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# The Trouble with the Beekeeper. Hans Werner Henze's *Aristaeus* (2003) or: Operatic Metaphysics after Humanism

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## Abstract

In their monograph *Opera's Second Death* from 2002, Žižek and Dolar seem to join the illustrious company of cultural critics and musicologists, from Adorno to Gary Tomlinson, tolling the death knell for the operatic genre: with the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the radical critique of the humanist premises that opera relied upon, the genre, so the story goes, had become at least anachronistic, if not outright reactionary. In the first section of my article I intend to not only counter this claim, but also to directly engage with a recent attempt on the part of musicologist Nicholas Till to frame from a Deleuzian perspective contemporary opera's renewed ability to deal with the metaphysical premises of the genre. In this respect I will suggest how, in spite of his own thesis on opera's (second) death, Žižek's ontological thinking aptly frames the kind of metaphysics that operatic production is dealing with today. In the second section I intend to examine in more detail a case in point, even if a twisted one, for a recent musical reflection of opera's metaphysical ties. In his late work *Aristaeus*, the German composer Hans Werner Henze attempts to reimagine the orphic myth outside its humanist framework. By closely reading this work against the grain of Henze's earlier retelling of the Orpheus story in the form of a ballet, I will highlight how in *Aristaeus* he "traverses the fantasy" of his own humanism, seeking to directly engage at both the dramatic and the musical level with an Hegelian/Žižekian dimension of absolute negativity.

**Key Words:** Opera; Metaphysics; Modernism; Humanism; Orpheus; Giorgio Agamben; Eric Santner

“Quis hunc nostrum chamaeleonta non admiretur?”

G. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*

Sometimes one has to go with Žižek beyond Žižek himself, especially when it comes to opera. Indeed, in his monograph *Opera's Second Death*, written together with Mladen Dolar in 2002, Žižek and Dolar seem to join the illustrious company of cultural critics and musicologists, from Adorno (Adorno 1978: 24-39) to Gary Tomlinson (Tomlinson 1999), tolling not without a degree of nostalgia the death knell for the operatic genre: with the advent of the 20th century and the radical critique of the humanist premises that opera relied upon, the genre, so the story goes, had become at least anachronistic, if not outright reactionary. Žižek seems to be even more specific on this point, claiming that after Anton Webern, who fully assumed in his music, as he puts it, “the nonexistence of the Other” (Žižek/Dolar 2002: 223), i.e. the very fact that music merely speaks for (and of) itself, that there is no one to address with music, that the fundamental link between human passions and music established by the late Renaissance intellectuals of the Florentine Camerata and embodied in the new operatic genre had been definitively broken, opera was essentially dead. Couldn't we, just once, be a bit more optimistic than that?

The present article consists of two parts: In the first section I intend to counter Žižek's claim by asserting not only that opera today is alive, but also that, oddly enough, its renewed ability to articulate under different premises those metaphysical ties that the genre from its very beginning was called upon both to voice and to reflect, seems to present rather surprising affinities to Žižek's own ontological thinking: precisely Žižek's – at first blush paradoxical – emphatic re-endorsement of the pivotal humanist category of the subject together with his re-reading of Hegel's concept of absolute negativity offer the best theoretical approach, I claim, for aesthetically grasping the transformations that the genre was subject to during the 20th century and has been in the last three decades in particular.

In the second part I intend to consider in more detail a case in point for a recent musical reflection on the metaphysical ties lurking at the core of the operatic genre; a reflection based – not by chance – on the orphic myth, opera's very first topic. Indeed, the story of Orpheus self-reflexively inscribes in its own dramatic content both opera's

