

On the Meaning of Music

The essay is the first installment of what at one time may become a book entitled On the Meaning of Music, or Why Music?

In the Charlie Chaplin film *Limelight* there is a wonderful dialog between the old clown Calvero and the young dancer he saved from a suicide attempt:

Dancer: Why didn't you let me die?

Calvero (drunk): What's the hurry? Are you in pain? (The dancer shakes her head.)

Calvero: That's all that matters, the rest is fantasy. Millions of years it's taken to evolve human consciousness, and you want to wipe it out. What about the miracle of all existence—more important than anything in the whole universe! What can the stars do?! Nothing! They can sit on their axis. And the sun? Shooting flames two hundred eighty thousand miles high! So what! Wasting all its natural resources. Can the sun think? Is it conscious? No! But you are. (The dancer has fallen asleep ...) Pardon me my mistake.¹

To prepare this lecture I have interrupted work on my opera, to be entitled *Prospero*, the text of which is based on Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Before I ask myself why I compose at all—in other words, what is the meaning of making music for me personally—I must ask myself why I am giving a lecture about the meaning of music—that is, what it means for me to write about the meaning of music. The question is easy to answer. For some time now I have been entertaining the idea of writing a little book, if possible, in a style comprehensible for non-specialists as well, which gives an account of what is important about music for a contemporary composer, for a composing contemporary—in this concrete case, for me personally. And not only about the music that I write, but also the music that I hear. This lecture is an occasion for me to formulate my first thoughts on the topic. Why I want to tackle the topic rather than any other, when there are so many other topics related to music, is another question that may not be so easy to answer. I could certainly restrict myself to writing about composing, which is difficult enough. Why don't I? Is composing perhaps not enough for me? Is it not so important for me that I want to dedicate my entire energy to it? Or is the very reason that composing is so important for me that I want to better understand why it is so important for me? Or: Is theorizing more important for me than practical activity? (To the extent that it can be claimed that composing is practical activity.) As regards this last question, I believe that theory cannot be separated from practice, although it is also clear that the composer is first and foremost supposed to compose, or, as the case may be, what is composed should enjoy primacy over what is theoretically thought, at least for me.

The fact that I selected such a topic certainly also has to do with the time, namely with its passing, or, more precisely, with getting older. The time is coming in which one asks the fundamental questions of life: What do I actually want? What is the most important thing in life for me? Why am I the way I am? Or, even more generally: Why do I exist? What is it all about, or is something at all? My God, these are questions!—whereby this exclamation does not ring true, because, if I had a God I could call upon and upon whom I could rely, it would all be considerably easier. The problem begins with the fact that I am unfortunately not religious. I may not be religious, but I am also not a-religious. For *religio* actually means connection, or cohesion—and, indeed, I am of the opinion that all living beings and all non-living subjects are somehow connected. What I mean to say is that I feel that there are flowing boundaries between all living and—perhaps only apparently?—non-living things in our world, and that there is a fundamental unity.² Someone who does not belong to one of the many religions at our disposal—all of which are essentially related, of course—may perhaps feel an even greater urge to ponder the meaning of his activities and of human

¹ [Transcribed from *Limelight* (1952): The Chaplin Collection (Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2003).]

² Cf., for instance, W. Welsch, "Reflecting the Pacific", in: *Contemporary Aesthetics*, www.contempaesthetics.org.

existence in general. Whether he finds a plausible answer to these questions is another issue. Yet the span of time we are given is short, and considering that death is approaching inevitably, it becomes more and more important to ask oneself what one would like to do with the time left. So you ask the essential questions, that is, the questions about the nature of existence. And this, of course, includes also the question about the meaning of what one's purpose in life is—in my case: music.

