

# PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE AND (A)TONAL MUSIC AS INGREDIENTS OF SPECTRAL MUSIC. *WHEN THE HILLS ARE TOSSING BLACK SHADOWS*

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**Abstract:** *Encountering the deciphering function of the imaginary in some cultural/musical paradigms - which should create an unpredictable link between signified and significant - refers to theatrical distance (Brecht), to super-signs, to the density surplus of contents. I refer to a possible translation of this function in the act of creation, to closeness to the composition project *When the Hills are Tossing Black Shadows* (its original title is *Stets wenn die Hügel werfen schwarze Schatten*) signed by this study's author. Appealing (during this project) to spiritual sources with a general-reflective consistency aimed at suggesting a finding - the vocation of human existence in the specifically musical expression. However, a real penetration into the semantic space of the work's expression is not possible if the conditions, intention types are neglected, through which questions are asked (answers given), so that meaning cannot be stopped. I think that this is the paraphrase of the generic title of my analysis, but it also mirrors the composition's generative reason: an open opus - the hyper-statement in which the receiver turns to a collaborator to the text's polysemous life.*

**Keywords:** *complexity, paradigm, nature-culture, musical languages, open opus, spectrality.*

## 1. Introduction

The composition project *When the Hills are Tossing Black Shadows* explores an extract provided by Dante's *Divine Comedy* (written between 1308-1321); its title derives from Dante's epic poem. The fragment which inspired me in my work is related to the *Inferno*; to be specific, to the chapter I entitled *The Dark Wood and the Hill* ("...In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood,

where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable the wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there. I cannot rightly say how I entered it. I was so full of sleep, at that point where I abandoned the true way..."). [1] If the dramatic plot is pursued closely, one will understand that, here, the being is strictly connected to the

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precision with which the author expresses human life, relating to other people, to religion, politics, society, to the plurality of significations, permanently present in the existential tumult. In the same way, in fact, my musical piece conveys a couple of ideas and images concerning either allegorical visions about the meaning of life, or a sampled mental landscape of the medieval world view; the two realities are developed through specific sound constructions. In his masterpiece, Dante tries to reflect upon the meaning of being, of history, culture, placing a space of inexhaustible semantic richness between the letter and the spirit. Walking on an initiation path, setting up codes which call different confrontation elements, distinct

models of characters, of significance, is the very spiral that synthetically defines complexity (in layers). Keeping these points in mind, we can realize that Dante, next to Cervantes, Goethe, Joyce, Musil, defines complexity in a similar way: like a transition which allows us to move from point to point between different levels of the human being's experiences. There are many contents in Dante's literature work which depict categories of meanings, ideas, like a collection of microcosms layering in a complex structured configuration. As one can see in the drawing below, the complexity is convincingly suggested through the polyphonic lines, stories, transitional ideas (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy's allegorical representation

## 2. The composition strategy concerning the musical work

In the same manner are layered my sound constructions, too. Moreover, the musical process I evoke is a synthesis of some cultural paradigms; cultural paradigms in the sense of Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996), for whom a paradigm is a mentality developed into a science. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (published 50 years ago) Kuhn changed the way the world looked at science. By “change of paradigm” the author understands a certain historical moment involved in replacing an old viewpoint (old cultural paradigm) with a new one; thus, beside other concepts - with a well-defined role in Kuhn’s theory (like that of *crisis* or of *community of scientists*; moving right along, Kuhn refers within his explanation to a very closed community of scientists) - perspectives can be approached, which refer to other meanings, to a *renewed* deepening of the sense of existence, to reflecting upon the world’s face with a *different* clarity - the new paradigm being the very *criticism* of the replaced one. T. Kuhn convincingly brings an example to our attention [2]: replacing determinist Newtonian physics with modern quantum physics (see Werner Heisenberg’s theory) or with Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity (the latter two appeared in the 20th century).

