

the tasks of a composer

tim hodgkinson, 2012.

In the report of its constituent session, Matei Socor, who had just (in 1949) been appointed President of the Romanian Composers' Union, underlined that "the tasks of the Union are clear as regards the re-education of certain artists accustomed to **bourgeois** aestheticizing criteria" and asked for "the imposition of the Party spirit in music". Vocal-symphonic pieces were preferred, for instance the oratorio Tudor Vladimirescu by Gheorghe Dumitrescu or the cantata for choir and orchestra Se construiește lumea nouă ("The New World Is Being Built") by George Draga, as well as revolutionary hymns such as "Îi mulțumim din inimă partidului" ("We Thank the Party from the Depths of our Hearts"), "Hei rup!" ("Heave-Ho!") or "Întreceri, întreceri, ciocane și seceri" ("Contests, Contests, Hammers and Sickles"). In the light or easy listening categories, hits included "Drag îmi e bădița cu tractorul" ("Sweet Little Fellow on a Tractor"), "Macarale râd în soare argintii" ("Silver Cranes Laughing in the Sun") and "Hai Leano la vot!" ("Come and Vote, Leana!"). From now on there would be only progressive composers and **bourgeois** composers. The latter would demonstrate cosmopolitan, decadent, formalist and obscurantist traits such as an attraction for abstract melody and dissonant harmony, and an infatuation for exotic, mythologic and other themes "having no connection whatever with our people". They would be pushed aside, confronted with their crimes at public meetings, and if necessary, sent to forced labour camps such as the ones for the Danube-Black Sea canal project (also known as the Death Canal).

And so things would more-or-less remain until the collapse of the regime in 1989, a brief liberalisation starting in the mid 60's being abruptly cut off by Ceausescu's notorious July Theses of 1971, inspired by the Chinese and, yes, North Korean Communist Parties.

There is an almost 360 degree reversal between that then and there and this here and

now as regards the meaning and usage of the concept of *bourgeois* that makes me want to say: Iancu Dumitrescu makes some of the most **anti-bourgeois** music I know. Our cultural environment today is that of vacuous affirmation and an easy connectivity by which anything can be exchanged for anything else. Against this, one vantage of an avantgardist stance is to inscribe negation and autonomy into its own immediate surface. In such a context, Dumitrescu's music is an insult, an outrage, an impossibility, a guest who refuses to mix.

But the term *bourgeois* cannot quite be made to stand for an entirely contemporary condition: boor-**zhwah**, *a person whose political, economic, and social opinions are believed to be determined mainly by concern for property values and conventional respectability*. It harks of a time when property values themselves could still sustain the illusion of that protestant rectitude so let slip by today's rich. And *conventional respectability* is a phrase itself so respectably conventional as to elicit a sense of the unsaid, a hidden and perhaps dangerous complexity of the underneath.

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Dumitrescu's music brings us into the presence of something that appears to be, or to represent in some way, Nature, or an aspect of it, as a universe of physical and dynamic conflicting forces, only this nature is not revealed in the usual way as turning out to reflect some predetermined meaning or epistemological need, but appears to follow its own ruthless and immanent laws. The specific burden of representation that Dumitrescu's music betrays is that of the bourgeois' secret admiration for nature as the only form of freedom and transcendence still possible in an already perfected form of society, namely capitalism.

Against this, consider that, *prima facie*, Dumitrescu's music IS profoundly regressive, redolent of primitivism in a way that the *Rites of Spring* was only footling at the edges of, a state of before musicness, in which it is only permissible to reference (not too often) the folk music of Romania - given exceptional status as the mystic crucible of East-meets-West. Consider also the discourse (not his, but Grisey's) that identifies spectralism with ecology, spectral music as a return to Nature.

The bourgeois holds a concealed admiration for Nature as a savage and instinctual

release from inhibition. The impulse of the most bourgeois art is not to maintain the surface of respectability but to open up the only possible zone of freedom - to make explicit and let rip the asocial violence of nature, because social revolution is a cognitive and psychic impossibility. Bourgeois art proposes, above all, an organisation of the psyche in which Nature is built up as an inner imaginary libido no longer able to hold onto an object of desire beyond that of being everything that society is not. All art has an anti-social component, but bourgeois art exacerbates this element into an imaginary release of the individual's repressed violence against society. Hence this art feeds in to the construction of the image of the savage, the anonymous nocturnal spontaneous primitive being which inhabits the heart of the racist and imperialist imagination.

