

Recycling as creation in postmodern music

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Abstract: *Recycling music from the past has a long history and takes many forms: transcription, paraphrase, parody, simple allusion, quoting, sampling, borrowing, rewriting, recomposing... These practices have changed considerably with the emergence of the postmodern paradigm. Rewriting musical works may now be seen as a way of expressing a creativity relegated to distortions and comments on “found objects”. Postmodern composers thus produce infinitely recyclable and adjustable artifacts, perfectly suited to wander the planetary networks and nourish the soundscapes of the future virtual universes set to supplant, if not to become, the real world.*

Key-words: *musical quoting, recycling, creativity, modernity-postmodernity*

1. Postmodern versus Modern

By the late 1960s, a gap is developing in Western culture between two conceptions of history, progress and society, to which correspond two aesthetic visions: one claiming its attachment to modernity, the other introducing a new postmodern trend. The musical scene mirrors this cleavage. While modernist composers denounce the regressive tendencies of the postmodernists, the latter consider the former as dogmatic and outdated. Table 1 shows in a schematic manner some of the key differences between the modern and postmodern founding assumptions².

On the one hand, the moderns, driven by a teleological vision of history, start from the premise of a linear and ineluctable progress of humanity. They affirm the will and the necessity of a radical break with the past, which they embody in revolutionary utopias. This conviction led them to value if not to

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² Nevertheless, an underlying continuity can be discerned between the pre- and post-1970 periods, which in fact maintain complex, sometimes ambiguous, relations. The hyphen between “post” and “modern” thus signifies both a break and an extension. The prefix ‘post’ is in fact polysemic: in the various circumstances in which it is used, it can also take on the meanings of other prefixes such as “anti”, “meta”, “trans” or “hyper” (Iliescu 2009).

fetishize the avant-garde, giving priority to the search for novelty and originality. The modern approach generally involves an uncompromising attitude, ascetic, purist and elitist, expressed in a preference for complexity, abstract art and atonal music.

Postmoderns, on the other hand, see history as a rather non-linear process, whose evolution may come to an end. They denounce the avant-garde and turn to the past, which they regard with a mix of nostalgia and irony. This approach is associated with a hedonistic, permissive attitude and with a preference for simplicity and repetitiveness, reflecting a concern for accessibility. In art, it involves the proliferation of "neo" movements, an eclecticism favoring a melting pot of styles, and the flourishing of recycling practices.

	MODERN ASSUMPTIONS AND HALLMARKS	POSTMODERN ASSUMPTIONS AND HALLMARKS
CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS	Linear history, Progress	Non-linear history
	Break with the past	Return to the past
	Revolution, Utopy	Restoration, End of utopy
	Unity, Centralism	Multiplicity, Pluralism
	Willingness	Passivity
	Ascetism	Hedonism
	Necessity, Constraint	Liberty, Permissivity
AESTHETIC ASPECTS	Search for novelty	Recycling
	Rising avant-garde	Fading avant-garde
	Non-repetitivity	Repetitivity
	Complexity	Simplicity
	Stylistic purity	Eclecticism, Polystylism
	Abstract art	Neo-figurative art
	Atonal music	Neo-tonal music

Table 1. *Modern and postmodern founding assumptions and hallmarks*³

³ This table, an initial version of which appears in Iliescu (2006, 67), synthesise a series of concepts theorised by Jean-François Lyotard, Umberto Eco, Zygmunt Bauman, Fredric Jameson, Anthony Giddens, Matei Călinescu, Antoine Compagnon, Michel Maffesoli, Guy Scarpetta, Gilles Lipovetsky, Michel Freitag, Yves Boisvert, Christian Ruby. Some of these concepts were discussed by musicologists like Jonathan Kramer, Béatrice Ramaut-Chevassus, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, and in Romania by Oleg Garaz (2012).

2. Postmodern recycling of “found objects”

The treatment, function and meaning given to musical quotations have considerably evolved from the first Middle Ages practices of borrowing to the most sophisticated forms of intertextuality explored by twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers. Table 2 compares three different approaches on this matter, which correspond to the pre-modern, modern and postmodern periods. Read vertically, it highlights the coherence of each of these three approaches. Read horizontally, it reveals a historical evolution discernible in each of the particular aspects examined. This paper focus on the postmodern period.