I would like to split the question implicitly contained in the title into two parts, namely one as to what it means for me to hear music; and the second, as to what it means for me to write music. I will start with the second part. Why do I write music? I could answer: because I cannot do anything else, or because composing is what I do best. Yet this answer would not get at the core of the question. First, I could imagine doing something else; and second, the decision about becoming a composer was already settled at a point in time (namely, on the day of my tenth birthday, when I made up my first composition, a waltz in C minor) before I could know whether there was anything else I could do as well or as badly, or in any case not better. For whatever reasons, the longing to make music was predominant already then. I gave in to this longing and over these many years have acquired a degree of artistic skill that allowed me to practice this profession my whole life long, and even to live from it. What is this longing? What is this profession or “calling”? (in German “Beruf” means profession and derives from “rufen” or call). I don't believe that it has anything to do with being “called upon” to do what one believes to do best (who does the calling?); rather, one does what one considers most important, something that bestows meaning to one's life. The motivations involved in someone's striking out on a certain path are extremely varied and generally cannot even be reconstructed after the fact. Not to exclude the possibility that they have to do with experiences that you already made in the womb. Especially as far as music is concerned, acoustic perception can be decisive at the earliest age, all the way back to the foetal stage.³ Also important are feeling of success in childhood, which brings me to a personal recollection. All in all, I will keep this lecture as personal as possible, as I cannot answer for theoretical notions, but only for what I have experienced myself. When all is said and done, it doesn't matter what one says, but rather what one does—and I think that's the only subject to be discussed in a well-founded and authentic manner. Thus, as a child I had developed a certain skill in playing well-known songs on the harmonica—a skill that made me successful with the Boy Scout troop I was a member of at the age of eight or nine. I was also successful when I started playing a piano that stood around at home, mute and dusty, picking out familiar melodies and even inventing short pieces like the birthday waltz I mentioned above. These successes and rewards were probably so important to me because I wasn't so successful in other areas like playing soccer with kids my age or in school, which became very difficult for me when my parents sent me to the German school in Rome at the age of ten when I didn't speak a single word of German. Our teacher was a musician and became my first piano teacher. He supported me in my attempts to compose and encouraged me to play my pieces for the class. When he found out that I had been introduced to the great Paul Hindemith—the most famous German composer at the time—as the youngest Italian composer, I had made it, at least as far as my musical career at the German school was concerned.

In addition to the experience of success, however, what counted was my pride in being able to prove my seriousness and stamina. When I insisted to my parents that they should let me take piano lessons, my mother said it would end up just like it did with my stamp collection, namely that after three months I would have had enough of the piano, too. Well, the fact that I still remember my mother's skepticism nearly fifty years later certainly means something. Is it conceivable that I became a composer to prove to my mother and to myself that I am capable of being steadfast and of sticking with a decision once I've made it? Why not. The paths of providence are infinite. In this case composing also—and not least—was important to show my parents and myself (hence the superego and the ego) that I am a person to be taken seriously, someone who is reliable because he is able to keep his word.

³ See A. Tomatis, *Der Klang des Lebens* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1987).

If these considerations should, over time, lead to the little book I mentioned above, it would be about time to draw up a possible outline. It could look something like the following:

[...]

A number of these titles already hint at the direction in which my considerations will be developed. Others must of necessity initially seem laconic or even cryptic. As you see, cautiously formulated, the field is extremely broad. Therefore I must make due with selecting just a few of these thoughts in my talk today.

What is music? I ask myself right away in the first chapter. A question that might sound strange, since we all believe that we know what music is. However, the question is not necessary self-evident. You, too, have surely experienced, after hearing a piece of new music, someone calling out: That is not music! A response that, by the way, is nothing new, but presumably has always existed.⁴ Music is a language and develops just as verbal languages develop. If a Roman from the age of Augustus were to suddenly appear in the Forum in Rome, he would be quite astonished, not only about the radical changes the city has undergone, but also about the fact that the language spoken there would be completely unintelligible to him. I said: language, but should say: languages, since many different languages are spoken there by tourists from all over the world. A number of them did actually develop from the language of the ancient Romans, Latin. Yet they developed further and are so far removed from the original that our time traveller could claim with good reason: “That is not the language I know, that is not Latin, but gibberish.” It is similar with music. In music, too, the vocabulary and syntax change continually, and what was valid for composing just yesterday may not necessarily be true today. Unless they are curious (in German one says “neugierig”, meaning eager for the new), people tend not to accept the existence of what they are not familiar with. In spite of all of this change, however, there must be a consensus about what can be called music and what cannot. Yet this very consensus is exposed to constant, explicit or tacit change—not unlike the rules that apply to every other sphere of life as well. It may be that in music—and in art in general—these rules become obsolete faster, at least in our Western cultural sphere. This is not true (or was not until recently) for other cultures such as the Japanese, for example, whose Noh music (and Noh or Kabuki theatre) is performed according to criteria that were fixed several centuries ago. Still, as soon as Western culture had prevailed in the East as well (which has long since happened), very important autochthonous cultural phenomena unfortunately start becoming more and more obsolete.

