

You only get it twice: Foreword(s)

Rex Butler; Mauro Fosco Bertola

Introduction I

It would make a wonderful musical study – perhaps someone has already done it – to compare the various operatic and instrumental versions of the famous myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Of course, the opera generally regarded as the first, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607), was based on the story, but there have been a truly astonishing number of different versions covering different musical genres, from opera to operetta, from cantata to song cycle. We might just mention here some of the better known: Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* of 1600 (in fact, the first opera whose music survives to this day), Georg Philipp Telemann's *Orpheus* of 1726, Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* of 1762, Joseph Haydn's *L'anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* of 1791, Jacques Offenbach's operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld* of 1858, Ernst Krenek's *Orpheus und Eurydice* of 1926 (on a libretto by Oscar Kokoschka), Kurt Weill's cantata *Der neue Orpheus* of 1927 and no fewer than four versions by the late-twentieth century British composer Harrison Birtwistle (*Nenia: The Death of Orpheus* of 1970, *The Mask of Orpheus* of 1986, *26 Orpheus Elegies* of 2003-4 and *The Corridor* of 2009). Needless to say, one of the fascinating musicological questions is how the music in each of these works might embody the distinction between looking forward and looking back, which might correspond to the distinction between the

variation upon as opposed to the actual recapitulation of previous musical material. Certainly, the contemporary Welsh composer Richard Barrett in his version of the myth, *The Opening of the Mouth* of 1992-7, uses electronic improvisation to create a work that refuses any musical recognition until the end when, like Orpheus looking back at Eurydice, thematic recapitulation occurs. The beautiful conceit of the piece is that, after sitting in the dark for two hours apparently being led out of the Underworld, at the conclusion when the lights come on and the holding of us in a kind of “continuous presentness” comes to an end, we realise that we are indeed back in the Underworld.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* has its origins in a conversation that took place a while ago in 2014 at the International Žižek Studies Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mauro Fosco Bertola had just given a paper comparing Gluck’s and Offenbach’s respective versions of the Orpheus myth, ‘Operatic parallax: Napoleon III’s impossible Orpheus or first as farce, then as tragedy’. I was in the audience, and at the end of Mauro’s paper I – a keen but strictly amateur music lover – went down and told him how much I had enjoyed it. Several months later, Mauro emailed me back in Australia and proposed that we put together a special issue of the *Journal* on the topic of Žižek and music. I immediately agreed, and we haven’t looked back since. (Obviously, following both his paper at the Conference and the essay he has contributed here on the German composer Hans Werner Henze’s melodrama *Aristaeus* (2003), I suspect it is Mauro who is undertaking this comparative study of Orpheus in music.)

Of course, Žižek is famous – or perhaps infamous – for his comment that, as opposed to the conventional understanding of how theory works, he simply applies theory to his objects: “The notion emerges... through the power of ‘abstraction’, of blinding oneself to most of the features of the object” (Žižek 2012: 279). Indeed, on a number of occasions he has frankly admitted that he hasn’t actually watched the films he writes about or others have pointed out that he has got decisive elements of their plots wrong. But this is not at all to reduce the object to a mere illustration of the theory. On the contrary, as he insists, it is precisely the attempt to have theory be responsive to its object that makes it merely illustrative, as seen in something like cultural studies. The perfect example of this for Žižek is the shark in the film *Jaws*, which has been variously interpreted as a symbol of nature fighting back against humans, the eruption of sexuality, the threat of the Third World to America and the rampages of capitalism. And undoubtedly the musical equivalent of *Jaws* – it even shares something of a musical resemblance – is Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, which likewise for Žižek has

lost any specificity and been taken up by groups and causes as various as Nazis, Stalinist Communists, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, apartheid Rhodesia, the European Union and the Shining Path guerrillas of Peru. That is, it is only in the most literal application of theory to an object that we can see what “resistance” this object offers, that we are able to perceive the object in a way we usually do not and that even the object does not itself. The power of any instance of culture, emphasises Žižek, is not how it comes out of a particular context, allowing us to understand it and fill it in, but how it *breaks* with its context – and this cannot be distinguished from (and is in fact the same thing as) how it breaks with the theory that is applied to it.