What happens throughout my composition aim (i.e. material organization) is that I evoked in the same time 3 different paradigms. These cultural paradigms overlap within the musical discourse and highlight different sides of European and non-European cultures, in both a synchronic and a synchronic texture inside the form development. One of these paradigms consists of 5 Haikus (A *Haiku* is a very short Japanese poem which describes in a quick way feelings, insights,

or (sometimes) hidden meanings. Its form consists of 3 verses; the 3 verses have 17 syllables. If we consider the first verse A with the first meaning, it will be followed by a verse B with a different meaning and the verse C represents the conclusion of both verses A and B) written by Matsuo Bashō, a well-known Japanese poet (1644-1694). Bashō brought the Haiku configuration to the clearest and most creative output. The first one in my piece is entitled *Frog Haiku*: An old pond/ The sound/ Of a diving frog (translated by Kenneth Rexroth - American poet, 1905-1982). The second is named *A snowball*: You make a fire/ And I’ll show you something wonderful/ A big ball of snow (unknown translator). The third Haiku - *A caterpillar* - sounds: A caterpillar/ This deep in fall/ Still, not a butterfly (translated by Robert L. Hass - American poet, born 1941). The last two Haikus bring up images similar to those presented. This cultural paradigm produces and emphasizes an *exotic breath* and renders nature’s pure sound to the whole piece, integrated into a specific timbre environment. A contrast comes along, that first paradigm with the second one - which is more *cultural* than *natural*.

The second paradigm launches some fragments from a European *Weltanschauung* (world view). It switches from the Haiku’s array of mental colours to the late Renaissance or early Baroque music. It draws on the choir music tradition developed by Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612), a German composer who lived and worked in Nuremberg and Augsburg 50 years earlier than Bashō. As one can reveal, I correlated in my musical work the historical time of the two paradigms: Bashō and Hassler lived approximately in the same period of time. Hassler’s style incorporates plenty of European choir music experiences; his composition route was influenced

especially by the Venetian School. The second paradigm tried to create some particular, cultural features, emphasized mainly through the above-mentioned choir fragments, accompanied by a very peculiar sound colour: the timbre produced by different recorders. Whereas the sound colours of vocal soprano, percussion, clarinet and viola in the first paradigm depict (simulate) a life experience (here I mean, first of all, in Bashō's time), the recorder sound evokes a style specific only to the European culture. I used a large range of recorder registers, from sopranino-recorder up to double-bass, to complement a well-known traditional sound pattern wholly connected to it. This paradigm doesn't quote choir music belonging to Hassler himself, but one can perceive a very close approach to it.

In addition to the previous two paradigms I integrated a third paradigm in the sound material, which describes an important aspect of Christian culture: how different people celebrate the birth of Christ in a number of different countries, and stresses the sense of belonging to an entire cultural unity, a unity of mentalities, values, etc. Musical achievement here is activated not only by an instrumental medium or with the soprano voice, but also by a narrator who uses different vocal and rhetorical modalities of expression. I divided this paradigm into 6 sound boxes, because I depicted here 6 distinct cultural populations where Christmas time is evoked. I preserved the Christmas time (i.e. the *decorated tree*) as the focal point of intersection; I chose and figured this focal point of intersection because it seems that Christmas is a meeting point across all space. In fact, *O, Tannenbaum* (*O, Christmas tree*) is connected with the birth of Christ only as a formal ceremony; since the 16<sup>th</sup> century – within the quite early modern Germanic culture (and later, since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) - this

celebration has become traditional and common to religious cultures. Pointing out this aspect, one can see that this paradigm strikes us especially because it seems to be more or less secular.

### 3. Perception and comprehension of the work

The three paradigms enhance in different ways the potential for various musical events and enlarge the aural perception, the feeling of observation. These are sometimes interconnected, sometimes not, and, in their appearances, look like a large sinusoidal wave form, more or less distorted, refined or recomposed (picture 2). Thus, a receiver who gets the sound of each paradigm from different angles will assimilate a variable cognitive space and duration in time for his manifold experience, witnessing an unsuspected succession of aperceptive horizons. From a composite ensemble, he will distinguish that Doppler-effect (The name of this effect is given in 1842 after the name of the Austrian physicist Christian Doppler (1803-1853). He proved that the frequency change of a periodic wave is sensorial and perceptible when the observer changes his position in relation to the generating source of the sounds) – decrease and increase of intensity – gradually becoming aware of his relative closeness to each sound corridor; now, he will also understand that each layer's music has a relative position in space.

In the next drawing I configured a possible territory of a perception; it is divided into concentric circles (expressing the paradigms mentioned), the largest of which is divided by the 6 respective sound boxes. It is difficult to determine here a constantly manifested sound reality; this always exposes itself in a surrounding of harmonics, noise, i.e. tone ingredients.

