

Musical metaphors of time

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Abstract: *Musical discourse is conditioned in the first place by its temporal articulation on which depends the composition type to which it may be assigned. For a composer, the temporal challenge is the most important: how to manage the temporal data of the work of art he creates. In this paper, we attempt to render some temporal archetypes that can be spotted in several periods, musical styles, works and composition profiles. We approach works that belong to religious and lay music, instrumental and vocal music, baroque, classical, romantic, and modern music.*

Key-words: *time, archetype, style, composition, metaphora*

1. Preliminary considerations

Musical discourse is conditioned in the first place by its temporal articulation on which depends the composition type to which it may be assigned. For a composer, the temporal challenge is the most important: how to manage the temporal data of the work of art he creates. In this paper, we attempt to render some temporal archetypes that can be spotted in several periods, musical styles, works and composition profiles. We approach works that belong to religious and lay music, instrumental and vocal music, baroque, classical, romantic, and modern music.

2. Theoretical perspectives

Temporality has several hypostases analysable from theological, philosophical, sociological, cosmological, artistic, and scientific standpoints; hypostases that need to be regarded in an integrative approach.

In Grove's New Dictionary for Music and Musicians, TIME has three significations: "(1) A synonym or shorthand for musical metre, as in '6/8 time'. (2) A general term to designate the rhythmic acuity of a performer or ensemble, as in 'playing in time'.

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(3) The essential medium for music and musical performance, a non-spatial continuum of past, present and future in which music exists and is understood. Music requires no material substance, nor can one circumscribe any set of sounds as inherently musical (and others as inherently non-musical), but all music must occur in time. Consequently, music makes us vividly aware of the duration and succession of events and our sense of change and continuity. For this reason, philosophers concerned with the nature of time, as well as psychologists interested in human memory and consciousness, often turn to music and musical examples to illustrate their observations and arguments” [London].

The conclusion of the third meaning (the one referring to the creative, composition dimension of time in musical art) is complex, highlighting that time is precisely the environment in which musical discourse unfolds and which conditions it (both from an interpretative point of view and from a creative viewpoint). An extremely important aspect, which London Justin also writes about, is the dimension regarding the public’s perception, and comprehension of musical art to which they listen, evaluate, and live its message. Consequently, all three dimensions of the artistic act are directly influenced by time: the creative, interpretative, and perceptive.

“Several hypostases or expressions of social time can be analysed from a scientific point of view: macrosocial and microsocal time; institutional and family time; work and daily time; free time; and also sacred time, the latter being a special hypostasis of time, characterised by a certain manner of perfection. This is because the moment of a present feast, for instance, does nothing else but to bring back to our attention those fragments of strong, original, and true temporality” [Popa, Mihalache, 2012].

Sacred time is also a fundamental dimension of musical art. The temporality of a feast frees one of the strictness of daily time, regenerating the spiritual powers of the one who is engaged genuinely, through living, into the timeless framework of a feast: “these encounters with feasts make us live the theology of time or a meaning of our lives, rolling into history; let’s try to see in every feast an event of one’s own life. We have neither patience with ourselves anymore nor patience because these come from a long prayer; it is not the time of prayer that is necessary, but the watch during this time, the extent to which I become aware of this time of prayer” [Muntean, 2016: 144-145, 241].

Cosmological, thermodynamic and biological time “can be analysed on the basis of the presentation of the main theories regarding the birth and expansion of the Universe” [Bourceanu, 2012], on the basis of Newton’s theory (of a static universe, outside the idea of becoming and change), and by considering the theories of Albert Einstein, Alexandr Friedmann, and George Lemaître, from the beginning of the 20th century. These last theories testify that the Universe is expanding, which implies an increase in its entropy, so an energy degradation closely related to the passage of time (cosmological and thermodynamic time).

3. Analytical perspectives

The musical examples that we are going to provide show different dimensions of time within musical discourse, with *important* consequences on the ethos, and on the significance triggered by those works.

In the creation of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, the temporal dimension is determined by the sacredness of his music; this is precisely why we chose to refer to one of the most important Masses in the whole history of music, *Missa Papae Marcelli*:

Ex. 1 - Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, *Missa Papae Marcelli*:

Missa Papae Marcelli
Kyrie G.P. da Palestrina (1525 - 1594)

The image shows a musical score for the Kyrie of the Missa Papae Marcelli. It consists of six staves, each representing a different voice part: Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Bass 1, and Bass 2. The music is written in 3/4 time. The lyrics are 'Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son Ky - ri - e e -'. The score shows the vocal lines with their respective lyrics and musical notation, including notes, rests, and bar lines.

Palestrina spent almost all his career “working and composing for the Catholic Church in Rome, much of it for the Vatican” [Reed 2005, 64], so his music has an extratemporal landmark, above time, which makes his sound art reflect mystical and transcendental models. At a concrete sound level, these aspects are visible in terms of the linearity of the melodic discourse of each voice (with mainly a gradual course), but also of the dialogue between voices regarding singing some rhythmically formulae (measure 2-tenor 1, measure 3-4-soprano, measure 4-bass 1, measure 6-soprano, measure 6-7-tenor 2).

Perotinus (Perotinus Magnus), active in the 13th century as the first composer to have written music on two independent voices (at the beginning of polyphony) stands out at the same level through the work *Ave maris stella*:

Ex. 2 - Perotinus (Perotinus Magnus), *Ave maris stella*:**Ave maris stella**

In this context, we note a clear static character of the musical discourse that does not develop at a temporal level but by means of a minimal dialogue between the two voices, which display only for short moments a complementary character: measure 3. Isorhythm, displayed at the level of the metro-rhythmic synchronisation of the two voices, is an aspect related to the non-progressive character of the temporality of this instrumental work's beginning.