Undoubtedly, Žižek’s treatment of music throughout his career is a perfect instance of this. It is obvious to anyone who has followed his work that classical music means a lot to him. For such a “post-modern” sensibility – his love of Hollywood cinema, his disdain for many aspects of high culture – it is evident that he maintains an almost “old European” respect for the musical canon (and, as a generation of younger musicologists has pointed out, including a number here, his particular taste is even a little “conservative”). Žižek, of course – as with virtually any other topic we can name – is the author of numerous essays and articles on classical music and has co-authored books both on opera in general and Wagner in particular. In his writings on Wagner, he has addressed the broad sociological meaning of his narratives, taking up again the fractious and much-discussed question of his anti-Semitism and the affinity of his work with Nazi ideology. In doing so, he has evidenced a deep familiarity with Wagner’s work, offering close and detailed readings of his various operas’ plots, the words of their libretti and aspects of their staging in the different productions and recordings he has seen and heard. He has even on occasion ventured further – and in doing so gone against his own stated advice that “it is absolutely crucial to bear in mind what goes on stage, to listen to the words also” (Žižek 2010) – and suggested that if only he knew enough about music he could demonstrate that the very *notes* of Wagner’s music are Lacanian.

However, as we suggest, this is not – or not only – the overwriting of Wagner’s operas with some pre-existing and unchanging theory. In fact, it is the ultimate mark of respect that Žižek could show Wagner’s music: not merely that it is Lacanian but that it can tell us what Lacanianism is. (As well, it is to show the ultimate respect for the particular pleasure he feels with Wagner’s operas: to render it ex-timate.) It is to effect what Žižek calls a “short-circuit”: to bring together two things (a theory and a cultural object) that are usually understood to be far apart. But as opposed to the match

between two generalities (the object and the theory) that produces the apparent “fullness” of the master-signifier (*Jaws*, Beethoven’s *Ninth*) we have the impossible equivalence of the particular and the universal that produces the authentic “emptiness” of the concrete universal: “Universality is not the neutral container of particular formations, their common measure, the passive (back)ground on which the particulars fights their battles, but this battle itself, the struggle leading from one formation to another” (Žižek 2006: 30). But here the question might be asked: which is particular and which is universal? Wagner or Lacan? Or is it perhaps that each becomes “universal” only in their (non)relationship with the other?

Rex Butler

Introduction II - A bunch of distortions, or: why are we actually doing this?

We know all too well the anxiety question par excellence, the disquieting “*Che vuoi?*” traversing our symbolically embedded lives. So, let me indulge a bit in this uncanny zone and ask: “*Che vogliamo (Rex ed io)?*”, what is our goal with this issue? Why did we start this project? To be honest, I’m more than uncomfortable with this question, as it pushes me dangerously close to the awkward regions of the Lacanian “*Moi, la vérité, je parle*”. Nevertheless, for the greater good let me play this role for a little while and do my best to outline an answer.

Basically the project started with a very simple question: How have Žižek’s reflections on music been received within the academic and non-academic world, and by whom? Of course, academically speaking, there are already some illustrious examples of this, including Lawrence Kramer (see for instance Kramer 2004) or, even if it is actually more Badiou-inspired, J. P. Harper-Scott’s book *The quilting points of musical modernism* (Harper-Scott 2012) – not to mention the fact that today there’s no substantial book on Wagner that doesn’t refer (at least with skepticism) to Žižek’s reflections on the composer (see for instance Grey 2008: 217). But, aside from this, what is really happening “out there”? Our aim was thus to offer with this special issue a first forum for all those working in music-related fields who have adopted Žižek’s theories on reflecting about music – from philosophers to musicologists, from composers to scholars in the field of sound studies, as well as dramaturges and opera producers. The issue was intended as an opportunity for these groups to get to know each other and gather new energy for further endeavors. With this goal in mind, we’ve

been as inclusive as possible, both in the call for papers and while selecting the contributions.

As a result, the issue includes articles written by philosophers, musicologists, composers and even lawyers covering not only a broad range of epochs, from Schubert (Tarrant) to contemporary opera (Goyós), but also different musical genres, from ‘classical’ (most of the essays) to jazz (Feige) and the experimental pop of Björk (Melançon/Carpenter). Other contributions address theoretical topics like the concept of interdisciplinarity in music analysis (Day), issues of performance (Butler) or of copyright (McLennan), the reflection of Žižek’s ontological thought in music (Aguiar) or, more specifically, in contemporary opera (Bertola), or the music-analytical potential of a (musical) “subject supposed to expect” modeled along Žižek’s own reflections on the “subject supposed to believe” (Summerfield), or even criticize Žižek’s ontology of music while nevertheless developing along the lines of the Žižekian concept of parallax an ontology of sound of their own (Wierzbicki). In a kind of self-reflexive (or perhaps self-negating) gesture – and though we largely disagree with its thesis – we have also included an article arguing against what the author refers to as “Žižekian musicology” (Smethurst). Last but not least, Žižek himself generously contributed to the issue with two unpublished texts on music, something we can’t thank him enough for. That being said, did we ultimately reach our goal?

