

## The Beautiful Woman in the Fish Pond: Difficulties in Communicating Musical Truth(s)

*In 1988-89 Lombardi lived for a year in Berlin (West) as Fellow of the Advanced Studies Institute. (Another guest at the Institute was his friend and compatriot Luigi Nono.) The text here was his Fellow Lecture at the Institute.*

When I recently visited a composer-friend of mine who manages a festival of new music in a city in Northern Italy and asked him how the festival was going, he looked distressed: The interest of audiences had declined so much that he felt compelled to rethink the concept of the event; at first people had come in great numbers because they were curious to know about new music, but meanwhile they had gotten to know it, and for that reason they did not come any more.

Obviously, the relationship between new music and audiences is difficult, so difficult in fact that information can worsen rather than improve the situation. What makes matters appear even worse is that new music frequently encounters a lack of understanding with educated persons, even those with a musical education. Something is fishy in the realm of tones! But what? Is the music, the composer to be blamed? Is it the audience, its lethargy? Or should a third party be found guilty?

Unfortunately, it is not only the new music which is complicated, but the many and multifaceted causes which have contributed to today's situation are also complicated. Thus, it is not possible to name *the* reason which has disturbed the relation between producer and recipient, and it is even less appropriate to propose a solution to a situation which neither composer nor listener like and for which neither is responsible. For *the* music, including *the* new music, is a mirage. On the contrary, there are a multitude of languages, styles, and composers that cannot be subsumed under one rubric. This has been the case, in principle, in previous ages, but even more so today since we are aware of the plurality of cultures, and this awareness extends in several directions: vertically (pertaining to our own European/Western cultural orbit) as well as horizontally (encompassing the rest of the world).

New in this century, for instance, is the division between "serious" and "entertainment music" (whereby the latter is a catch-all for a multitude of very different musical practices). The same is true of the multifaceted universe of new, so-called serious music, which divides into different directions and projects. As long as we still could believe in the world spirit—arriving either on horseback or in the guise of a twelve-tone machine—it was possible to speak of a main path of new music. This path begins with Wagner's *Tristan* and continues with Mahler, Schoenberg, and Webern to integral serialism of the 1950s and, beyond, to those manifestations nourished by it even today. This is not completely wrong but only defines *one*, albeit important, strand. I consider such linear, teleological form of writing music history utterly problematic. But even if we assume that there is something like an expressway of new music, less traveled country roads are often not only more pleasant but also can lead us to more interesting discoveries.

If we look at new music from a bird's eye perspective, however, we can, in a rough outline, distinguish between two big camps: music which (still) functions as a language, and music which does not do so (any longer).

Language is an intersubjective abstract communication system (and here the adjective "intersubjective" needs to be stressed). What is not intersubjective does not function as language—whereby I do not want to exclude the possibility that it could become one.

Tonality and the major-minor harmonic system is a language. As does every language, it undergoes constant change: thus we can distinguish the tonal language of Haydn, Mozart, and the young Beethoven, of early Romanticism, of late Romanticism, and so on. A language consists of a reservoir of signs and meanings (*langue*) from which every composer can fashion his individual voice (*parole*). Even after tonality was renounced by the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg and his students), it did not cease to exist; in fact, it determines, to a large extent still, our musical experiences today—be it in the form of the often shriveled structures of entertainment music or in the music of the Classic-Romantic tradition which is almost exclusively heard in concert halls. Important composers of the twentieth century have continued to use tonality—among them Stravinsky, Hindemith, Weill, and Shostakovich. During the last two decades there has been in the whole world an increasing return to tonality or to some of its components; this suggests that the cultural tradition of tonality is so strong that it cannot be quickly replaced by another one. It looks as if this trend will continue to co-exist with others.

The suspension of functional harmony (in other words, of that hierarchical system that regulates chord successions in classical tonality) had led, already with Debussy, to a weakening of goal-directedness [in music]. The dissolution of the musical syntax produces the impression of stasis. Development is replaced by repetition or a quasi-centrifugal explosion of events into many different directions. Music, an art organized in time, tends to become an art that unfolds in space. This is obvious to a much greater degree with Webern than with Debussy. Webern appears, ambivalently positioned, at the beginning of a qualitatively new phase of modern music. On the one hand, he is the fulfillment of the Western tradition which is preserved (and completely assimilated) in virtually every measure of his music; on the other hand, he introduces the period of a radically new music which constitutes itself no longer as an intersubjective language. Such music is anything but arbitrary; on the contrary, it is based (as was the case also with music espousing total serialism in the 1950s that derived from Webern) on a complicated and strict system of what to do and what not to do. But it is a system of rules that cannot be presupposed to be known by the listener; indeed, often it cannot even be fathomed by the listener. Serial composers may have nurtured the hope that the new system, over the long run, would be generally accepted. But that did not happen. The system has either been rejected, for instance, through the chance music of John Cage, which—surprisingly—arrived at the same musical results—not through the rigorous techniques of serialism but through aleatoric operations. (Perhaps not a surprise at all but a premise of information theory: When everything can be expected, nothing in particular is expected, which in turn lowers the informational content and, by extension, blindfolds the listener who cannot distinguish anything in the ensuing darkness: All cats look grey at night.) Or the system has split into a myriad of private techniques, resulting in music's *de facto* resignation from being a form of communication.

