

Self-quotation in Personal Creation. The Journey from Musical Self-Portrait to #Selfie

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Abstract: *Music composition is an art that allows the creator to encapsulate her/his personality and conceptions in an abstract manner, as well as to mirror his whole being into the music, like in a self-portrait. A single musical theme may be both the key to the evolution of the compositional techniques and a witness to the inner self transformations that occur during one's life. This study follows a theme and some of its iterations in other personal works over the last 25 years in order to capture the relation between life, creation and compositional traits, using the concepts of time and memory to explain the evolution of my own musical language.*

Key-words: *musical theme, time, memory, orchestration, journal, musical evolution*

1. Introduction

The self-quotation technique has been used by composers throughout the centuries. J.S Bach, G. Mahler, D. Shostakovich are only a few examples of brilliant usage of their own themes and motives, even entire compositions in their new works.

In the Romanian musical space, there is the well self-documented case of composer Maia Ciobanu, who conceptualized this technique in the Journal series (Ciobanu 2021). She memorizes fragments of her own music in different moments of her life, looking at them through a different lens. In her opinion, *“the only valid biographical document is the totality of the artist's own works remains. Creation constitutes a personal diary, clearer than any other daily notes. It carries the essence of thinking, of affectivity, of the spirit and of all that the unaltered truth of the personality of the artist”* (Ciobanu 2021).

In my case, the musical theme was conceived in 1999 and in the last 25 years it has suffered several transformations and variations, as well as re-contextualising, like a witness to an artistic “coming of age” and path to maturity. In this paper I will

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present the theme in its original iteration and address some of these changes that occurred in my musical style and conceptions over the last quarter of a century, closely related to the concepts of time, memory, personality and becoming.

2. The Theme as memory, self-portrait and #selfie

Memory is a psychic mechanism for encoding, storing and retrieving information.

In Mielu Zlate's opinion, human memory *"takes the form of a complex psychic mechanism that appears as a link between situations, events separated in time, thereby contributing to the regulation and self-regulation of human behaviour. In this way, memory reflects (mirrors) the world and man's relations with the world of which he is a part"* (Zlate 1999, 348).

In music, memory has many layers, from the capacity to reproduce the musical score to the permanent effort of the creator to recreate the initial feeling or idea that prompt the composer to write the music in the first place.

The subject of this paper is a *Theme I* have written in early 1999. It is the main theme of a *Fugue-Sonata for solo violin*, a piece constructed using both polyphonic and development techniques, in an ABA form that continually grows and transforms the musical material.

The Theme's centre is the note F, and it has a length of three and a half bars. The modus is a harmonic major scale, and the melody itself contains a gradually elevation of the register, going from a small interval (the minor second – F-E) to larger ones (ascendent quart E-A, descendent quint A-D, ascendant sixth D-B), continuing with four consecutive sounds, from which the last one, C, is conjunct to the reiteration of the quart, this time descendent, "guarded" by two second intervals, one descendent, like in the beginning, and the other one ascendent, like a recapitulation of the middle section of the theme (bar 2).

Fuga

Sabina Ulubeanu

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled 'Fuga' by Sabina Ulubeanu. It consists of two staves: Violin and Vln (Violin II). The Violin part is marked 'Andante' and 'pp' (pianissimo), with the instruction 'senza vibrato sul tasto'. The Vln part is marked 'mf' (mezzo-forte) and 'cresc.' (crescendo). The score includes various musical notations such as ornaments, slurs, and fingerings.

Fig. 1. "Theme from Fugue: - S.Ulubeanu

The whole piece is a clear image of the seeds of creation already planted at a young age due to extensive study of counterpoint and classical sonatas. The predisposition to polyphonic structures and continuous development were implemented on a personal language that stemmed from modal structures. This is why I also used the theme, written in the first year of university studies, in the *Cello Concerto*, the main work of the final year (2003), symbolizing two covers of the same book.



Fig. 2. “Cello concerto”, bars 45-63

The *theme* is modified, both melodic and rhythmical, the main intervals that are kept are the minor second and the quart. The whole melody is placed on a large texture, a cluster of long notes in the strings section, and preceded by its “premonition” on solo clarinet and glockenspiel, so it is not a direct theme, but a labored one, being the first time when I introduced in my creation the concept of “becoming”. Looking back in time, it was linked to the time when my daughter was born, a transformation that changes a person in the most profound manner, but it also brings back glimpses of the hard, deep structures, definitory for one’s personality, just like this theme emerged divided between the two instruments before being displayed by the solo instrument (cello).



Fig. 3. Bars 35 -43

In the next year, 2004, I wrote my second solo violin piece and used the theme with a different function.

*Cadenza lirică*² for solo violin is a composition that operates with the notion of cadence, in its both meanings: melodic or harmonic termination of a musical phrase or the grand virtuosity section of a concerto musical composition.