This neo-Caudwellian argument converges somewhat with the position of Socor/Ceausescu. When Caudwell made his rapid move from Freud to Marx he tried to flip Freud's data out of psychology into sociology. All these approaches miss the main point that resonant art is not an expression of meanings generated elsewhere - whether in the Oedipus complex or in the class struggle. In what follows, I zigzag gradually from the level of discourse, made of meanings, the stuff that hangs around in concert halls after everyone's gone home, to the level of process and method.

As a side example, consider Jackson Pollock, whose work was toured by the CIA as an expression of individualist freedom antithetical to repressive socialist culture, reaching Romania at the height of Ceausescu's détente with the USA in 1969. But according to Jameson, abstract expressionism provided libidinal gratification in a world drained of it, and he meant the capitalist world (Jameson 1981, 48.) How can the same painting be interpreted as having two exactly opposite significations? Or rather, how can the project of reducing a work of art to its meaning permit itself such an arbitrary relationship to the causative environment? When I look at a Pollock, I don't have an experience which symbolises, or substitutes for, a libidinal gratification lacking in either capitalism or socialism. I have an enormous sense of gestural movement freed from the obligation to represent. What is being thrown off is the burden of representation.

In Dumitrescu's music the violence seems *prima facie* to come from the collision or

eruption of physical forces rather than biological or psychological ones. It is not, on the face of it, an expression of human violence let loose, but a vision of the implacable 'inhuman' violence of the cosmos. The cosmos not as human body or psyche. Or the cosmos, if you like, not as Gaia, mother, but as child-devouring Chronos.

So here is one important departure from that Parisian spectral mainstream which connects itself to ecologism. Ecologism is founded on the idea of redeeming humanity's fall from grace, and the state of grace is the homeostasis of the ecosystem of which we are part. The cosmos is ultimately nurturing and harmonious, if we can only find a way back to it by growing out of our infantile over-consumption of resources. But this rather glosses over the sheer inhumanity of the cosmos. After all, we could (though this scenario looks more and more far-fetched) reach a state of full integration with the planetary ecosystem, only to discover the next day that speeding towards us from outer space is an electromagnetic pulse big enough to extinguish all life on earth.

A further aspect of Grisey's ecologism is a notion of interconnectedness in which entities cannot fruitfully be considered as isolates because energies are constantly running through them: this is what he called 'an ecology of sound'. It is an old dream, not far off shamanic and not far off New-Age, in a George Harrison way true of course, but it's where you go with it: recognising that on a quantum level there is a ubiquitous network of energy-flows does not suddenly invalidate the array of entities brought forwards by our cognitive and sensory filters to match the needs of functional engagement. So it's what you want, or need, to do, that counts in determining how stuff is organised. Spectralists want to work with timbre, so they need a way of understanding what they are doing which is different from that of serialists. *A timbre possesses a priori a correlated ensemble of energies... therefore it explodes every sort of matrix or grid* (Grisey 1991,385) . Actually it simply replaces some kinds of grid with others. Grids of pitch are out, grids of overtones are in. Computers are re-deployed to digitise sound masses rather than arrays of series applied to diverse variables.

But the question of connections and isolates in music cannot be resolved by applying

a formula: the question is HOW we segment experience: we don't choose to segment or not segment incoming information any more than we choose whether to distinguish or not distinguish objects or events in the space-time around us. Hearing always involves isolating and interconnecting within the information flow, and a spectral approach to composition does not magically dissolve the way the human brain works. It is difficult to imagine what an actual absence of segmentation would be like. For example, under LSD or in dreams, things turn into other things before our eyes, but experience is still segmented. What we can do is make diverse kinds of art that stimulate different kinds of segmentation and their polyphonies and ambiguities. There is no way that less segmentation would be 'more natural' than more segmentation.