So what is music? I think that we can agree on a very simple, but convincing definition: *Music is that which a sufficiently large number of listeners regard as music.* If one single person in our cultural sphere were to say of an artefact: that is music, it is improbable that the artefact would actually be music. A consensus is required in order to define music as music. For this consensus it is not only important that there is a large enough number of people who share the same opinion, but also that this opinion holds out against time and rankling criticism. Here I am not speaking of the quality of the music designated as such, which is all the more subject to the test of time. The definition I propose may sound very simple, perhaps too simple. Yet it seems to me inadmissible—

⁴ Cf. Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective* (New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000). Here I would also like to offer an anecdote told by the composer György Ligeti: “I had a good and strict piano teacher, to whom I truly enjoyed going. I was quite intimate with the common literature of the time, with works by Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, because I had heard them on records and in the radio. Once, pretty much at the beginning of my instruction, I was fourteen years old, she played me a piece by Debussy. I said: That’s nonsense; that is not music! Even I could write something like that. Well, so far I haven’t managed to do it. It was “Golliwogg’s Cake Walk” from *Children’s Corner*. It was neither major nor minor. I was like any philistine: What was not major or minor was not music.” In: *Träumen Sie in Farbe? György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Eckard Roelcke* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2003), 31.

as happens over and over again in history—to aspire to lay down standards for determining what is to be accepted as music and what is not. We are certainly aware (or should be) that aesthetic criteria change over time. Thus if a sufficiently large number of people come to an agreement that a certain production of the human spirit is to be regarded as music, there is no reason to contest this just because it does not correspond to one’s own criteria. Of course everyone is entitled to his or her own personal taste and to prefer this or that music. But this has nothing to do with the essential right of existence of every kind of musical practice that enjoys a consensus.

Well, I already hear some of the possible objections to my definition of music:⁵ this is a “social definition” of music, which, first of all, is too broadly conceived. It is not up to everyone to decide, as in a democratic election, but to a circle of specialists. In the modern age (the objection continues), this circle is often extremely small and under certain circumstances may consist of just a few composers, music critics, and conductors).

Second, it is less a “social definition” that we need than an “essential definition”, which must drive at something like the essence of music.

As to the first objection, I know that the group of those who define a certain kind of music as music can be small. That is why I stated above that it must be merely “sufficiently large”, which means that as far as I’m concerned it can even be extremely small. The point is not that I would, so to speak, submit to the verdict of the masses. On the other hand, neither do I intend to defend the taste of the elite. To the extent that this is at all possible, I would like to understand the definition as value-free. Indeed, I do not say: this music is the only good and true music, but claim instead that there are very many and very different kinds of music and that it is not necessary to know and to appreciate all of them. Yet they are all varieties of this phenomenon that we (can) call music. As to the *essence* of this phenomenon—and here I respond to the second objection—that is another question, although not entirely different. But since there is no one such thing as *music*, but rather only very many and very different musical practices, it will certainly not be easy to make out a single essence of music. This is because a string quartet by Beethoven and a hit song are incommensurable phenomena—which, it is true, are both subsumed under the concept “music”. Or should it be possible—I’ll venture a bold comparison—just as we undertake the attempt to define what the essence of life is, despite the fact that there are entirely different life forms, to apprehend the essence of music even for entirely different musical organisms? If this is the case, it seems to me that the question, or more accurately, the answer, does not become any easier: I dare to doubt that there is an essence of music valid for each and every one of us, as the actual meaning of music is different for every individual. Once more, what I am concerned about with this—admittedly very broad—definition is not the tabulation of a normative aesthetics that might be expected. For history teaches us that the standards I am formulating today—provided that they can lay claim to any general validity at all today—will most assuredly already be obsolete tomorrow. The point is not whether I deem what can be defined as music to be good, not what music is for me personally, or what the “essence” of music represents for me personally, since I am of the opinion that for every individual to whom music means anything, the meaning of music is a different one. The boundaries between what we designate as music and what does not yet deserve this name (and now I am forming a transition to section 1.1) are fluid today anyway, and this is true to a much higher degree than it used to be. This has to do with the incursion of noise into music at the beginning of the twentieth century. Consider the increasingly important role of percussion. A multifaceted and differentiated percussion section gradually became not only a permanent constituent part of the classical symphony orchestra, but even pure percussion compositions were written, such as *Ionisation* of 1931 by Edgard Varèse, in which thirteen percussionists employ forty-two percussion instruments and two sirens.