I think it is especially this type of music which causes the difficulties. Music which abandons its language character induces the layman to say: "I do not understand this any longer." And he is right and wrong at the same time. Right because he notices that, unlike traditional music, there is no linguistic code that would allow him to follow a logical musical discourse; wrong because he does not know that there is nothing to be understood—unless we mean by "understanding" the recreation of the constructive principles of the composer, something which is neither possible nor necessary in the act of listening, but which can be accomplished through analysis. This kind of music, of course, is music for specialists, clearly something legitimate, but we should not mistake the concert hall for a musical research laboratory. How did a music disconnected from language emerge? And why was new music unable to develop an intersubjective form of communication?

First, the crisis of music begins with its secularization. Music which emancipates itself from serving court and church becomes *modern*, but it loses at the same time its social function, a

purpose which is only partly compensated by the development of concert life. The social function recedes into the background in favor of aesthetic reception. The practical function of music gives way to the composer's need for expression and confession. This process, which began with Beethoven (at the latest), still continues today.

Second, historicism (a mode of inquiry emerging in the nineteenth century) leads to the discovery of the music of the past. Not only contemporary music is being performed but also (and nowadays especially) the music of previous masters. This historical attitude has increased in our century through the means of technical reproduction to such an extent that now 90% of all music performed in the concert hall is music of the past. New music thus lacks the social function as well as the need to be heard, since audiences are satisfied with two hundred years of music. (The music performed today was, roughly speaking, composed between 1700 and 1900.)<sup>1</sup> Third, there is an ever-widening gap between serious and entertainment music. Unlike other eras, the "serious" composer is permitted to delegate the needs for entertainment to a caste of musicians, who are especially singled out for such tasks and who, in his eyes, are of a lower rank.

The fourth reason has to do with the application of the concept of progress in musical matters. This belief in progress developed at a time in which scientific and technical progress increasingly informed one's world view. Sometimes art was confused with science in a rather naïve fashion, whereby musical progress was identified solely with the technical aspect of composition. This pathos of progress has contributed to the increasing acceleration with which the traditional linkage of music to language was altered and overcome, resulting in the emergence of a music divorced from language. Even though skepticism about the idea of progress, not only in music, has increased, there are still many composers today who adhere to this positivist tradition. Granted, it is legitimate to use means provided to music by new technology, but it is nonsense to make the aesthetic "justification" of a composition depend on this or that device. "You can make music also with a laurel leaf," a friend once told me. Music is a type of thinking that articulates itself in tones—what kinds of tones are used to turn this thinking into a concrete manifestation is relatively unimportant. But it is significant that my friend, even though he reduced his instrumental aspirations drastically, selected a laurel leaf—in other words, an object associated with recognition and honor—rather than a more prosaic cabbage leaf. Let's sum it up: The means of producing sounds are not completely irrelevant, but it does not make sense to link the aesthetic legitimacy of a composition to the nature of the material, to whether a violin or a computer are used. Music means manipulating relations between acoustical events. Whether these events consist of sixteenth notes or perfect octaves is completely irrelevant for the stringency of the compositional process.

Finally, there is yet another factor that should not be underestimated. What we know and hear of the music of the past is the result of a process of historical filtering. What has come down to us is a fraction of what has been composed. We are not willing to listen to all pieces of even the greatest composers, not to mention those who appear to us today as insignificant or forgotten, even though they may have been famous during their time. For obvious reasons we cannot apply such a filter in the case of new musical productions. Whatever is being composed today demands, initially at least, to be heard, even though most may be considered a *corpus delicti* in prosecuting the authors of such music for stealing irretrievable hours of life from their listeners.