From a structural point of view, the piece is constructed in the form of a lied: ABA. The first section debuts with three phrases of different lengths, (the phrasing increases gradually). Each of the three phrases has as constitutive nucleus a certain type of melodic cadence: The classical tonal cadence, melodic cadences specific to the Gregorian or Renaissance music (prior to the affirmation of the tonality as the main musical system) and Gesture-cadences, more akin to contemporaneity (inverted chromaticism, tritons, suspended phrases etc). The next bars, until the beginning of the „B” section, represent the development and the amplification of the previously explained procedures, in a virtuoso spirit of the instrumental cadence. Thus, the composition works deliberately with the cultural memory, on a “memory of ideas” conceptual level (because the cadences are the hard structures specific to every music era), and also from a historical point of view, because the spectacular component of the instrumental concert is fully represented by the instrumental cadence.

The second section, a slower one, also uses all cadence types, but the “goal” is the birth of a melody, exploiting the euphony given by fragments apparently disjoint. They are the slightly modified fragments of the theme. These fragments are linked to each other through harmonic pillars: minor ninths, major tenths and minor thirds.

Fig. 4. “Cadenza Lirica”, bars 55-62

² <https://soundcloud.com/sabina-ulubeanu/cadenza-lirica>

The minor ninth G-A flat (var 55) is the ending of the original theme, as the beginning is rhythmically transformed, and the harmonic major scale always altered.

The ending of the piece represents the return of the first section, but in a form of a synthesis, inserting into the musical material all the elements “gained” in the “B”.

Transforming the theme, I reinforce in my own creation the usage of the notion “altered memory”, extracting only what I consider functioning in the new composition.

15 years later, I returned to the theme in a totally different configuration, on purpose, in an orchestral piece that plays with musical quotes viewed as the concepts of hashtags in the digital world – *#just a composer*.³

In the contemporary era, being “just a composer” is at least unusual, if not anachronistic. The hashtag (#), often confused with the sharp sign, represents the persistence of ideals amid daily chaos. The hashtag is the symbol that transforms a word into a hyperlink, allowing it to be seen in all its appearances on the Internet, in the most diverse, and sometimes surprising, contexts. I drew an analogy between the hash tag and the creator, who maintains their status as a creator in whatever context life presents, in this tempting modernity where time slips through their fingers. Their refuge is the sheet with empty staves waiting to be filled, a refrain in the composer’s life.

For these reasons, as well as my concerns about time and memory, I chose the work *#just a composer* to articulate a quasi-Rondo Sonata form of the ABACBA type. The Rondo is the form that most appeals to memory, reinforcing or contradicting it, because it brings the past into the present and creates a permanent polyphony of overlapping times. *#just a composer* is a work for orchestra, with the ensemble comprising strings, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and percussion (tam-tam, tambourine, metal chimes, woodblocks, crotales).

The first section places the string instruments in the foreground, with a bass pedal supported by the timpani. Over this, two defining elements for the work’s evolution are superimposed: “ephemerides” micro melodies, in pizzicato at first, then glissando on the strings, both evolving towards the creation of motor continuity, and a chordal, homophonic structure—a conscious allusion to the “signal chords” in T. Olah’s third symphony. This structure will be amplified, developed, and varied in the following sections.

³ <https://soundcloud.com/sabina-ulubeanu/justacomposer>

The second section overlaps several layers: a play of accents in the brass instruments, over which a trumpet solo presents a cantilena that, is hardly perceived as such, being hidden between two other melodic phrases in the woodwinds. This “infinite melody” from the trumpet is actually a kind of autobiography, containing micro-elements of songs that I have written in other works, and that have obsessed me in the past, serving as a sort of leitmotif over the years. Among them, of course, there is the *theme*. This time, the scale on F contains both A and A flat, the B flat disappears, and C replaces the D flat, a minor modification, barely noticeable, with the strict function of contradicting the hash tag signification, a subtle way of not obeying to the strictness of the digital world.

Fig. 5. #justacomposer, bars 92-95

The organic growth within this section combines elements only exposed in the first section and ends with a quote from the first measures of Olah's third symphony.

The third section begins where the material left off; the melodic pizzicato element of the first section is amplified and assigned the role of ostinato. Superimposed on it, also as an ostinato, is a motif of six notes, which in turn represents a quote from Depeche Mode's, *I Want You Now*. The brass breaths are also an allusion to this piece. The quotes are sublimated within the micro-developments and massive crescendos from all the instruments, rendering the track unrecognizable.

The final section begins with a single chord, also quoted from Olah, then transitions back to the melodic phrases from the second section, but now on a different harmonic structure in the strings. The piece ends not with the quote itself, but with an allusion to “Olah's chord”, gradually deconstructed by the successive disappearance of instruments.