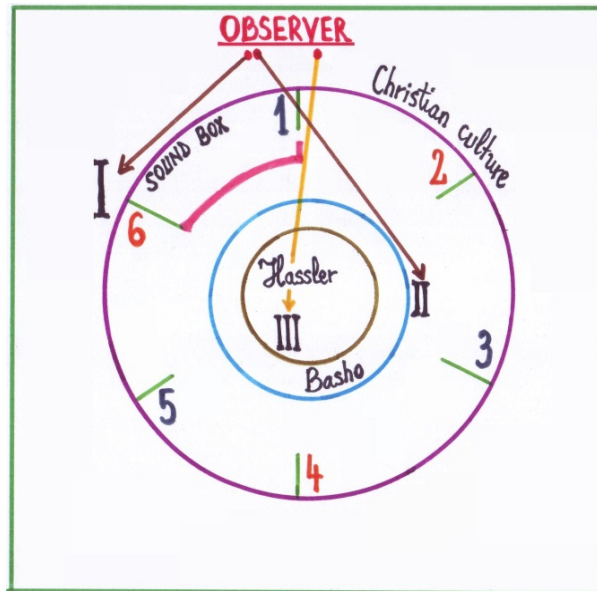


Fig. 2

The small inner circle indicates that the paradigm evolving in the “Hassler space” evokes the stationary, single-coloured sound of recorders. The sensation of timelessness, elusive rhythms and weaker meters is enhanced through the juxtaposition of varied polyphonic lines (textures). These are displayed on different layers of tempi (different speed developments) inside the whole music configuration (see picture 3). In a similar

way I shaped 3 frames (corresponding to the cultural portraits described above) which can meet one another in different vectors, i.e. structures combinations: A+B, A+C, B+C, B+A, A+B+C, A+C+B, B+A+C, B+C+A etc. Every paradigm (frame) A, B or C has to be interconnected, so that each of them creates distinct intersections. I also imagined combinations of dynamics, such as:

$$\begin{array}{c} A + B \quad \parallel \quad A + C \quad \parallel \quad B + C \quad \parallel \quad A + B + C \quad \parallel \quad A + C + B \\ \text{forte piano} \quad \parallel \quad \text{piano forte} \quad \parallel \quad \text{fortissimo pianissimo} \quad \parallel \quad \text{mezzoforte pianissimo benforte} \quad \parallel \quad \text{benpiano, ff, mp} \end{array}$$

The musical language of my composition is atonal, except for rare tonal insertions. The harmony is based on the domain of the equal temperament system in connection with a reservoir of spectral sounds (i.e. noise, enharmonic or harmonics of a fundamental sound). The degree of change becomes various and points to an extended sound spectrality, to an approach close to

electronic experiments in music. Below I present a fragment of the music already described; time stripes are layered with sounds, in specific orchestral combinations; it is the very 3 paradigms, with instruments that particularly ensure their ethos, with the semantic components of the texts (from the background of each) that feed them (Figure 3).



The image shows a handwritten musical score for a stage production. It consists of several staves:

- SOPRAN:** Features a vocal line with dynamic markings like *Beruhigend*, *p*, *f*, and *tu*. It includes a 5:4 time signature and various rhythmic patterns.
- SPRECH:** Contains the text: "UNTERSCHIEDEN SICH KAUM VON DEN DEUTSCHEN. IN HOLLAND SAGT MAN ZU WEIHNACHTEN: GELÜCKIG KERSTMIS".
- BASS:** Includes a section marked "Klang" and "benf" with a 3-measure rest.
- GROBASS:** Features a section marked "nur LUFT" and "multa cresc." with a 3-measure rest.
- BASS:** Includes a section marked "(LUFT)" and "ff".
- BASSKL:** Features a section marked "p benf" and "mp".
- SCHLAGZ:** Includes a section marked "JAVA GONG" and "PLATTENGLOCKE".
- BRASS:** Features a section marked "MSP" and "ST".

The score is highly detailed with various musical notations, including dynamics (e.g., *pp*, *mp*, *mf*, *sf*), articulation (e.g., *benf*, *sf*), and performance instructions (e.g., "man muss dieses Fragment zweimal wiederholen, d.h. 1. und 2.").