Contrary to this, Gesualdo da Venosa proposes a discourse full of dissonances, thrilling temporal reflections (inner accentuations of the phrase ensuing from syncopations or formulae with unequal values), and chromaticism, all these being elements that vary and even fragment (deliberately in the name of a certain expression) the unity of the musical discourse. The mobility of the musical discourse makes it unpredictable, and dynamic, including at the level of temporality, which determines sound expressiveness.

Ex. 3 - Gesualdo da Venosa, *Tristis est anima mea*:**Tristis est anima mea**

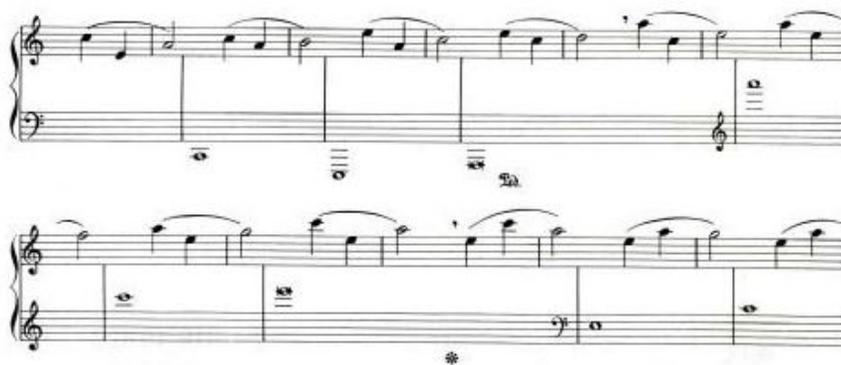
Responsory for Maundy Thursday (No. 2, Nocturno I)

Carlo Gesualdo di Venosa
(1560-1613)

detachment from a very frantic daily life, withdrawal into oneself, and into a bright inner life full of significances (“speaking belongs to this age, silence to the everlasting age” [Sf. Isaac, 151]).

In the work *Variationen zur gesundung von arinuschka*, Arvo Pärt proposes a repetitive melodic and rhythmic drawing, almost mechanical, that induces (precisely through its simplicity and ostinato character) the hypnotic charm of the music of a musical box.

Ex. 5 – Arvo Part, *Variationen zur gesundung von arinuschka*:



George Enescu also counts on a similar musical effect for the famous beginning of the second Sonata for piano and violin, in which the melodic level is extremely mobile (suggesting a supple and frantic thrill), but the timbre and rhythmic levels propose a (temporal) immobility rendered by means of the isorhythm of the three voices present in the musical discourse, but also of the equality of most of the note values (that thus annul even the effect of bar). In this case, we underline one of the most obvious qualities of Enescu’s musical discourse: fluency, cursive character, and continuity.

Musicologist, Despina Petecel, renders an interesting parallelism: „Enescu’s Unison (in the case of the above-mentioned Sonata, intonation in parallel octaves) and Brâncuși’s Endless Column (the Endless Pillar) are two ways of suggesting the same immobility of eternity, the same timeless significances of eternity. Both the Unison and the Pillar render, by means of their musical, variational, auto-generative, repetitive, imitatively-canonical, and homogeneous structure (...), the idea of steps that one has to climb very high in order to see far away” [Petecel 2014, 167].

Ex. 6 – G. Enescu, *second Sonata for piano and violin*

The image displays a musical score for G. Enescu's second Sonata for piano and violin. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system shows the Violin part on a single staff and the Piano part on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The Violin part is marked 'Assez mouvementé' and 'pp'. The Piano part is also marked 'Assez mouvementé' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 72, and 'pp *iso*'. The second system continues the music, with the Piano part showing 'cresc.' and 'decresc.' markings. The score is in a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature.

In conclusion, these are a few archetypes that show the static or progressive character of the temporal dimension in the musical discourse. This determines, in fact, the expressive, and semantic character of the entirety of music. This is the reason why we underscore once again the importance of analysing this aspect of sound art, and of correlating it with other analytic dimensions.

Temporal system is directly linked to the cultural system, to the spiritual fundamentals of musical discourse: “the musics of non-Western cultures, most notably those of Indonesia and the Indian subcontinent, may also display a temporal organization that is in part a reflection of different concepts of time” [London].

It is very important to analyse and valorise in interpretative terms the energy of pauses in music; this could be related to what is called “vacuum energy”: “in modern Physics, the existence of a vacuum energy was found at a quantum level, which is present in every particle composing the sensitive world; in an atom, 99.99% is empty space (quantum vacuum), but full of energy” [Popa et al., 2012]. “Music may at times strive to exceed our temporal grasp, from the expansive hypermetres of Bruckner to the rapid rhythmic complexities of Nancarrow’s player-piano pieces” [London].

4. Conclusions

Music is an art displaying a sequence of durations, an art of change and continuity, which supposes its own dynamics, analysable only through a temporal perspective. Music reflects cultural and spiritual coordinates of the environment in which it is created and temporal demands that have an impact upon it: “in the Middle Ages the expansive polyphony of the Notre Dame school can be considered a musical portrayal of Boethian notions of eternity and timelessness, in the Age of Reason the propriety of musical succession and continuity was a source of aesthetic satisfaction, in music of the 20th century we find explorations of discontinuity, non-linearity, fragmentation and chaos” [London].

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