specific musical form (the instrumental accompanied solo singing as opposed to vocal polyphony and/or instrumental music) and its humanist aesthetic premises (music as the language of human passions, as the voicing of true interiority), thus perfectly embodying the humanist category par excellence, that of the subject, as we will see in more detail farther into the text. In his late work *Aristaeus*, which quite significantly is not an opera, but a melodrama for speaker and orchestra based on a libretto, the composer Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012) – a composer who, throughout his life, explicitly committed himself to an emancipatory agenda as well as to a musical language overtly dealing with modernist techniques and modes of expression by nevertheless upholding a humanist worldview and the humanist idea of music as “the language of the soul”<sup>1</sup> – attempts to rethink the orphic myth outside its humanist framework. By closely reading this late work against the grain of Henze’s earlier retelling of the Orpheus story in the form of a ballet (*Orpheus*, which premiered in Stuttgart in 1979), I will highlight how in *Aristaeus* Henze mercilessly questions the flaw lying at the core of the entire humanist endeavour that both the operatic genre and his own music relied upon.

Significantly labelled by the composer “*dramma in musica*”, an expression cunningly intermingling the terms “*favola in musica*”, used by Claudio Monteverdi and Alessandro Striggio for *Orfeo*, the very first true opera in music history, and “*dramma per musica*”, the most common term for opera from the late 17th until the middle of the 19th century, *Aristaeus* thus tentatively reflects, from the “decentred” perspective of the melodrama form, on the possibility of an operatic space able to fully assume the ontological consequences of what Žižek calls “the nonexistence of the Other”. Accordingly, the work offers a perfect starting point for an inquiry into the entanglement of the more recent operatic production with metaphysics (and a Žižekian brand of metaphysics) I intend to develop further in a later article.<sup>2</sup>

### **We have some serious metaphysical problems here: Opera and Modernity**

In an article from 2013 the musicologist Nicholas Till reflects on the fundamental aporia plaguing opera within the modern world.<sup>3</sup> For him, it’s not a question of societal changes, or of an intensifying process of commodification, or of the appearance of new forms of mass entertainment like cinema (a thesis that Taruskin more recently and unexpectedly breathed new life into, see Taruskin 2005: 548), or even a consequence of the “musealization” of classical music, which has transformed an over-canonized

repertoire into an increasingly malleable means of social “distinction”, to put it in Bourdieu’s terms. No, for Till what opera has been facing since the end of the 19th century is nothing less than a genuinely *metaphysical* dilemma. As he puts it: “Operatic metaphysics is intimately linked to modern ideologies of subjectivity and autonomy [...] based upon a distinction between invisible interiority (true) and visible exteriority (illusory)” (Till 2013: 40).

For Till, who is developing here Gary Tomlinson’s thoughts on the structural link between opera and metaphysics throughout the entire history of the genre, opera today is still reifying in its very music-dramatic apparatus fundamental traits of Western ontology like “essentialism and universalism” or “binary ways of thinking”.<sup>4</sup> With its emphasis on character-based narratives at the dramatic level and on voice as the guarantee of lived, authentic presence and unmediated expression of “true” emotions at the musical level, according to Till opera ultimately champions an emphatic, old-fashioned humanistic model of autonomous subjectivity, openly ignoring (or even consciously denying) pivotal developments in the history of Western thought over the last one and a half centuries, from Freud’s psychoanalysis to post-structuralism. In this respect, Till highlights the common anti-humanist stance on these developments, which unanimously puts forward conceptions of human subjectivity as being fundamentally inter-subjective, problematically plural and fragmented, and by all means entirely or to a significant degree socially constructed. The conclusions Till draws from all this are accordingly bleak, and for opera-goers (at least those who show some degree of awareness of the world they’re living in, which seems almost an oxymoron after these kinds of reflections) utterly depressing: “The metaphysics of opera is ideologically overdetermined, and [...] any operatic practice that continues to subscribe to such metaphysics ignores the predominantly anti-metaphysical tendencies of modern thought” (Till 2013: 39). To put it bluntly, opera as the privileged embodiment of humanism and its agenda is definitely *passé*, if not as such inherently reactionary.