	PREMODERN	MODERN	POSTMODERN
QUOTING APPROACH	Appropriation	Dissimulation	Subversion
COMPOSER’S POSTURE	Self-identifying	Distant	Nostalgic/Ironic
QUOTE PROCESSING	Development	Truncation	Distortion
RELATION TO THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT	Continuity	Discontinuity	Restoration or Reinterpretation
RELATION TO TRADITION	Integration	Negation	Stagnation
ROLE OF THE QUOTES FOR CREATIVITY	Trigger	Ferment or Accessory	Support or Substitute
QUOTING’S FUNCTION	Pretext	Hidden reference	Subject
DISPLAYING OF THE QUOTES	Enunciation	Insertion	Mise en abyme
INTEGRATIVE ELEMENT FOR THE QUOTE	Style	Structure	Quote itself
COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUE	Variation	Montage, Collage	Rewriting

Table 2. *Historical evolutions in musical quoting treatment*⁴

“Recycling” and “rewriting” are generic terms designating various ways of reusing music from the past, such as quoting, transcription, parody, etc., but also the

⁴ An early version of this table figures in Iliescu 2007, 34.

reactivation of old musical styles and languages, or even of specific symbols or gestures. Thus, in *Sankt-Bach Passion*, Mauricio Kagel does not quote any of Bach's motifs, nor does he intend to imitate his style. He instead makes his own the *Passion's* sacred symbolism, whilst diverting it by replacing the figure of Christ with that of Bach. In another context, without citing any specific work, Berio's *Sequenze* recast in a contemporary musical language the cliché gestures of virtuoso instrumental writing inherited from the nineteenth century.

The analogy suggested by the word "recycling" between these practices and the reuse of household waste, shocking as it may seem, is assumed by certain composers. Ligeti, who describes his opera *Le Grand Macabre* as a "pot au feu that comes out of a dustbin"⁵ (Balász 1990, 30), provides this original 'recipe':

You take a piece of *foie gras*, drop it on a carpet and trample it until it disappears, that's how I use the history of music and, above all, the history of opera (Samuel, 1981, 25).

In the same vein, one of the most representative postmodern composers, John Adams (1999), claims as source of inspiration a "big dustbin" ready to receive all the music in the world. Well before him, John Cage - a postmodern in his own way - had randomly assembled around a hundred scraps of magnetic tape that had already been recorded and abandoned, according to legend, in a dustbin. This was to be his first composition of electronic music, *Williams Mix* (1952).

As suggested by this kind of approach, recycling found musical objects goes hand in hand with another postmodern trend: putting together disparate fragments. This is for example the case with Mauricio Kagel's soundtrack of the film *Ludwig van* (a collage of Beethoven excerpts) and with Pierre Henry's *Tenth Symphony* and its latter "remix", entirely cobbled together from extracts of Beethoven's nine symphonies. This technique is crucial for the musicians of the electronic scene, who remix in an eclectic spirit jazz, rock, pop, techno or cartoon soundtracks, as well as samplings of traditional, classical and contemporary music.

One can speak of a postmodern aesthetic of recycling, the prophet of which is Marcel Duchamp, father of the concept of the *objet trouvé* and inspirer of many experimental projects, both in music and visual arts⁶. Following his example of putting a moustache on the Mona Lisa, a number of composers extensively quote - not necessarily in a provocative way - works from the Baroque, Classical or Romantic repertoire. Cage, who assumes the legacy of Duchamp and Satie,

⁵ For Ligeti, Balász (1990) observes, "everything can become acoustic garbage: Schubert and Verdi on the one hand, horns and sirens on the other".

⁶ Sculptors like Arman and César are known for their distortions and compressions of various objects, which often came from industrial waste dumps.

illustrates in his *Europæras* cycle a subversive re-use of musical heritage: he entrusts a computer with the task of randomly superimposing several arias from the Romantic repertoire and their accompaniments considered as interchangeable.

If musical recycling dates back to the Middle Ages borrowing techniques that enabled, for example, a secular *chanson* to fill the role of *cantus firmus* in a work of sacred music, in the twentieth century, and especially after 1960, this practice changed in nature. Like Picasso, Magritte or Warhol, postmodern composers came to regard works from the past as “found objects” that they could interpret and distort as they wished. Berio (1983, 146) thus defines the third movement of his *Sinfonia* as a “meditation on a Mahlerian ‘found object’” (the Scherzo of the *Second Symphony*), while Ligeti’s introduces in his opera *Le Grand Macabre* “a sort of pastiches similar to the found objects of Pop-art” (Samuel 1981, 25),

3. Integral rewriting

The postmodern composers give new life and dignity to “minor” genres such as transcription and orchestration, which had been almost abandoned by the avant-garde of the 1950s. The following examples illustrate in various ways this shift, which resulted in the blurring of the boundaries between recycling (reinterpreting, rewriting, recomposing) and original creation.

