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Music: a world apart?

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"It is as true in a cultural as in a physical sense that there can be no music in a vacuum." (p. 130/121)

This sentence taken from Nicholas Cook's conclusion of his book *Music, a very short introduction* provides us with a very good metaphor of the overall impression one can have while reading this text. And I am not sure, when beginning this commentary, whether I will really be able to explain why I am under this impression. Everything is so obviously clear, well argued, filled with common-sense examples throughout the text, that one should agree with such a demonstrative flow. But it seemed to me that all that rhetorical persuasion reminds us of the references used by Nicholas Cook himself about music (p. 132/132) "the Pied Piper of Hamlyn [...], the sirens of ancient Greece [...] or the voice of Saruman [...], the model of honey-tongue demagogue whose speech captivates his listeners even if they struggle to reject what he has to say". It just sounds to me as if this book were not a book about Music, as if it had nothing to do with Music. This was something rather painful to acknowledge.

Of course, this is only a first impression, and, therefore, it will need to be made clearer. In fact, as a University scholar, being part of a new generation of musicologists, involved in a research centre on human sciences of music, I ought to applaud this corrosive intent to modernise and renew the *thinking* about music. Even more should I adhere to the aim of achieving a new musicology on the basis of the critical philosophy initiated by Adorno.

Nevertheless, I am not sure that Adorno would have appreciated this book more than I did. As Richard Taruskin says on the back cover: "This book is bound to please Sir Elton more than Sir Harrison; but, love it or hate it, that is the direction academic music studies are taking". And there is the first point that can help us to understand the real aims of such a book, and its ideological innuendoes. Let us quote the author himself: "The role of a truly 'critical' musicology is, of course, to uncover this political content, to demonstrate the ideology implicated in what might otherwise appear as innocent and innocuous an act as the performance of a

Schumann song cycle" (p. 127/118). "In this book I have spoken of my cautious optimism about music: not just about music itself, but about our ability to understand it and use it as a means of personal and social transformation" (p. 128/119). It is clear that Nicholas Cook claims the idea that music is not "music itself" but some sort of psycho-sociological phenomenon. The example he gives of Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben* (A woman's love and life) as 'the impersonation of a woman by the voice of male culture' (Ruth Solie, p. 126/117), is perfect to help us realise the misunderstanding. Because the work of Schumann is dealing with a text that is truly a kind of romantic male chauvinism, because this music was performed in a context in which male chauvinism was dominant, does it imply that the music of Schumann itself, played today, conveys this precise meaning to somebody like me that doesn't even understand German? My interest in Schumann's work lies somewhere else. Who cares about the sex of the interpreter or the composer when he listens to music? Not me, and I really wonder, when I read the writings of Robert and Clara Schumann, whether there was not much more respect to each other, to the true nature of the opposite sex, in this time than in ours.

Everyone is indebted to their social and cultural background, and there is no reason why composers should be an exception to the rule. Nor musicologists. The fact that the 24 (22) pages long final chapter of Cook's book is dedicated to *Music and gender* is in itself a significant historical and cultural preconception. Such an emphasis on this topic is, for the French reader I am, a good example of the actual Anglo-Saxon way of negating their cultural "gender" heritage for a kind of compulsory flat post-sexual illusion. I would be glad to laugh about it, if this ideological model was not in some way a mask for a new kind of hypocrisy and fanaticism¹. But this is another debate.

Nicholas Cook's efforts look like an attempt at defining what is *Musicologically correct*. In as much as Music is reduced throughout the book to our ability to understand it, this *Musicologically correct* attitude tends to instruct us in what is *Musically* (that is to say: *Artistically*) *correct*. I will therefore be positively *incorrect* in what follows to make my point clear. First, I assume the fact that, despite being "a University scholar, being part of a new generation of musicologists, involved in a research centre on human sciences of music", I am also a *composer* (I am sorry for my being so rude, but after all, if one should respect minorities, it should *also* be possible to be a composer, should it not?). For a composer, music has never been defined by its surroundings — to which Nicholas Cook is so cleverly introducing us — but by an intimate involvement within the art itself, which is a complex mixture of technical, spiritual and sentimental ingredients. The emphasis laid by Nicholas Cook on the surroundings naturally leads him to reevaluate the *image* of the composer. It is obvious that there is a myth of the creator that has little to do with

(1) To understand what I mean, one can read the novel by Michel Houellebecq: *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Maurice Nadeau, Paris, 1994.

the reality, and that great composers are not always great people. But why is it so difficult to accept that they are mainly responsible for what music is?

