyes, the eyes cannot see the core of things" (Saint-Exupéry 2018, 39).

As the renowned teacher and scientist, the Deacon Sorin Mihalache, stated: "YOU ARE WHAT YOU LIVE. We are continuously exposed to multiple forms of noise, which weaken our vigilance; they dissolve our feelings and fragment our inner life. Cultivating one's spiritual life is indissolubly linked to attentive measures

¹ PhD Transilvania University of Brasov, petruta.maniutcoroiu@unitbv.ro

for a life sheltered from sounds, from sensorial disturbances and the noetic interference of the world” (Mihalache 2018, 3).

Spiritual tranquility is a sign of spiritual health; it influences our inner thoughts and emotions, representing an essential aspect in cultivating one’s spiritual life. Tranquility as a spiritual state crucially depends on quietening one’s senses and then one’s thoughts. We are living in the noisiest of societies, and this affects our cognitive functions, our attention and memory.

And not only that: it can even lead to a severe reduction of our capacity to understand noisy message. The background noise of thoughts and emotions prevents us from seeing the essential: human beings can no longer spare the time for an inner life, because of the dynamics of the outer universe, which overwhelms them and sedates the power of faith. Saint Ioan Scărarul considers that “the beginning of tranquility consists in drowning the noises which stir the depth. Tranquility kills the outer senses and awakens the inner ones” (Ioan Scărarul 2021, 379). The noise of the world does not allow us to prepare for the meeting with Christ.

2. Musical ways to suggest the power of silence: silence as musical speech

The noise is not only present at the auditory level, it is also on the inside: there is an even more dangerous spiritual interference through “excess of images, lights, colours, aromas, information – uninterrupted torrents of stimuli overcharging the senses” (Connor 1999, 287) – which “hinders self-reflection” (Goldberg 2006, 329) and exceeds by far “man’s limits of information processing” (Weil 2013, 247), “overcharging the person at a cognitive level” (Levitin 2015, 47).

Thus, cultivating inner tranquility entails a selection of what one allows in one’s heart and mind. All the forms of noise prevent us from functioning at full spiritual capacity. Saint Isaac the Syrian underlines the importance of tranquility in one’s spiritual life: “continue to read in peace, he writes, so that your mind is always focused on God’s wonders, but you should read in peace for all and be free of taking excessive care of the body and of the stir of things, so that your soul might be overcome by the sweetest taste of God. Obtaining inner tranquility is more important than anything, and without it we cannot be clean, and know our weakness” (Mihalache 2018, 8).

It becomes more difficult to control “tranquility when faced with inner turmoil, contradictions, phantoms, doubts, opacity, monologues, value judgements and inner tendencies. Our passions push away tranquility, this is why God Himself encourages us to seek tranquility” (Logothetis 2001, 48). We should think seriously about our constant need for noise, for any kind of music, which reveals our

incapacity to enjoy tranquility, to understand it not as something negative, as simple absence, but exactly the opposite as a presence, “a condition for **any** real presence: living in our inner world. Only tranquility can connect us to the highest realities” (Schmemmann 1998, 130).

Many of us are in an abnormal situation: we need to waste our energy, to search for ourselves without finding us, we are afraid of the tranquility we might find when left alone with ourselves and when we ask ourselves – like never before – tenderly and seriously: how are you? How are YOU? Where is your light, where is your tranquility? Why cannot we see how much we need it? These come from the immemorial time of childhood, of the purity of the immediate answers to questions that were never asked, where we understand to defend our dearest feelings. We hide them from the rest of the world, which would deform them, which would deform us too, and there we escape every time we open again the gate towards the light, perhaps through great music in which silence lives with infinite energies.

2.b. L. van Beethoven - Piano sonata op. 111: Arietta.

The pause system is a way of punctuation in musical art, without which the sound phrasing has no meaning. Music can bring us to light, when it is not dissonant, not dominated by an aggressive rhythm, by a congestion of timbres or by consumerism that consumes everything – including our values and tranquility.

Music can bring us the smell of the clean heights of the forever serene sky: this is the whisper of the mystical and transcendental Arietta in the last Beethovenian sonata for piano, her secret, variational message, articulated as a farewell to the world by the great composer: the last part of the last sonata which seems... open, unfinished, concluded however with an evanescent melody which searches its identity at unsuspected heights, out of this world, although it was composed after 1820, at the beginning of Romanticism, displaying a metro-rhythmical complexity which contrasts with the absolute melodic purity.

L. van Beethoven entrusts his soul to the tranquility of this melody in Do major, which carries in it the entire inner beauty of the Missa solemnis that he was working on at the same time, the unearthly beauty of the Holy Mass. Part 1, Allegro ed appassionato (in c minor!) is the sonorous troubled image of this world, but Arietta offers the portrait of eternity – to which music always responds: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile.



Fig. 1. L. van Beethoven, *Sonata op. 111, Arietta* (m. 1-9)

The 9/16 meter is entirely unusual even for classical times (without mentioning the connection to the measure of the beginning of the 19th century), and the situation becomes even more complex in the last two variations, the 4th and the 5th (where the measures are divided into 27 semi-units – a unique phenomenon in classical music). Music becomes increasingly fast at the semantic level (not only at the level of the tempo of the composition), because the phenomenon of the sound congestion is increasingly ample: either by the suggestion through the meter of an unmarked triolet or by other subdivision procedures.