Quite surprisingly, Žižek and Dolar seem to join the chorus of mourners in their book on opera. As they write in the introduction, “the moment of the birth of psychoanalysis [...] is also generally perceived as the moment of opera’s death – as if, after psychoanalysis, opera, at least in its traditional form, was no longer possible.” (Žižek/Dolar 2002: vii). One can easily read this statement from Till’s perspective: As soon as new anthropological views arise, challenging the humanist ideal of an autonomous, self-legislating subject, like psychoanalysis does, opera (“at least in its traditional form”) comes to an end. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t forget here the presence

of the beloved Žižekian caveat “as if”; indeed, only a few lines later the focus of Žižek’s and Dolar’s argument somehow shifts into a more general statement, as they write: “Opera *never* was in accord with its time – from its very beginnings, it was perceived as something outdated, as a retroactive solution to a certain inherent crisis in music and as an impure art. To put in Hegelese, opera is outdated in its very concept. How, then, can one not love it?” (Žižek/Dolar 2002: viii-ix). The obvious question here is, of course: what is this “certain inherent crisis in music” that opera is a retroactive solution to?

As Daniel Chua in his monograph from 1999 highlights, in the passage from a closed, theocentric universe to an anthropocentric, humanist one based on the category of the subject with the Renaissance, the long-standing criticism that music was intrinsically meaningless and thus, once deprived of the text, potentially dangerous became even more pervasive: not only instrumental music but also vocal polyphonic music (the most developed and important genre at the time) becomes, once deprived of its traditional theological foundation, which constructed it as a mirror of the divine cosmic order, “meaningless” (Chua 1999: 32-33). Opera is both a symptom of and a solution to this impasse: it “saves” music precisely by means of that category, subjectivity, which undermined music’s traditional ontological fundament. In this context, Chua highlights how opera was born with the passage of music from the *quadrivium* to the *trivium*, i.e. with the shift “from the immutable structure of the medieval cosmos to the linguistic relativity of rhetoric, grammar and dialectics” (Chua 1999: 35):

In the trivium, music becomes *human* and can be made infinitely malleable by the power of rhetorical persuasion. This shift allows man to bend music according to his linguistic will, twisting and distorting its intervals to vocalise his passionate self. Monody deliberately breaks the harmonic laws of the cosmos to legitimise humanity as the new sovereign who creates his own laws of his own being. This new style of singing, by ‘transgressing through several forbidden intervals’, as Caccini puts it, articulates the heretical ego of the new humanity. Singing is its being; or to borrow Derrida’s term, singing brings out from the recesses of the ego the ‘metaphysics of presence’ in an unsung world, bereft of divine presence (Chua 1999: 35).

The impossible claim of opera is thus that of restoring, through song, the fullness of meaning within an anthropocentric universe of autonomous subjects; of securing ontological consistency in our cosmos, despite the radical metaphysical doubt accompanying the new category of a self-legislating subject with its own uncanny self-reflexive core. Opera embodies the anthropological turn in music’s ontology, offering a form, a musical device, for the new understanding of music as the voicing of

interiority and subjectivity and at the very same time it keeps at bay (but also reflects upon) the unsettling consequences of this move, i.e. the fact that at its most fundamental, music as the voice of pure interiority is voicing nothing but the emptiness of a purely “heretical” act, of an exception, of a rip within the texture of being, or, to put it – yes, us too – in Hegelian terms: “The subjective inwardness constitutes the principle of music. But the most inward part of the concrete self is subjectivity as such, not determined by any content” (Hegel 1975: 320). The “certain inherent crisis in music” opera is a solution to is thus precisely the re-founding of music as the voice of the self; a re-founding, which robs music of its own metaphysical foundation in the cosmic order and renders it potentially meaningless, the voicing of something that lacks any positive ground: opera’s impossible promise is to restore metaphysical presence (the immediacy of song, the heartfelt living presence of the singing voice) and at the same time to voice the very agent of this dilemma, the subject. Opera’s innermost aim is thus to reconcile subject and being, exception and rule, necessity and freedom: *canto, ergo sum*.