In view of all these factors, it is really a miracle that a kind of music exists which does not fulfill a social function, does not satisfy the aesthetic needs of the audiences, and, furthermore, lacks an

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<sup>1</sup> [The canon of orchestral music performed in the United States differs from that listed by Lombardi as typical for European orchestras. In fact, the symphony orchestras in North America feature very little Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart, but frequently present works by Debussy, Ravel, Sibelius, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich.]

entertaining character. And yet, quite a lot of new music is composed and performed today. It seems that the need of humans to produce and to hear something new is stronger than the crisis in the relation between music and audience generated by social and historical processes. But it also must be said that in recent times composers have searched with greater awareness for ways to establish new contacts with the listener. One indication for this quest is the recall of various forms of tonality or, more generally speaking, of a music structured clearly along polarities, i.e., toward points of reference. Schoenberg justified the presence of audiences during performances of new music by saying that an empty hall does not sound well. Today's composers are more and more convinced that the presence of an audience does more than improve the acoustics.

The differentiation between music that is similar to language and music that is divorced from it is, of course, a simplification. There are many in-between areas in which both types are present. Thus, a piece which basically follows a linear structure (with a clear beginning, a development with or without climax, and a marked closure) can exhibit elements of stasis when time is suspended, as it were, and the listener's attention is focused, regardless of what comes before and after, on the sonorous moment—a moment which also can be quite lengthy. By the way, this is an experience which, to certain extent, only new music has made possible, namely the acceleration and retardation of time. The more we concentrate on individual sound events, the more we become aware of the stretching of time. Thus, a single tone can be a microcosm which wants to be explored as if under a microscope, comparable to a drop of water which contains an entire world to be discovered. Vice versa, moments of a clearly developmental nature can occur in a piece which is non-linear, essentially static, and which basically lacks beginning and closure. I am interested in both possibilities, the linguistic-linear as well as non-linguistic, centrifugal, fragmentary.

An example for a language-oriented linear kind of music is the first movement entitled "Gradus de Parnasso" from a three movement composition for two pianos.<sup>2</sup> This movement represents an exclusive compositional attitude; it excludes, as far as the selection of the material is concerned, many other possibilities, because I fashioned it from only two elements: a six-note scale and a five-note chord (see Example II, 6)

#### EXAMPLE II, 6: Basic Material of *Klavierduo*

The scale can be replicated several times, whereby the figures generated in this way can vary in length (in my case from one to 144 notes); it can ascend or descend and be played at different speeds. From the five-note chord I generated, by means of inversion and selection of the resultant aggregates, thirteen additional chords. Since the original chord does not consist of stacked thirds (a building principle of tonal music), its inversion reveal much greater differences than would be the case with traditional chords consisting of three, four, or five tones (see Example II, 7).

#### EXAMPLE II, 7: *Klavierduo* (p.9)

These chords are characterized by varying degrees of harmonic tension; they are, simply put, more or less dissonant.

This is something very important for me, namely how an object can be transformed into something else, not by changing its components but simply by reordering them. My five-tone chord and its

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<sup>2</sup> Luca Lombardi, *Klavierduo* (Milano: Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1983).

derivatives are not used like the building blocks in traditional music; therefore, they are not combined with each other according to the syntactic principles of tonal music. Their succession is determined, depending on the result I am striving for, either by statistical principles of permutation or on the basis of subjective selection. Here are two examples for the different usages of the chords. The first example shows a succession generated by aleatoric-statistical permutations (see Example II, 8). For the second example I select a chord which generates an entire section consisting of 15 measures (see Example II, 9).

EXAMPLE II, 8: *Klavierduo* (p.10)

EXAMPLE II, 9: *Klavierduo* (p.20)

The piece, as I said earlier, is language-oriented. But what establishes the language-character of a composition which does not follow any conventional syntax, any kind of major-minor tonality? It is to be found, I think, in the compositional procedure which distributes musical energy, which regulates tension, release, and the succession of contrasting sections of different kinds in general, and which generates coherence between individual events. This piece follows a musical logic with all the surprises and associative leaps which differentiate this logic from other kinds. The music is not to be predictable, but plausible.

The scale, like the chord, changes its appearance as well, depending on how and in which context it is used. A scale is not merely a scale but a material from which different sonorous objects can be fashioned. When I play the beginning of the piece in slow tempo, it comes across like an insignificant etude. But when I accelerate the tempo, there is a switch from quantity to quality. The object is transformed: Individual notes are no longer important; important is the overall effect which may be likened to a sonorous carpet or curtain (see Example II, 10).

EXAMPLE II, 10: *Klavierduo* (p.1)

The scale thus far has been heard in different registers (high, low, medium) and always softly. But when I perform it only in the low register, in slow tempo and forte throughout, it gets a completely different meaning and, perhaps, can no longer be identified with the original scale (see Example II, 11).