⁵ I recently spoke at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Jena, where I had been invited by my esteemed friend Wolfgang Welsch, who was then so kind as to summarize a number of objections against my theses and to share them with me in written form.

Consider as well “musique concrète” and electronic music, both of which sprang up in the 1950s, but theoretically were aspired to much earlier—for instance by Ferruccio Busoni in his “Sketch of a new Aesthetic of Music” (1906). In the “musique concrète” of the fifties, as the name suggests, sounds of the real, concrete world are recorded and worked into compositions. It is not difficult to imagine that, for many listeners of the time, such pieces were not music—and often are not even today.

When I was around twenty, I invented pieces for transistor radios or for aluminium sheets. Once I even used my mother’s Fiat 500 as an instrument and presented her with a birthday concert. A full—or only—thirteen years had passed since I’d had to convince my parents to let me take piano lessons. What must my mother have thought (remember the story with the stamp collection) about the unusual direction that my musical interest had taken? At the same time I continued to play piano, however, and also composed pieces for thoroughly traditional instruments like the piano, violin, etc. I also completed my composition exercises, which covered counterpoint theory and harmony theory and everything else that belongs to composition lessons. I was altogether aware that the universe of music is quite extensive and complex and that a wide variety of musical practices find their place within it. The boundaries are fluid not only between music and noise, but also between the individual kinds of music (and that brings me to section 1.2), for there is no one such thing as *music*; there are only many different kinds of music, even if I limit myself here to the Western European tradition, namely the classical music of various types and periods (orchestral music, chamber music, opera, as well as what is known as contemporary music, which itself breaks down into different areas); light music in its diverse forms (pop, rock etc.); the different styles of jazz, film music (another world of its own); the insipid music that supposedly helps us relax, the kind my physiotherapist has running in the background during my treatments, and which, at least for a composer, is anything but relaxing—indeed, it threatens to supplement the back pains with a headache just as intense—and even more other kinds of music.

Recently, in Berlin, I was listening to the news on the radio. The reports were interrupted by quite different pieces of music. After a short classical fragment the announcer said: that was No. 30 (sic!) by Mozart, next is a song by another immortal, Elvis Presley. From this song, too, only a fragment was aired. Mozart and Elvis Presley, as interchangeable as apples and oranges—both are fruits to be sure, but what’s important is the difference between them. This is not always the case for music, as one kind of music is apparently supposed to be the same as the next. In principle I have no objections to the idea that we differentiate not among genres, but between good and bad music, and that Mozart and Elvis Presley or Bach and Duke Ellington may be different, but they are qualitatively equal options in our cultural landscape, and this independent of personal taste. On the other hand, however, I think that there is no reason to be ashamed of exercising one’s critical faculty, that is, the ability of discernment. Even people, who are in principle all equal, are not all equivalent, and this is true not only for their aesthetic essence but also for their ethical essence. Why should this not also be true for human artefacts, which are, after all, a reflection of the qualities of their creators? Just as – if I may spin this associative thread a bit further – people cannot be better than their creator or creators: As opposed to the exclusive God of the monotheistic religions, who is supposed to be devoid of all human faults (which is certainly, to put it conservatively, improbable), the gods of antiquity have characteristics that do not necessarily make them better beings than their mortal creatures. Shouldn’t these structural defects, which no one can deny people have, put their designers in a bad light?