John Adams’ orchestration of Liszt’s *La lugubre gondola*, modestly presented as an “exercise in the macabre style of the nineteenth century” (Adams 1996), is significant in that it magnifies the modernity and darkness of the original composition. Inversely, Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* set by Uri Caine in a twilight Venice and deprived of the sonic power of a large symphony orchestra, is reduced to a derisory gesticulation. Pierre Schaeffer’s *Bilude*, integrally quoting the *Prelude in C minor* from Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, turns it into a “concrete music” by replacing musical sound with various noises. In Gavin Bryars’ *The Sinking of the Titanic*, the noise (that of water, in this case) also alters musical meaning, by slowly drowning out an anthem played by the orchestra of the liner during the disaster.

Dieter Schnebel’s aim in his *Re-Visionen* cycle - to reveal the unexplored potential of masterpieces from the past - has been well surpassed. His spatialized vocal versions of excerpts from *The Art of Fugue* form a “journey to Bach Land” transporting listeners into the past but also into the future. His *Beethoven-Sinfonie*, a parodic orchestration (timpani and chamber orchestra) of the *Fifth Symphony*’s first movement, subverts the cliché of the heroic composer. His *Webern-Variation* transform the monochrome pointillism of the Viennese composer’s piano writing into a thick orchestral texture. As for his *Schubert-Phantasie* for large orchestra,

freely built around an “analytical instrumentation” of a Schubert’s piano sonata, it should be regarded as an original composition.

Salvatore Sciarrino calls his various rewritings “elaborations”. Most of them are creative transcriptions, like those of the child Mozart’s piano pieces. Sciarrino’s choice of instruments is generally significant in itself, as in his version of Bach’s *Toccatà and Fugue* in D minor, where he abandons the massiveness of the organ for the fragility of the flute, or in his *Exercises in three styles*, string quartet arrangements of Scarlatti’s piano sonatas in a style reminiscent of Haydn’s quartets. The composer’s most personal “elaborations” combine music by Gesualdo and by himself written in Gesualdo’s manner. Conceived as sonic “diffractions” of the original works, they take the form of an Italian puppet opera featuring, among other things, a folk singer’s voice and sounds of breaking glass.

Hans Zender’s “composed interpretation” for voice and orchestra of Schubert’s *Winter Journey* and Brice Pauset’s “composed listening” for piano and small orchestra of Webern’s *Variations for piano* also show that one can compose music on (and about) music. As for Max Richter, he “re-composes” Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* in the spirit of a remix culture from which he distinguishes himself by his use of traditional techniques instead of the DJ’ typical sampling. Some composers also adopt the posture of a restorer who fills in missing parts of an unfinished painting. Yet, if Berio’s *Rendering*, a restoration of a Schubert symphony, tries to be faithful to the Viennese composer, Georg Friedrich Haas introduces in *Sieben Klangräume* his own thematic material into the interstices of Mozart’s *Requiem*.

4. Romanian composers

In Romania, and in other Eastern European countries, the ideological constraints and the isolation suffered by artists under the communist regime resulted in the postmodern *Zeitgeist* manifesting in different ways and with a certain time lag⁷. Recycling of musical works from the past rarely came in the form of extensive quotation or of complete rewriting, but rather in the register of a late modernism in which the borrowings are dissimulated.

There are exceptions, however, such as Tiberiu Olah’s puppet opera *Geamgiii din Toledo* [*The Glassmakers of Toledo*] (1959), a “postmodern parody avant la lettre” (Lupu 2008, 318)⁸. While this work ridicules the absurdity and falsity of the

⁷ On the specific features of Eastern European postmodern music, see Sandu-Dediu 2002, 206.

⁸ Sandu-Dediu (2002, 145) mentions another example of postmodernism “avant la lettre” in Romanian music: Pascal Bentoiu’s buffe opera *Amorul doctor* (1964).

conventions inherent to the operatic genre, it could also point to the clichés of "socialist realism". In this respect, it recalls Shostakovich's *Rayok the Anti-Formalist*, ferocious satire of the Soviet regime.

Olah is also one of the few Romanian composers to have used quotations as an almost exclusive musical material, and even as subject of an entire work. His *PaROdiSSINlana* (1973) is a musical joke in which a duet for cello and double bass by Rossini is both performed and parodically "commented" (Thomasz 2008, 440-442). Years later, Andrei Tănăsescu, a disciple of Olah, would proceed in a similar way in his piano pieces *Ciuleandra* and *Vălurile Dunării*.