Note that the history of music theory is a history of successive interpretations and articulations of the naturality of music.

When the Parisian spectralists proclaimed their music as natural, IRCAM and the marriage of art to science under the aegis of Pierre Boulez were already well under way. Music's self-knowledge would now be centred in the study of the physical nature of sound: composing would become like doing science, in this case the science of overtone structures. But this is highly problematic. An entire panoply of new and problematic productive relations is introduced into the making of aesthetic work, and there is an inexhaustible tendency for artists to be deflected into technicalities so that the outcome is often aesthetically tired and gutless. Broadly, science is interested in the objectivity of procedures, and not interested in the experience of listening to music. Research is conducted in laboratory conditions that bear little or no relation to the totality of the experience of music listening. There is now a vast international efflorescence of well funded research programs which more or less have in common the dissolving of the aesthetic domain into complexes of human perceptual and cognitive processes which usually turn out to be entirely banal. This is more and more where the funding is going and it is tending to lock contemporary music into a narcissistic world of academic conferences and auto-commentary.

To pursue the question of objectivity and objective solutions, there is, first of all, never any necessary material in art: that is, what is chosen as material by a particular

tradition or work is contingent, because aesthetic work concerns transformative process and the working relationship towards the material. So the materiality, of, for example, the human body, the musical instrument, or 'sound itself' (more tricky to pin down, this one) is ultimately neither here nor there. There is nothing about the 'return of the body' that guarantees the production of deeper, more effective, more exciting aesthetic work. There is only the historical circumstance that, for a particular culture at a particular time, this move has been reenergising. I could suggest that the historical DE-materialisation of European composed music under its thousand year-long incubation within the Church (with its radical body-soul split) is the necessary precondition for the RE-materialisation of music to be liberating.

On the other hand you could argue that the resistance offered by material to the aesthetic idea is essential to the aesthetic process: so that historically it might be that 'material' tends to be defined in ever more concrete terms. At least the model for this resistance of the material in art is the physical resistance of the material world and the objects and forces that comprise it. (Though for that to be explicitly the case, the universe has already to have been disenchanted, and to be conceived materially. But the idea of natural law is older than the idea of a post-god universe, whether nature is seen as god's creation or as god's body being neither here nor there.)

But the point about art and nature is not that art is, or reflects, or embodies nature, but that art is sensory: it looks and listens, and this looking and listening is not functional in the way it's functional in the real everyday world in which perceptions are orientated to needs. So art is a slightly off-world domain in which fundamental world relations to do with how perceptions are connected are reconstructed differently. Music is about perception of sound in time, and time in sound. Sound and time are fundamental categories for worldly living. The first thing music does is to create a vocabulary of sounds carefully fenced off from all other, non-musical kinds of sounds, and separate out its kind of time from any other kind of time. But now comes in the *natural* argument. The autonomy of music seems to form a kind of ideological scandal which can only be overcome by music somehow being recuperated into ideology, not explicitly as a social construct, but as a natural phenomenon.

Two things, quickly. First, in older kinds of society, music is often sacred, and the

sacred is often nature conceived as a totality. Second, as we come into the period of European music history and an increasingly desacralised view of nature, we notice that the music-nature connection, although always quietly present, is explicitly deployed whenever and perhaps only whenever music confronts itself divided. In other words it is an argument deployed to support one kind of music against another. The Renaissance theorists used it against the Medieval composers whose works they were flinging out of their libraries. Grisey used it against the serialists, whose music, he argued, was grossly unnatural: our procedures (to paraphrase), as spectralists, are superior to yours because they are based on an understanding of natural harmonic systems: with us, music finally arrives at its own form of objectivity, not an abstract logical system, but a nurturing of organised processes that are already there in the concrete experience of sound. But I just am not persuaded that Anton Webern's music embodies a desiccated and quantified image of sound. These are simply loaded adjectives in which dryness and quantification equal unnatural equals bad. It doesn't seem to me that Webern's music is either more nor less natural than I am myself, it just is a music, and one that rises above the immediate circumstance of its creation - the form of Webern's antipathy to the world in general and to the world of composition in particular.