And indeed, Žižek and Dolar conceive opera “in its traditional form” as an *enjeu* between the subjective exception and the inherent necessity of the rule: from Mozart to Wagner they highlight the gesture of entreaty, of the subject’s “impossible” appeal for a singular break within the order of being (embodied in the musical-dramatic gesture of the *lamento*) as the genre’s constitutive element. Opera is caught up between the fundamental negativity of the subject as pure exception and the very order the subject has to rely upon and appeal to in order to gain its own positive consistency, its own identity; something which, according to Žižek, is paradigmatically inscribed in the very first (and, as Adorno suggested, behind the different dramatic contents of the various operas, the only) topic of opera: the orphic myth. The story of Orpheus pleading with the ruler of the netherworld in order to regain Eurydice by means of his singing is nothing but the “first, rudimentary form”, the very matrix of subjectivity as the “voice of the Subject beseeching the Master to suspend, for a brief moment, his own Law” (Žižek 2010: 166).

The Lacanian twist that Žižek and Dolar add to the discussion on the ontology of opera outlined above is thus clear: opera as a genre voicing modernity’s anthropological turn is merely the embodiment of Lacan’s formula of subjectivity. Like the Lacanian subject, opera is barred; it revolves around a gap, a fundamental lack within the symbolic order (the subject as pure negativity *and* the meaninglessness of music once it is conceived as the very embodiment of “subjective inwardness”), which it

seeks to address, to suture up by lending (musical-dramatic) consistency/presence to the (metaphysical) fantasies of ontological fullness. Like the Lacanian subject, opera, located at the intersection between the Other and the Real, between the symbolic order and the fundamental negativity at the core of the subject, is caught up in the lure (or plague) of fantasy: opera sings the promise to overcome once and for all the very lack it revolves around; the same lack that the genre simultaneously retroactively constructs and responds to, poses and presupposes.

So, the beauty of Žižek's and Dolar's approach lies in the very fact that, by offering a decentred, anti-humanist reading of a "wannabe" humanist spectacle, they convincingly frame the inherent aporia of a genre that at the same time sustains humanism and lays bare its inherent inconsistency. Nevertheless, what happened when these humanist premises began to come under scrutiny during the 20th century? Or, framed somewhat differently, what is the unfathomable "second death" that the title of Žižek's and Dolar's monograph so prominently refers to? Of course, what the two authors are alluding to here is in a strictly Lacanian move the death in the Real, the annihilation of the genre following the collapse of its own premises. As Žižek points out in the very last pages of the book:

Why is Wagner not yet properly modern? To put it in dogmatic Lacanian terms, he is not because for him, the big Other still exists [...]. Not even Schoenberg fully abandons this reference: The true break occurs between Schoenberg and Webern. Although Schoenberg [...] still counted on the symbolic fiction of the one purely hypothetical, imagined listener, which was needed for his composition to function properly, Webern renounced even this purely theoretical supposition and fully accepted that there is no big Other, no ideal listener for him. (Žižek, Dolar 2002: 221).

After having so glamorously lived for centuries in the interstitial space between the two deaths, challenging from within the symbolic order by ultimately staging, by giving acoustic and bodily presence to the 'absent centre' of humanist ontology, i.e. the unfathomable construct of subjectivity, opera, Žižek and Dolar argue, faces its demise as soon as modernism and its radical critique of humanism appear on the scene; a demise that they see symbolically represented by psychoanalysis with its radical critique of every form of autonomous subjectivity and Webern as *the* composer who, recognizing that there is no big Other to beg for an exception (and conversely, that there is no autonomous subjectivity, no listening subject to reach out there), never wrote an opera. And Žižek melancholically concludes: "Such a heroic acceptance of the nonexistence of the Other is perhaps, the only thoroughly radical *ethical* stance

today, in art as well as in real life. [...] And it is only within this horizon that Isolde will no longer have to run” (Žižek, Dolar 2002: 223).