EXAMPLE II, 11: *Klavierduo*, p.24

By suddenly interrupting the thunderous texture and exposing the scale in its naked simplicity, the piece, which seemed to end dramatically, takes a turn to the humorous and ironic.

Changing perspectives are, for me, decisive as a composer. I look at an object from different angles and make a discovery. Even though it is the same object, it always reveals different aspects. I do not want to move from the relatively harmless realm of music to the minefield of philosophy, but I have to say that I can relate to the axiom (formulated, however, not by a philosopher, but by the physicist Niels Bohr) that the opposite of one truth is another truth.

The problem of a multitude of standpoints or truths is represented, in a quasi programmatic way, by another direction of contemporary music. Let me call it *inclusive* to differentiate it from the *exclusive* compositional position just described. By this I mean the inclusion of several codes (styles) in one and the same work. Such an inclusive piece is *La canzone di Greta*.<sup>3</sup> It is based on Edoardo Sangineti's *Faus: Un travestimento*, a transformation of Goethe's *Faust I*—in this case, of the passage known through Schubert's song *Gretchen am Spinnrad*. I use different stylistic means in the piece. My point of departure is the piano figuration of Schubert's song (see Example II, 12a), and I change Schubert into a minimalist, bringing him close to American minimalist music (see Example II, 12b).

EXAMPLE II, 12a: Schubert, *Gretchen am Spinnrade*

EXAMPLE II, 12b: *Canzone di Greta* from *Faus: Un travestimento*, mm.870-90

Another component from Schubert, namely a chord, is transformed by means of inversion into several chords which are harmonically and semantically completely different. Schubert's accompanimental figure accompanies Greta on a journey through different stylistic landscapes. There are several stylistic layers, tonal and atonal, including even some stylized rock music.

In inclusive music, style becomes a kind of parameter among others (pitch, duration, register, etc.). The different styles underscore in this piece the oscillating character of Greta, who is not treated by Schubert and me as a precise unified personality but as an agglomeration of several different characters, and the different historical perspectives and contexts from which Greta can be viewed would allow this kind of mirroring to continue at will.

The problem of inclusive music has occupied me during the last fifteen years again and again. The use of different styles and codes is nothing new. In literature there are some early, albeit isolated, examples: *Don Quixote* by Cervantes and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In music the integration of heterogeneous elements begins to assume an important role with Mahler. In his music, the fringes of the officially sanctioned culture, including the trivial and the banal, claim their rights with insistence. In an even more emphatic way this is true of Charles Ives: Folk music, the European classical tradition, and avant-garde experiments become for him legitimate means of expression, which he uses as a composer in a compelling, albeit completely unreflected, way. It is no accident that both composers were contemporaries out of tune with their times; and it is also no accident that their time did not come until the experience of a culture supported by mass-media made listeners receptive to such works.

In inclusive music, as I envision it, the conventional unity of a piece, which [always] has a touch of false harmony and reconciliation, is given up in favor of a multiplicity of different perspectives. Being polycentric rather than concentric, labyrinthian rather than linear, it represents not one truth but several complementary truths. Similarities to the real world are neither accidental nor unintended, because the contradictions reflected and embedded in music (music understood here as a process of cognition) point toward precisely such reality. In this multiversum—a term of William James taken over by Ernst Bloch to grasp the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous—the different materials, techniques, and languages have the same rights. Even major-minor tonality has its justification, as classical physics was preserved, not replaced, by quantum physics. It is the task of the composer to establish a significant and musically compelling relation for the different means

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<sup>3</sup> Luca Lombardi, *La canzone di Greta* (Milano: Ricordi, 1987).

and styles.

I am unable to predict to what extent this compositional position may contribute to bridging the gulf between new music and audience. In any case, the position has nothing to do with restoration; it is, on the contrary, a post-modern attitude, an attitude that retains the core of modernity (which one could describe as the deconstruction of an all-encompassing rationality) and raises it to a new level of historical consciousness. Such an inclusive approach to composition, of course, cannot prevent a listener from selecting just parts of the work, thereby losing sight of their relation to the whole, nor prevent the listener from being superficially satisfied with tonal and consonant passages, thereby completely missing the meaning of a compositional strategy which uses tonality, among other elements, quasi enclosed in quotation marks. What matters is indeed the relation between the individual layers that balance and qualify each other.

In the final analysis, of course, everybody will hear in a piece what he can hear and wants to hear. Not everything will please everybody. Not everything can and should please, as the following story from the Zen tradition exemplifies: A very beautiful woman lived in a village; she was so beautiful that all its inhabitants desired her. One day this beautiful woman jumped into a pond—and the fishes were frightened.

[Source: *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*, XLIV,9 (September 1990), 754-64.]