Fig. 3

The example in the work's score also has a semiotic model encrusted in it; as we notice, the 3 paradigms - with their sinuous lines - simultaneously evolve in the discourse: paradigm I (vocal soprano, bass clarinet, percussion, viols), paradigm II (the recorder group), paradigm III

(narrator). Like chemistry, biology, psychoanalysis, this music imposes directly its own timbre-symbiosis. The *unlimited* semiosis (Peirce), linked to the codes of cultural signs, is a process of analysis-synthesis, which allows for linguistic or non-linguistic signs to be

defined and interpreted through other signs, in an infinite circularity [3]. According to unlimited semiosis, the music of the piece *When the Hills are Tossing Black Shadows* operates like an open text, a musical poetic product dilated in significations. Then, it has to be paradigmatised again, and offered (through connected circularity) further on to its future receptors for “normalisation”.

#### 4. Conclusions

1. In my composition, I tried to depict a schizophrenic human portrait along the same lines as in Thomas Kuhn’s unfixed paradigms. Moreover, the complex sound development imagined can be compared to a *palimpsest* - a manuscript scratched and scraped again and again, many times - (this writing / re-writing technique has been known ever since the medieval time of the Roman culture (Cicero is one of those who mention it). The 9th, 10th century monks also used to cover another preexisting text with texts of their own semantic (i.e. their specific meanings), on the same parchment (therefore, without succeeding in entirely erasing the old text). Today, deciphering these text layers through techniques like UV-ray exposure or other technologies is being attempted, thus safeguarding that cultural overlapping through folds, overlapping of past historical epochs. This overlapping is a *palimpsest*). The musical experiences are layered and arranged as a sound display, like a *palimpsest*. That is, while there is a primary sound within each paradigm, one can also hear a distinct and distant secondary sound. That is the reason why each paradigm emphasizes a different personality. The composition has three personalities, and one personality dominates the other two along the whole composition; in fact, we can conclude that each micro-composition inside the musical

form expresses itself in a different rhetoric, so that we can perceive intersections between three different sorts of rhetoric.

2. As one can reveal, the second and third paradigms are closely linked, because they both deal with the same European culture. The musical material of the two paradigms, generated through a system of paradigmatic replacements, highlights the relationship between explicit-implicit in syntagmatising the sound structures. If the “Hassler recorders” paradigm intoned sound, that for the Christmas celebration renounces the sound in order to appeal to speech (narrator). This model of paradigmatic replacements is not new, but appears concomitantly with Schönberg’s or Webern’s atonal language, but closer as well, in the avant-garde inscribed by Boulez, Stockhausen and Vieru, or by Stroe, Grisey, Murail and Rădulescu in the so diverse musical plurality.

3. The discourse strategy proposed for the two ontological models, so disputed today: *nature-culture* (unfolded by paradigms I and II), projects into the profound structure of sound articulation a truth that is easy to understand, namely that, along history, the human being has left aside, marginalised the product of nature’s normality in exchange for the endeavor to perfect the artificiality of culture. The greatest quantity of intellectual work, discipline and contribution has been directed towards culture for centuries, and nature has remained an oasis for leisure. The result is confirmed by an entire cultural and civilising production (literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, photographic art, music, or briefly: cathedrals, museums, concert halls). However, the nature motif expressed by the Haiku has become (even if imported all the way from Japan, alas) a mouthpiece in culture. As a reflex already acquired by Europe (via Orient), the comeback to nature’s voice through the

instruments of culture is highlighted with pronounced clarity nowadays. All effects imagined, manufactured and emancipated by electro-acoustic music in our contemporary epoch are basically snapshots of an intuitive nature; they are the voice of the human subconscious nature that has been turned into a cultural product.

4. I support Raymond Picard's position with my last conclusion that fits the given context, namely that "the work [of art (n.n.)], prolonged, explained, justified beyond itself, is no longer inside the work. Outside itself, it is built of relationships which surpass it" [4].

This can certainly be an essential meaning of the art I analytically and

synthetically proposed to the observer; it is about deciphering beyond culture and nature, beyond criticism or creation; it is a permanent quest in lucidity and *in somewhere else*.

#### References

1. \*\*\*(*Inferno*, Canto I:61-99, translated by A. S. Kline).
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