The gradual decrease of the values of the notes leads to a faster tempo, but also to an overcharge of the discourse almost to a dancing level, including continuous syncopate formulas. After these phenomena are pushed to a maximum level within the third variation, the discourse returns in the fourth to coordinates close to the initial ones.

2.c.J. S: Bach – Fugues and Matthauss Passio

The fugue point is another element that implies the suspension of the sound musical discourse and the semantic concentration on elements of great subtlety and force: it is the moment of climax of the fugue form, in which the great composers prefer a short circuit of the route of the musical work in order to recharge with necessary force to complete the opus.

Another masterpiece that emphasizes the pause in a privileged moment of the work is Matthauss Passio by J. S. Bach, which - in the second part, scene 7 (no. 61-62) places the paradoxical and painful response by which the people demand the release of Barabas in place of Christ, on trial before Pontius Pilatus. The moment is better highlighted as it has a strong ally in the tonal, modulatory framework used, the response of the disbelieving crowd intervening on a sudden modulation and a strongly dissonant chord, being succeeded by a general pause that absorbs the terrible tension of this answer that will change the history of the

world: Christ arrives at the fully assumed sacrifice, and salvation becomes a reality without which the world could not continue.

The scene is opened by the recitative sung by the Evangelist (no. 61, Auf das Fest...), which describes - with characteristic piety - the moment when the governor Pontius Pilate asks the crowd to choose the one who will be freed: his recitative ends with a modulation suggested towards the tonality of D major, dramatically interrupted by the diminished chord with the diminished seventh that occurs with the answer: Barabam! The structure formed by the sounds d sharp-f sharp-a-c superimposes three minor thirds, making up one of the shaking dissonant landmarks of the work. The dissonance and the tonal aberration that takes shape on purpose (later leading to the escape to the mi minor tonality) only shows the moral and spiritual disorientation of those who, through this answer, have consecrated another course of history.

The clash between the assumed tonic of the new tonality (D major, before the interruption of the Evangelist's intervention) and the tonic of the diminished chord with the diminished seventh (D sharp) enshrines a melodic atrocity that reproduces the drama of the situation in which man - in the absence of God - does not know what to choose.

3. Conclusions

In such privileged moments of music, time seems suspended because tranquility suspends our inner storms. Then we connect to that tranquility we came from, of which we are made, in which the great artists immersed themselves when they tried to depict it in their creations. We stop hearing it only if we become willing to listen to **our** inner voice which calls us to it.

Then the temporal layers overlapping with such pressure in our lives set us free from their burden, and we find ourselves in front of a limitless horizon, with no deadlines, where one is led to prayer. This is the route to prayer. Music offers us multiple and valuable opportunities to find tranquility. It is the only way to find real tranquility; only this way life can continue ADAGIO MOLTO SEMPLICE E CANTABILE.

4. Proposals

If we believe you cannot discover such privileged tranquil moments in the music of the 20th century, I suggest in a future study to examine closely the masterpiece for two pianos written by the French composer Darius Milhaud, *Scaramouche*. In the

second part, we discover the composer's dialogue with himself, in an atmosphere that can resemble tranquility, the same as in the slower part of the *Concerto for piano in Sol* by M. Ravel. The research can continue in the evaluation of such an unusual element in the research of musical creation, apparently related only to the sound dimension - the most obvious, but not the only quality of sound art.

References

- Blaga, Lucian. 1968. *Poemele luminii (Liniște)* [Poems of Light (Silence)]. București: Editura pentru literatură.
- Connor, Steven. 1999. *Cultura postmodernă. O introducere în teoriile contemporane* [Postmodern culture. An introduction to contemporary theories]. București: Editura Meridiane.
- Goldberg, Ilan. 2006. "When the Brain Loses Its Self: Prefrontal Inactivation during Sensorimotor Processing." *Neuron* 50 (2): 329-339.
- Ioan Scărarul. 2021. "Scara" [Stairs to heaven]. In *Filocalia*, vol. IX. București. Editura Institutului Biblic (IBMBOR).
- Levitin, Daniel. 2015. *Mintea organizată: cum să gândești corect în era supraîncărcării informaționale* [The organized mind: how to think correctly in the age of information overload]. București: Editura Publica.
- Logothetis, Spiridonos. 2001. *Deprimarea și tămăduirea ei* [Depression and healing]. București: Editura Sofia.
- Mihalache, Sorin. 2018. "Liniștea interioară, semnul sănătății duhovnicești" [Inner peace, the sign of spiritual health]. *Ziarul Lumina*, 28 Oct 2018. București.
- Saint-Exupery, Antoine de. 2018. *Micul prinț* [The little prince]. București: Editura Litera.
- Schmemann, Alexander. 1998. *Postul cel Mare* [The great Lent]. București: Editura Doris.
- Weil, Andrew. 2013. *Fericirea spontană* [Spontaneous happiness]. București: Editura Curtea Veche.