But back to music, or at least to a radio program that not only mixes apples and oranges, but also fobs off the listeners with mere fragments of these: a few measures of Mozart, a few measures of Presley, and so on. What is the point of this, if the sense of a musical discourse can only unfold in the formal articulation determined by the composer? I suppose its only sense (if we can call it that) is not to demand too much of the listener, who in the early hours of the morning is gradually trying

to get used to being vertical again. You don't want to strain anyone, especially at that time of day. A couple of minutes of something spoken, a couple of minutes of music, everything in rapid succession and only hinted at. Going into depth might bore listeners, whereas rapidly switching topics is supposed to support the blood pressure at the level needed for the day's activities. Thus radio supports a culture of fragmentation, although we are plenty fragmented enough on our own.

What music do I mean, then, when I speak of the meaning of music? In order to answer this question—again, in a very personal way—I have to differentiate between the music I listen to and the music I write. I can listen to pretty much everything, depending on my mood and the occasion. I may not be much of an expert on non-classical music, but now and then I do like to hear songs, Brazilian music, and ethnic music and the like. There is no doubt that this music has its own functions and meaning. But here, too, it is important to differentiate, as every kind of music has its own “specific gravity”. In general, however, I would say that everyone can find the music he or she holds to be important, for whatever reasons, to make sense. And be it one single kind, one single composer or one single piece of music.

This is different for the music that is composed, or, in my case, that I compose. While the occasion and mood are important here, too, it is generally a music oriented toward the standards set by the Western music from the “Ars nova” of the thirteenth century to the classics of the twentieth century. This is like a broad and incredibly long river that flows through different climatic zones, is home to different fish, whose bed exhibits different kinds of stone—and is thus at the same time both homogenous and extremely diverse.

Since my introduction, so far I have sketched the contents of the first chapter of what may someday become my book about the sense of music. Now several chapters will follow which I cannot summarize here. Therefore I will jump directly to Chapter 4, several parts of which I would like to discuss.

Section 4.1.4 is to concern the political motivations and implications of music. In my youth I dealt with this subject too, both theoretically and practically in my compositions. At that time I wrote my dissertation about the composer Hanns Eisler (1898 - 1962), entitled “Hanns Eisler's Contribution to the Development of a Marxist Poetics and Aesthetics of Music”.⁶ I wrote a series of compositions myself in which I resolved to make a contribution to the socialist development of society, small though it might have been. Is it possible to change the world with music? Today I would answer no. Can one change the world at all? It is certainly possible to make it worse, and quite quickly at that. Improving it, on the contrary, is a long, drawn-out process. As they say: “gutta lapidem cavat”, a droplet hollows out a rock. But the effect that art and music can have is just another drop in the bucket, namely negligible. In his *Ninth Symphony* (and in the opera *Fidelio*), Beethoven acts the role of a representative and advocate of mankind and humanity. The fact that not even the most magnificent work of art was able to influence the nature of man is another matter. Or is it the same matter? In general, music and culture do not have the power to improve the human race. Whether the human race is at all capable of improvement is yet another question that is difficult to answer. Political attempts to change the human race for the better have ended in tragedy. Pedagogical zeal can transform abruptly into brutal repression, as the example of the last century teaches us. And the brave new world keeps marching in the same formations. This could easily lead to the conclusion that the meaning of music is unfortunately nothing that can encourage the “humanizing” of mankind. As far as this is concerned, nobody would rather be proven wrong than I. But if the history of humanity has not been able to accomplish this by now, it will certainly be difficult to experience it still within one short lifetime. I hail the efforts to put together an orchestra of Israelis and Palestinians in order to promote peace between these warring

⁶ Later published as *H. Eisler, Musica della Rivoluzione*, edited and with an introduction by Luca Lombardi (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1978).

brothers or cousins; indeed, I would be more than willing to make my musical work available to such a project, but I fear that we are fooling ourselves if we place too much value on the music we believe to be so important. For music is important regardless of whether it has a measurable function, be it to increase cow's production of milk or to promote the humanization of human beings.