There is a generational thing going on here, and the structure and politics of Parisian generations don't apply in Romania. Dufourt, for the French spectralists, associates serialism with the destructiveness of industry and a modernist mentality that had once been revolutionary but that was now, like the PCF (the French Communist Party), an impediment to change. Spectralism stands associated with a post-1968 anti-institutionalist left geared to a new post-industrial society. Grisey fills this out by suggesting that serialism corresponds to the levelling out from above imposed by the old kind of state socialism, with neo-tonality as a rightist reversion to a hierarchical class society, and spectralism bursting in on this binary opposition with a new proposal that is both non-coercive and non-hierarchical. The G-spot of spectralism is the instrumental synthesis of the partials of a single sound, in which we arrive at something which is neither quite fused (as in the perception of the timbre of a single note) nor quite separated out into components (as in the perception of a chord made up of several pitches.) (Grisey 1998, 296)

There is a further implicit level to this claim that 'my music is more natural than your music'. Which is that whatever can be shown to be immanent to the medium will strengthen its aspect of being a thing unto itself, an object, with the strength and autonomy of an object, as against a (social) relation, a vehicle, the expression of social impulses originating elsewhere.

Against this, I could try perversely arguing that Dumitrescu's music IS (merely) the expression of a social impulse, namely the wish-dream of the cataclysmic collapse of the Stalinist state in its Romanian manifestation. After all, many of his most intense life-experiences were bound up with the pressures and afflictions imposed by the regime and their endless repercussions on intimate and family life: he specifically recalls a traumatic dream of exploding glass whilst doing his military service and how this dream leads to one of the great early pieces *Pierres Sacrées*. If this is true, does it make him unique amongst composers from the Eastern block, in terms of his letting rip an explicit rage against the machine? Let's say that perhaps this dimension is there. But the interesting thing in Dumitrescu's trajectory is the rare combination of *fortuna* and *virtu*, because this one doesn't play the victim at any point. He will tell you what it was like, things that will make you feel bad inside, but it's almost as if he's not complaining, because he knows that in the wider pattern of things he has been able to use this experience. And it's this 'knowing how to use' the accidents of circumstance which is the *virtu*, and which lifts a serious artist out from the level on which art can be said to be (merely) the expression of social forces originating elsewhere. So even with the collapse of the Stalinist dystopia ringing in our ears we sense another agenda.

Dumitrescu uses drama. He *uses* the violent disintegration of sound material. He *uses* the willfulness of authority and the violence of classical hierarchy against his players. He *uses* the struggle of the avantgarde artist against society, the contempt of the creative mind for the circumstantial world. He *uses* the physical human gestures of priesthood and alchemy. He uses whatever he can and resists being pinned to any level on which any of this defines him. He may be religious, but he is careful to say: My music works *as if* there were something mystical. As such he is engaged in a complex mediation of what music is and what composing is. He appears in classical concerts but stands partly outside the scene. Virtually unable to perform on stage in Ceausescu's Romania, he seizes on the medium of recording and becomes one of the

few composers to seriously address its potentials. Realising that music audiences are reconfiguring in new ways, he goes straight for it, and without compromising one jot. This is not a composer who will incorporate references to another music into his work to gain access to its audience.

In the sense that he has been fully able to take possession of all these dimensions thrown at him by circumstance, he emerges from the pack of drifters as a stayer, dealt a crap hand and playing it to hell.

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There is something very French and very refined about the Parisian school. They see spectralism as a way of exploring certain kinds of delicate arrangements: their calculations are no less byzantine than those of Babbitt.

Historically, the ideas of process and continuous change came before the real spectral work. For me, this fascination with transforming objects and creating hybrids was always there: it's almost congenital. I think retrospectively that this idea, coupled with the importance I (and others) place on working with harmony in a way that completely controls it – giving strength to the formal construction – were the basic ideas of spectral music (Murail, 2000, p.7).