After having paternalistically boasted in the preface (“I shall not stop to explain this in more detail, because I should deprive you of the pleasure of mastering it yourself, as well as of the advantage of training your mind by working over it”, Descartes 1954: 10), René Descartes takes a (slightly) more modest stance at the very end of *Geometry* and writes: “I hope that posterity will judge me kindly, not only as to the things which I have explained, but also as to those which I have intentionally omitted so as to leave to others the pleasure of discovery” (Ibid.: 240). In the same vein we would ask the readers of this issue (there’s still time for posterity...) to “judge us (the editors as well as the contributors) kindly”, even if we are in a very different position than Descartes, not only (obviously) in spatio-temporal terms but also and especially theoretically: indeed, *there is nothing “intentionally omitted”* in this issue and we couldn’t have even if we’d wanted to. What do I mean by that?

Out of fear of something I can only call “narcissism by proxy” (a quite interesting theoretical figure, by the way), Rex tried to talk me out of referring to some of his previous texts on Žižek at this point (“Mauro, we don’t want to look too narcissistic!” – which of course implies that *we are actually unabashed narcissists*, and such

narcissists that we sell our own thoughts as universal truths...). Needless to say, I'm going to ignore his protests. Indeed, as Rex (together with Scott Stephens) already pointed out on another occasion, Žižek's philosophy seems to somehow echo, both at the formal and the content level, the Lacanian process of *passee*. In the *passee*, the message the analysand intends to transmit to the analyst is structurally distorted by the intervention of two witnesses who are entrusted with passing on precisely this message to the analyst. The point is, of course, that the truth of the message is by no means the true message. I.e., what the analysand passed on to the witnesses doesn't really matter; on the contrary, it is precisely in the distortions, misperceptions etc. unconsciously contributed by the witnesses that we have to search for the analysand's truth. To put it bluntly, "these distortions *are* the truth" (Butler/Stephens 2006: 3). Correspondingly, "it is this very truth that is repeated throughout Žižek. His work both demonstrates and speaks at every level of the truth of this contingency or distortion. [...] Žižek's real point is that *no* philosophical Truth can ever exist apart from its exemplification, that is, its enunciation" (Butler/Stephens 2006: 3-4). The parallax nature of Žižek's philosophy, its being consistently embedded in the same contexts of enunciation within which it operates, the very fact that the plethora of examples wittily intermingling "high" and "low" culture, politics and everyday banalities punctuating (or structuring!) Žižek's texts doesn't illustrate/exemplify a philosophical truth, but paradoxically *is* this conceptual truth in its "feminine" status as non-All; all this thus makes of Žižek's enunciations outright anamorphoses referring to an impossible gap that only (and only retroactively) exists within the horizon of these different contexts and enunciative distortions. If this points, at the content level, at Žižek's Hegelian "ontologization" of Kant, which at its most fundamental consists in nothing more than "the acceptance of the [Kantian, A/D] 'not all' of finite incompleteness as more than just an epistemological limitation" (Johnston 2008: 15), at a more formal level it means that ultimately: "there is always a difference between Žižek and himself or Žižek and what he says. And it is this difference that *is* Žižek, that is what Žižek is saying, rather than anything he actually says" (Butler 2016: 1). In its endless attempts to split other theoretical/ideological frames, Žižek's philosophy is thus structurally split from itself, an "impossible" object that can never be spoken of, the aim of which is nothing but to shift the very frame within which the discussion takes place.

So, our goal with this issue was not (at least implicitly) to outline something like "a (structurally impossible) Žižekian approach to music" or, in a more cautious, postmodern form, to (under)state it by playing the beloved academic game of deferral, thus adding a (once again, implicit) "towards" to what was nothing more than an

attempt to establish an hermeneutic orthodoxy. There is no ultimate external “truth” about Žižek’s philosophy and its interaction with music: the truth of “Žižek and music” (our own very specific kind of master signifier) can thus never be “intentionally omitted”, as it can never be truly included, existing only as difference, only in its own distortions. In a very Lacanian way, what we ultimately get is thus merely the “pleasure of discovery”, that enjoyment “curving the space” of our academic or more broadly professional engagement with music and at the same time shifting the very frame in which it takes place. Our goal by letting philosophers compare notes with musicologists, composers and even lawyers around the master signifier “Žižek and music” was to map out (and by no means exhaustively) different ways of curving this space, and to open up within it a gap of undecidability, which allows us to parallaxically “see” precisely the empty space from which this “professional mode of engagement” with music originates. And so, what we have to offer in the following pages is nothing but a bunch of distortions, which – we hope – are stimulating enough to inspire more of the same!

Mauro Fosco Bertola

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