So if music is not necessarily "humanizing", it does not necessarily have to be "beautiful" either. Personally, I have nothing against beautiful music. But that is not its main task, least of all for the music of our age. Arnold Schönberg said that music has to be true. I like that better, although it is certainly not easy to say wherein this truth lies. More on this in the chapter "Music as Knowledge and Self-knowledge." As to the political function of music, let us say that if music can be implemented functionally in the political sense, it can also be appropriated for a different cause, as the abuse of German classical and romantic music by the Nazis showed. Even poor Eisler experienced how a number of his most popular political songs were co-opted.⁷ For instance, his "Red Wedding" (named for Berlin's working-class district of Wedding) became "Brown Wedding". Nevertheless the National Socialists were not able to appropriate a number of his songs, such as the "Solidaritätslied" ("Song of Solidarity") because its rhythm was fairly brusque and could not be marched to very well.⁸ Poor comfort for a composer who was determined to turn his back on his venerated teacher Arnold Schönberg in order to become the composer of the working class—a class that couldn't have been bothered with him while it still existed. Had Eisler, who was embittered enough when he died in 1962, lived to see later events, no less comprehensible—and perhaps less so—than in his age, from the bankruptcy of socialism on to the world of today, he might ask himself if it would have been better to write a few more "bourgeois" compositions like a couple of good string quartets, rather than chasing after the chimera of a socialist music that (he might now feel) was musically simplistic and ended up being socially irrelevant.

However, these skeptical remarks about the meaning of politically motivated music are not intended to suggest that composers should not concern themselves with the world in which they live. Testimonies of humanity—such as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—even if they are appropriated for other causes or remain ineffectual, indicate that humans are working on an image of themselves of which they need not be ashamed. Indeed, *Homo sapiens sapiens* is still working on becoming human, and it looks like there is still a long way to go. What appears to me important is to remain reasonable and not to overestimate the effectiveness of such politically motivated works. Just as important, or perhaps more so, the artistic value of such works is primarily based on musical criteria. There have always been works of art indebted to contemporary political events. In the *Divine Comedy*, written while he was in exile, Dante Alighieri may have referred to the concrete political situation of his hometown of Florence and to the abuses of the church, but this is of mere anecdotal value for us today. What is of value are its simple and at the same time magnificent structure, and its linguistic beauty and power. What is true for Dante's *Comedy* is also true for other religiously inspired works of art: They are valued and enjoyed even by those who do not share the religious conviction of their creators.

If I may return from such heights to the lowlands of my own composition practice, for all my disillusionment about political developments and about the political function of music, I have not withdrawn to the ivory tower—and not only because such towers are rare and expensive to buy. For example, even in recent years I wrote the opera *Dmitri, or: the Artist and Power*, based on historical material, namely nearly thirty years of Soviet history from Lenin's death (1924) to Stalin's death (1953), and dealing with the (self-)contradictory relationship between the composer Dmitri Shostakovich and the dictator.

A piece of music can be listened to on many layers, and there is every reason to believe that one of

⁷ For more on this, see 3.3.

⁸ See H. Eisler, *Musica della Rivoluzione*, p. 69.

these layers can impart extra-musical knowledge, be it of political or psychological or philosophical or any other kind (which, in turn, brings me to section 4.3, “Music as Knowledge and Self-Knowledge”). This is true not only for the listener, but also for the composer himself. Here I would like to relate a personal experience I made with two of my compositions.