The whole piece is an explicit self-portrait of all the personality and compositional layers the defined me in 2019, as well, through the quotes – hashtags, a gateway to the complexity of the sonorous world that we occupy.

In 2021, I wrote *Sommerfäden*⁴, a chamber work for two voices, clarinet, violin, and live electronics, set to the lyrics of Nikolaus Lenau (1802–1850). It is dedicated to the German community in Timișoara, of which Lenau is a representative poet. The piece is inspired by research into the traditions of the Swabian community in the Banat Plain and the Banat Mountains, which I have conducted in June, July, and August of 2021 as part of the documentary project The Unified Voices of Banat.

Structurally, the composition follows a well-defined lied form: A (bars 1-35), B (bars 36-50), and a varied A (bars 51-84). The A section operates with two contrasting elements: texture and melodic motif. The texture primarily unfolds within the interval of a minor third, while the main theme of the lied spans a minor tenth (bars 1-17), and this where the theme is presented almost identical to the original, only with minor rhythmical variations, mandatory due to the text involved. It is a hidden key to my own personality in a piece fully dedicated to another community, a sign that their culture is never appropriated, but only reflected through my own personal lens – a musical *#selfie*.

Sommerfäden

Vanishing Flowers - The Unified Voices of Banat-

Lyrics by Nikolaus Lenau

Sabina Ulubeanu

Mezzo-soprano 1

$\text{♩} = 72$

mp

Mäd - chen

2

M-S.

8

si - ch am Wie-sen - ha - n - ge.

Fig. 6. “Sommerfäden”, bars 1-11

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-CAXuQU44>

The first 17 bars contain all the material that will later be developed through the following techniques: dynamic variation of texture, dynamic variation of the theme, imitation development of a single musical cell.

The main melody in bars 24-35 encapsulates these processes through juxtaposition. The B section is much more dynamic, constructed around a double ostinato in the second voice and violin, based on the intervals of a minor second and a fifth (previously used in the melody from bars 24-35), while the lead voice presents sustained notes. The melody is also built on the augmented minor second, reaching the climax of the work in the upper register.

The varied A section returns with a transitional segment in bars 51-67 (with an upbeat). The texture is immediately more dynamic, and the two female voices first appear at the double octave and then at the octave, simultaneously. This is followed by a brief intermezzo by the first voice and an exact imitation by the two voices in the subsequent bars, leading to the reprise of the ending from the first A section. Although the section follows a similar developmental path, the familiar elements are always presented in relation to their most recent "evolution".

The finale (bars 68-84) revisits previously exposed motifs, altering the register and timing of their appearances against the dynamic texture.

However, the element that disrupts the apparent symmetry of this deeply German lied (with an allusion to a Richard Strauss-like breath, more ideological than strictly post-romantic in sound) is the inclusion of live electronics. The role of the musician is to create a continuous synthesis of the written text, capturing it live and processing it using their own methods. This introduces an element of "chance", as the instructions are brief but sufficient. Here, live electronics is tasked with recreating time, superimposing the past onto the present, and providing impulses for the "future", especially in the middle section (B). The *theme* is very prominent in the live electronics rendition.

I chose this approach as a tribute to the German community mentioned at the outset. Deeply rooted in the present, with all the tools of contemporary technology, they preserve Swabian traditions more intensively and extensively than Germans in Germany. This overlay of time, achieved through live electronics, perfectly illustrates the saying: "*Tradition ist nicht Anbetung der Asche, sondern Weitergabe des Feuers*" (Tradition does not mean the veneration of ashes, but the transmission of fire.) I link this to the usage of my original *theme*, a strong expression of the transformations that actually help the composer stay true to the person she/he is in the moment of creation.

3. Conclusion

The self-quotation is a technique that helps the composer connect with his older versions and create, with the help of long-term memory, cultural memory and altered memory, windows in time that will reinforce the authenticity and honesty of her/his musical approach. In my case, going back to a theme I considered worthy of this process, created also the responsibility to insert it in the exact stage of my professional development of that moment, aligned with my current musical, scientific, social and anthropological *Weltanschauung*. The *theme* has witnessed my student debut, the graduation, the conscious play with different types of memory, serving as an anchor, the role of a slightly distorted self-portrait in the mechanical hashtag era and a straightforward selfie in a composition fully dedicated to a different culture. A theme does not age, but the human composer does. In my case, the *theme* is here to remind me of the cruel act of composing, in which the inner self must be fully connected to the musical realization and express the exact person you are in that moment in time.

4. Proposals

The phenomenon of self-quotation is as ancient as composition itself. Musicologists should seek such quotes not only within musical themes but also in the specific elements that define an artist's creation and life, whether consciously or subconsciously. It would be fascinating to distinguish between personal style, musical obsessions, and self-quotation, particularly in contemporary music. This exploration could provide a deeper insight into the creator's inner workings, helping both the public and emerging composers better understand how the world is translated into sonic art.

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