Murail, composing, begins from a stable musical sonority and transforms it, step by step, into another one. He first pins the sonority down by analysing its overtones, mapping the changing volume of each frequency through time. Dumitrescu begins with something more elusive and more unstable, something more like a sonorous behaviour, with an ergonomic counterpart formed of instrument and player. The object does not need, so to speak, to be transformed from the outside, because it is already potentially rushing, sliding or juddering towards another state of itself. It has been chosen for this reason, for its inner life. Sound is on the fly. The sounding system is unstable. The analysis is not scientific, as in Murail, but phenomenological. Whilst Murail is getting out his graph paper, Dumitrescu is trying to seize his sound without any kind of categorical preconception: he is developing a relation between his sound and his consciousness that will at a certain point lead him to a perception on the one

hand of the inner forces of the sound as dynamic vectors in a state of tension, and on the other of the form of the sound as graspable. Only when he knows his sound well enough does he begin to compose out its inner tensions, drawing out an extended sonorous field whose repercussions may in turn be constructed, folded, repeated, negated and transformed. But all the time he is dealing with sound as magma, as the thing that is already, itself, becoming something else, either by means of sudden and violent reversal, or by gradual slippage or dissolving. And this is absolutely core. He never leaves his sound, he never lets it get away from him, he never loses it to any kind of procedure or any kind of structural thinking coming from anywhere else. And in this way he is giving his sound an unusual depth. Just as magma is like it is because it has the inner forces of the earth working in it, Dumitrescu's sound is the way it is because of the generosity of imagination he must vest in it.

There is a peculiar and pressing presence of the player in this, which is not so in the case of Murail. The player required by Dumitrescu's music cannot be pinned down absolutely, where in Murail the player is so pinned down - a function of notated actions and/or results. Even though the Parisians railed against notation (*The sound has been confused with its representations... Since these symbols are limited in number, we quickly come up against the wall...* (Murail, 1984, p.158)), they never radicalised the concept of notation: they are still writing what the player has to play. Dumitrescu's scores are more about eliciting particular reactions from the musicians who will read them. For him, the musicians are vectors of hope. Essentially the musician is thrown back into herself by the score, the score does not make sense, it is a cryptogram of impossibility: the very starting point is the demand for the impossible. This is a million miles from difficulty. Difficulty is where the musician grasps, or at least begins to grasp. that there is some technical problem demanding days and weeks of careful step by step deconstruction and re-assemblage of the already known. Impossibility demands looking for something un-named. It requires, furthermore, nurturing this unknown un-named until the very last possible moment, until, in fact, THE actual moment in the actual performance of the actual piece, because only at this actual moment will the composer-conductor know this unknown and give the temporal and dynamic flux in which the musician makes the move. But even here, there is no one right way to play a particular nexus of musical signs on the page because the total situation and moment will be different each time, and there is

the idea of a surpassing adequacy to this unrepeatably moment such that the thing will become extraordinary. This is the ambition. And the ways to realise this ambition are subtle and ambiguous: there will not be enough rehearsal time, musicians in a group will try to do what is wanted and the what-is-wanted will have to be put in such a way that their professional and banal character, the aperture of their attentions, the ease of their collectivity, can be tricked so that they themselves are surprised by what they do. The players' rediscovery of the piece and of themselves within the here and now of performance, although very quick, is the counterpart, in performance, to the phenomenological reduction applied in defining the original material, because it too strips away pre-understandings, and the performance, like the composition, is not an unfolding of a pre-existing knowledge.

On the level of method, it is phenomenology that separates Dumitrescu from the French school. Phenomenology sets out to examine phenomena as they are originally given to consciousness without any kind of prejudgement about an object's objective or physical character. Almost exactly the opposite of spectralism then, which sets out to base music in the physical nature of sound. What this *as they are originally given to consciousness* actually means in practice is hard to pin down. Consciousness is indeed usually unoriginal, habitual, busy in its own history: the kinds of things it is busy with are an outcome both of biological evolution and of an individual mental development conditioned by a historical society. So phenomenology proposes a procedure of blanking or bracketing out this normal busy behaviour of consciousness. This will set aside (so far as possible) anything like the meaning or connotation or value of the thing, or any question about to which category it belongs. Ultimately, in practice, there is no final arrival at the pure stripped down experience: what there is is an experience from which the mediating factors of meaning or value or category are progressively being sliced away. It is the structure of this process itself which will then, for a philosopher engaged in phenomenology, illuminate the basic and general structure of experience on which meanings, values and categories are subsequently scaffolded.