While I was writing a piece for eight instruments in the mid-1980’s, I began playing with the letters in my name by assigning a musical note to each letter. (See Example II, 3a) Because my first name and last name consist of four plus eight letters, the result was a twelve-tone structure, yet not a canonical twelve-tone series which contains no repetitions (the letters “l” and “a” occur twice in my first and last names). Experimenting with this material brought me to repeat this tone-row as a melodic structure, distributed among the instruments, starting from the beginning each time. The other structural features of the compositional plan that gradually developed are not important in this context; what was characteristic first and foremost was the formal idea of repeatedly starting from the beginning, which brought me to the title “Sisyphus”. We all know the story of the demigod Sisyphus: For offending the gods of Olympus he was sentenced to the punishment of pushing a boulder up a mountain. But every time he is about to reach the top of the mountain, the boulder rolls back down and Sisyphus has to start from the beginning again. Over and over, for all eternity! Not until afterward (by then I was working on a second piece entitled *Sisyphos II*) did I become aware of certain relations, and I began to look at the piece (the pieces) as in a mirror. What does it mean: to start repeatedly from the beginning? What is meant by the boulder that repeatedly has to be heaved up the mountain? And who is Sisyphus? Am I supposed to have something in common with him? Why did I take my own name as the material (as building blocks)? Could it be that I, myself—without consciously intending to, and, again, without even being aware of it—have composed a sort of self-portrait? Do I really have such an absurd-tragic opinion of my life and my work?⁹ I could easily answer: yes. But the knowledge I could draw from this piece was even more perplexing and further reaching. How so? Well, from childhood I had always been a supporter of socialism and thought of myself as a Marxist. As such, I ultimately had a linear understanding of history. But as my own piece showed, I no longer appeared to have this understanding at all. My Sisyphus pieces—eventually I composed four—showed me that my view of the world had changed. My view of history became more contradictory, and I began to take my leave from Marxism. Whereby I would say today that Marxism is by now a sedimented material of which we all partake, whether or not we want to, and whether or not we know it.

I had another experience, existentially just as important, with a piece I wrote for double-bass and eight instruments in 1986, entitled “Ai piedi del faro” (“At the Foot of the Lighthouse”). I took the title from a sentence by the philosopher Ernst Bloch: “There is no light at the foot of the lighthouse.” What I understood the sentence to mean is that we cannot grasp the present *now*; we can illuminate the past from the present, but what we are doing now must for the most part remain incomprehensible to us. It is the “darkness of the instant just lived.” In this piece I used—as many times before and since—a scale with which musical forms of a peculiar oriental influence could be constructed. Why? What do I have to do with the Orient? More than I was aware, as would become apparent. While I was working on the piece I listened to a record with Sephardic singing, which a Jewish-American singer had given me as a gift four years earlier, but which I had never played. I really liked the songs, especially one in which a bewailing tone, sung with tight intervals coiling around each other: “mama mia, salvadera de mi vida”. That is Ladino, the language of the Spanish Jews, and means “Mother mine, saviour of my life”. As I continued work on the piece, it went without saying that the song became integrated into the score. Why was I attracted to this particular song? And why had I used it in my piece. The there purely musical reasons for this, or did it have something to do with my Jewish mother? In any case it was not conscious, and I hadn’t at all—at least, as I said, not consciously—considered relating the piece to my mother. When I built the song

⁹ These last sentences are taken from my essay “Sisyphos als Selbstportrait? (Oder: von der Last des Komponierens)”, from “Beim Komponieren. Drei Texte”, in *Lust am Komponieren*, H.-K. Jungheinrich (ed.), Bärenreiter, Kassel, Basel, London, 1985, 34-40. This essay includes more on the piece and the considerations it evoked.