Quotations in Romanian composers' works are most often difficult to detect, as they are truncated, concealed and perfectly integrated into a complex musical fabric. Sometimes they are only revealed at the end of a work, like Debussy's *Ondine* motif in *Prairie, Prières* by Aurel Stroe, or the incipit of Mozart's *Fantasy in C minor* for piano K. 475 in *Obelisk for Wolfgang Amadeus* by Tiberiu Olah⁹.

The tribute paid to the masters of the past rather yields cryptic quotations. Unusually for him, Ștefan Niculescu inserts in *Sincronie II, Homage to Enescu and Bartók*, melodic motifs extracted from works of these composers. In an equally covert manner, Dan Dediu refers in his *Studies for orchestra op. 23* to Mozartian "mottos", in an approach described as falling somewhere "between modern and postmodern commentary" (Rădulescu 2002, 216).

5. Creative recycling

The full-length rewriting of musical "found objects", as performed by postmodern composers, calls into question the notion of creation. Some critics point out that the diverting of existing works tends to replace invention, while creation confuses itself with plagiarism (Sabbe 1998, 99-102)¹⁰. To be sure, postmodern composers no longer follow the model, cherished by the moderns, of *tabula rasa* and of creating *ex nihilo*. They entirely assume making music about music, or even creating "new works from ancient remains" (Manoury 1998, 118). As Jean Molino

⁹ On the structural role played by this Mozartian incipit, see Lupu 2013, 49-50.

¹⁰ While François-Sappey (1992, 117) coined in this respect the malicious expression "found objects kleptomania", other authors consider borrowing, especially in electronic music, as a "creative theft", which they analyse as a form of resistance to the merchandising of art. See Metzger 2003, 160-187. Actually, postmodern recyclers claim full authorship of their works, including in terms of copyright.

observes (2006, 83), “people have always used the old to create the new”, the only differences concerning “the extent, fidelity and treatment of borrowings¹¹”.

However, when extended quotations are the central element of a work, if not its subject, one may wonder about the nature of the author’s contribution. Should we be satisfied with this weak¹², second-degree creativity? Is the postmodern period capable of producing its own artistic patrimony, or is it an “age of emptiness” (Lipovetsky 1983)? In fact, the notion of artistic creation has undergone a significant transformation. It is now acceptable to assert one’s creativity by setting quotations in new and unexpected contexts, by distorting and diverting them from their original meaning. While reinterpreting music from the past, postmodern composers are forging for it a new identity, bearing a part of themselves.

Indeed, when Dieter Schnebel composes his “analytical instrumentations”, this “restrained creative act, between respect and diversion”, as he calls it, ultimately leads him to a discovery of himself¹³. When Gavin Bryars quotes in extenso the music played during the sinking of the Titanic, he expresses his own feelings about many other collective tragedies that have marked the twentieth century. When Hans Zender imagines a “composed interpretation” of Schubert’s *Winter Journey*, he is transforming it in a highly subjective and creative way. When Pierre Schaeffer dresses Bach’s *Prelude in C minor* in the garb of “concrete music”, he provokes his contemporaries with one last witty wink.

6. Conclusion

The massive recourse to quotations reflects an important cultural and societal shift. If the creative drive characteristic of the modern composers, their obsession with novelty and originality, correspond to their desire to *make history*, the lesser creative commitment of postmodernists, their apparent lack of ambition and originality, seem to indicate a propensity to be more a subject of history. The willful spirit of the former, summed up in the motto “change the world”, is replaced by the resignation of the latter, who seek comfort in alternative worlds. To be sure, spectacular advances in digital technologies will more and more enable us to

¹¹ For theorists of intertextuality such as Jean Ricardou and Antoine Compagnon, “all writing is collage and gloss, quotation and commentary”, and “writing, for it is always rewriting, is no different from quoting. See Escal 1984, 188.

¹² The adjective “weak” could also be understood here in the sense - not necessarily pejorative - in which Gianni Vattimo speaks of postmodern “weak thinking” (*pensiero debole*).

¹³ See Michel 1970, 112.

escape reality and take refuge in virtual worlds, where worst-case scenarios are tackled by avatars.

The disguise and role-play typical of musical postmodernism - Berio replacing Schubert to finish his symphony, Sciarrino putting himself in the shoes of the child Mozart to orchestrate his piano pieces - are all in line with the omnipresence of simulacra in postmodern societies, as analysed by Jean Baudrillard. The identity of musical works, constantly modified and reinterpreted, thus becomes uncertain, like that of many found objects circulating on the planet's networks, undergoing transformations that make them unrecognizable. Such wandering ghost-objects, more and more anonymous, are likely to furnish the future virtual universes set to merge with, and eventually replace, the real world.

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