What is wrong with the composers? I have no time here to challenge page after page, all what is said in this book, about the depreciation of “pure music”, of the “genius” and so on... Therefore, let us concentrate on a point that appears to Nicholas Cook as one of the most problematic: “[...] Harrison Birtwistle (perhaps Britain’s leading modernist composer) condensed the Beethovenian concept of the composer into a dozen words when he announced, ‘I can’t be responsible for the audience: I’m not running a restaurant’” (p. 40/37). What is so shocking with Birtwistle’s sentence? He is only saying that a man intimately involved with *music* cannot be liable for whatever is occurring in people’s minds about what he does. He is responsible for the music itself. Not for its commercial fate. But of course, for Nicholas Cook, music itself is nothing.

This recalls exactly the terms of the particularly stressful debates between fundamental and applied researchers. Those who ideologically condemn fundamental research are very often far from the world of scientific investigation, making short term economic-strategic arguments, taking advantage of the state of the art on the one hand to depreciate the value of intellectual work on the other (not to speak of some unconscious jealousy). I wonder, anyway, why Nicholas Cook focuses so much on this as a “Beethovenian concept”. Let’s quote Johann Sebastian Bach, through the “testimony” of Anna Magdalena, who can not be suspected of being beethovenian: “I think that if all men were deaf, you would still write the same music”, I said once to him. — “Maybe, he answered laughing, and it seems to me a lot of them are so, but it is not forbidden to hope that some day they will hear a little better! And, as I write for my own pleasure, I ought not to take offence at their not loving what I do” (Anna Magdalena Bach, *La petite chronique d’Anna Magdalena Bach*, Paris, Buchet/Chastel, 1995, p. 201, translation from the French).

This leads us to the last topic I would like to point out. It is about the famous “crisis” of contemporary music. First, I notice that when Nicholas Cook (but he is not the only one) speaks about contemporary music, he speaks about composers that could be my grandfathers. Not a word about what is doing the new generation. Instead of that, the usual insistence on serialism. How are we supposed to understand the systematic association with “soundtracks for horror movies” (p. 47/44) and others clichés, if not as a reduction which has nothing to do with historical data. Boulez himself said that the generalised serialism did not last for more than one or two years. And I am not negating the importance of this movement by saying that. On the contrary. What has been so deeply wounded in our civilisation this music accounts for?... This is a true question, and we are indebted to “contemporary music” for its true answer, a kind of *catharsis*, that the neo-classic negationism was unable to conduct after the First World War.

Now, what does “being a composer” mean today? I am not writing serial music. I am not writing music for the *Spice girls* either (not that I cannot do it, but I am

not interested in doing it, even if I would get much richer doing so, which is not difficult). It would probably be nice to be famous world-wide, even if in fact nobody cares about who composed music for the *Spice girls*, because it could really be anybody, as it is such a standardised commercial product. Would it be *my* music? Definitely not! And this is the point. Nothing is more boring than the usual question following the declaration of being a composer: "And what kind of music do you write?". As if there was already a "kind of music" I am writing!

Today's ideology tries to deny individualism through a "global village" consensus that is in fact probably the most perverse imperialism that has ever been conceived. If there is something tremendously urgent to say about music, it is that music has a future, and this future will need a radically different kind of involvement than what is actually intended, even by the so-called new musicology. Many things has to change in our conceptions about music, and I truly agree with Nicholas Cook on this point. I also agree on his analysis of the main roots of the crisis of our thinking about music: thinking that music is made *of* time and that it does not need an external representation (p. 50/46). My own work as a musicologist is clearly engaged in giving music the opportunity to be understood by its own means, that is to say as an autonomous object, conscious about its condition. It is not independent of my preoccupations as a composer...

If there is no music in a vacuum, let's hope that there will not be too much of a vacuum in the music of future...²

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