into the piece I noticed that the intervals of the song were astonishingly similar to those I had been using up to that time, not only the tight “oriental” intervals, but also a fifth that plays an important role both in my piece and in the Sephardic song. Thus I could integrate the song into the piece with no difficulty, indeed, the piece even ends with a fragment of that somewhat melancholy song: One after the other, the instrumentalists exit the stage, each of them playing independently of each other, and assemble again at the other end of the hall or in an adjacent room. Only the double-bass player remains on the stage. The remainder of the musicians begin playing the Jewish song from the other location, and the double-bass player tries to join in. But the communication is unsuccessful: The other musicians do not respond. The double-bass player persists with one note, almost an unanswered call, until he finally resigns and falls silent. Not until months later, while reading a book by Primo Levi (*I sommersi e i salvati*), did it occur to me, as in an insight, how much this ending had to do with the overall Jewish character of the piece, which by that time had become clear to me as well. Levi tells of a Jewish family from Libya that holds obsequies every evening during its transport to the concentration camp: It sang lamentations and thus gave expression to the pain about the constantly repeating exodus. I couldn’t believe it: Apparently the subconscious does exist, and composing was a way for me to bring it to light. It became clear to me that the French horn which plays alone at the beginning of the piece and gradually summons the other to join—like a voice calling in the desert—is the shofar, the ancient Hebrew horn which calls the community together, the community that is scattered to the four winds at the end of the piece. Yet at that time I had never even heard the shofar, just as I had never entered a synagogue. I did not do so until eight years later, in Sao Paulo in Brazil, with my new girlfriend at the time who is now my wife, and who comes, strangely enough, from a Libyan Jewish family. The oriental-sounding scale—see Example III, 11—which I have used ever more often since then (it contains the intervals: minor second – major second – minor second – minor third, and once again: minor second – major second – minor second – minor third) suddenly made sense as well, a very private sense which bound the cultural strands of my father and my mother in a singular way. My father, a philosopher from Naples and musical layman, had composed Neapolitan songs of which he was very proud. These songs often use an oriental-influenced mode typical for the Mediterranean region. This was certainly a point of departure for me as a child, one from which I had distanced myself further and further the more seriously and professionally I dealt with music. Over time, however, this early “imprinting” apparently returned to the surface. I like the idea that the oriental tinge of the sequence of notes I use refers to both the Neapolitan origins of my father and the Jewish heritage of my mother, whose ancestors came from what is today Israel to Italy 2000 years ago, and who, despite assimilation, never forgot her ties to her original country, just as I never forget them.

EXAMPLE III, 11: “Oriental” Scale

Yet this raises the question: Do these personal experiences and reflections play any role at all when people listen to my music? I believe: yes and no. The listener does not need to have this information to get something out of my piece. However, they may be useful to understand it better. A piece of music always has several layers, and unless one deals with it intensively and professionally, one cannot access all of them. And this is not necessarily a must. Yet every additional piece of information, starting with the title, can help penetrate deeper and deeper into what a piece of music means, what it “actually” is.

In closing I return to Chaplin’s film *Limelight* and back to the dialog between the clown and the dancer, which continues as follows:

Calvero: Tell me, was it just ill health that made you do what you did?

Dancer: That and ... the utter futility of everything. I see it even in flowers, hear it in music: All life aimless without meaning.

Calvero: What do you want a meaning for – life is a desire, not a meaning! Desire is the theme of all life. It’s what makes the rose want to be a rose, want to grow like that. (Calvero imitates a rose growing ...) And a rock want to

contain itself and remain like that. (He pretends to be a stone that wants to stand firm.)

(The dancer smiles.)¹⁰

This dialogue, full of philosophical thought and poetic lightness, actually gives the answer to the question implied in the title of my lecture—and not only because one of the subjects here is music (which supposedly has no meaning for the dancer), but also because the question as to the meaning of music includes, or at least suggests, the question as to the meaning of life as a whole. .

My remarks may be mere comments on a topic that certainly can be dealt with in much more depth, but old and tipsy and wise Calvero (“in vino veritas”) has already said what counts.

[Source: “Vom Sinn der Musik,” typescript of lecture given at various places in 2003 and 2004; published in both German and English—in case of the latter under the title “On the Meaning of Music” (trans. Susan Richter)—in *Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg: Jahresbericht/Annual Report 2003* (Delmenhorst: Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg, n.d. {2004}, 13-16 and 27-39; Becheri 03,7. The English translation published here has been revised somewhat.]

¹⁰ [Transcribed from *Limelight* (1952): The Chaplin Collection (Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2003).]