A musician, on the other hand, doesn't have the project of deriving a universal truth, and asks for something else from phenomenology: a way of organising sound that respects how sounds are experienced, not how science tells us that they objectively

are, and not how music tells us that they should be. The phenomenological focus on timbre comes because working with timbre enables you to get rid of the music, that is, to strip away all the stuff like pitch and rhythm that has hitherto (in the European tradition) given musical meaning or value to sounds. In this sense a music actually based from the start in phenomenology has to be an anti-music, it has to break down musical language. What is being destroyed in Dumitrescu's music is the accretion of musical language per se, and the immanent violence of the work, the recurrent splitting apart or explosive flying apart of the sonic textures, is the refusal of sound as a continuously purified experience to submit to syntactic organisation from the outside, and its constant fragmentation into agrammatic and aphonetic elements in oppositional and apophatic relation to any emergent musical vocabulary. This is a music that constantly struggles to return the listener to a hypothetical original experience of sound itself. From this derive both its spiritual component and its infantile regressive component. With regard to the latter, J-L Nancy has stressed the centrality of sound to the constitution of the subject in childhood, noting that experience of timbre is the mother sound that precedes the 'sense' of melodic pitches.

Nevertheless, the other half of the dialectic is present in that even the exclusion of certain types of material, such as melodic figures and diatonic chords, tends, given the limitations of extended techniques on orchestral instruments, computerised sound production with particular sound qualities when projected through loud speakers, and the recurrence of visual elements in the notated parts, to become a language, in the sense of forming a stock which tends to develop a relational syntax in which certain kinds of thing happen before or after certain other kinds of thing.

You might think that trying to get back to a fundamental original experience would involve in some way getting outside of time and space. And phenomenology is indeed regularly accused of promoting an ahistorical view of the human condition. But there is a paradox here, in the fact that the original experience of something can equally be thought as the full manifestation of that thing in all its immediate and unique detail, because it is its uniqueness that we are getting at when we remove everything else. And uniqueness is not only necessarily within time and space (as the dimensions of comparison) but entirely within time and space, in the sense that uniqueness is that quality of a phenomenon that situates it very very precisely only where and only when

it happens. The phenomenological stripping away in fact brings us not up and away to the abstract and general, but back and down to a here and now that is more intensely circumstantial than before.

Two important points flow from this. First, Dumitrescu is the first composer to apply such a phenomenology from the beginning of the composing process, choosing often unstable sounds, whose occurrence already contains the danger of uniqueness, that is, the threat that a unique and unrepeatable element might pose to any kind of formal organisation, and carrying this through into his right-for-its-time-and-place performance aesthetic by which the actual sounds should be different on every iteration because this uniqueness, this truth to the moment, at work not only in the original selection of the material, but also in the actual live performance in which the listeners constitute a part of the total here and now, is exactly the necessary risk to take for the extraordinary to happen.

Second, Dumitrescu is not engineering a transcendence, as, say, Scelsi might be said to be attempting, so much as setting up, via an intensification of the here and now, the anthropological conditions for a ritual negotiation with a difficult, wilful and unpredictable deity, the one known to old time religion, and who then got written out of the sacred books, the actual arrival of the god being an event that always may or may not happen, and whose actual occurrence is therefore relegated to the level of metaphorical possibility, which is exactly where it should be in art.

These remarks should not be taken to mean that I know what goes on inside Dumitrescu. The discussion is about music. In so far as I have a philosophy of art it would contain the proposition that art's power requires a degree of autonomy from signification, so that even when we steer very close to meaning, we have to keep a tiny but careful distance from it. This, it seems to me, is exactly what Dumitrescu was saying when he said the words I quoted earlier : *My music works as if there were something mystical*. The risk undertaken in the music stands for the metaphysical indetermination that allows Dumitrescu's art to breathe - because art is not a vehicle or expression of meanings put together on some other level. The *unpredictable deity* is of course the risked realisation of a musical event that is completely true to all its conditions. This corresponds more or less to a feeling I've had sometimes in concerts

when the music ends and I think: *for once we did it!*

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