Now, just once, let's be radical pragmatists here and counter Žižek's and Dolar's claim by pointing out not only the rather banal fact that important, fascinating and challenging operas have been composed after Webern, but also that particularly over the last three decades new operas have been staged that neither reproduce nor “simply” negate by means of parody the humanist premises the genre is built upon (the most famous candidate for this second option being György Ligeti's only opera *Le Grand Macabre* from 1978). As Till points out (thus offering, after his radical critique of the genre and its presence in modernity “a glimmer of light”, as he puts it by referring to Adorno's own essay on opera from 1955), since the 1990s at the latest something new has been happening on the operatic scene; a claim we can also find in David Metzger's monograph on musical modernism in the 21st century from 2009, even if from a perspective not exclusively linked to opera.<sup>5</sup> Till highlights in particular “a trio of composers” like Helmut Lachenmann, Salvatore Sciarrino and Olga Neuwirth, “whose [more recent, A/D] work maintains a commitment to the critical premises of modernism and modernist music whilst refusing the consolations of the metaphysics of either subjectivity or form. These composers [...] have all accepted most of the basic conventions of opera [...], but have re-worked those forms in ways that challenge the metaphysical hierarchies of opera without simply resorting to parody or pastiche” (Till 2013: 53).

Till is right in highlighting the emergence of a new form of operatic approach, which seems to be able to restructure the genre in its own fundament, nevertheless he frames this development as an essentially anti-metaphysical shift. Indeed, he defers to a Deleuzian-inspired interpretative framework, in particular to Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of “becoming animal” as an alternative form of subjectivity, “in which the human subject seeks not to conquer that which is other than self but to transform the self in the face of difference” (Till 2013: 58) and ultimately stresses how “Deleuze and Guattari equate the state of becoming animal with the state of becoming music, describing the ‘becoming-animal of music’ by which to inhabit music is a kind of dissolution of subjectivity” (Till 2013: 59).<sup>6</sup> Till's conclusions read as follow:

All three composers [Lachenmann, Sciarrino, and Neuwirth, A/D] offer what might be considered a post-human (rather than anti-human) subjectivity grounded in the mimetic faculty. Such a view of the human subject does not perpetuate the transcendent subjectivity of romantic (or neo-romantic) opera, nor does it reify or psychologise the



object subjects of modernity. Instead, [..., these composers, A/D] seem to affirm that a non-metaphysical opera might be a musical-theatrical form that is capable of conveying different ways of being and of being in the world (Till 2013: 63-64).

Till's claim has to be resolutely rejected here: first, faced with the collapse of humanist metaphysics, composers like Lachenmann, Sciarrino and Neuwirth (but I would like to add to the list at least Kajia Saariaho and Georg Friedrich Haas) do not abandon the metaphysical ties of the genre; on the contrary, they reaffirm them even more strongly. By no means are they attempting to create "a non-metaphysical opera"; rather, what they accomplish with their works is to change the very content of the metaphysics that opera as a genre both supports and reflects. And second, it is precisely at this point that Žižek's ontology *sui generis* turns out to be – and this despite Žižek's own reflections on the status of the operatic genre within modernism – a thoroughly valuable approach to intellectually grasping these more recent developments in opera's long standing entanglement with Western metaphysics. To paraphrase Žižek's own beloved formulation in the context of dealing with Hegel, one has to go with Žižek beyond Žižek himself here and recognize in Žižek's attempt to think Being as structurally incomplete – as severed by a dialectic relationship between a pre-ontological Real/Void and the Void of ontological Nothingness itself – the kind of metaphysics that more recent operatic productions involve.

So, Žižek seems to echo with his thesis of a fundamental "impossibility" of the operatic genre after psychoanalysis and the modernist avant-garde the sceptical attitude toward theatricality as such and opera in particular typical of some kinds of modernism, in particular that of the (Webern-centered indeed) Darmstadt avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s; a sceptical attitude, which ranged from Olivier Messiaen's *bon mot* that there are only two kind of operas, those "that are good theatre and bad music and those that are good music and bad theatre" (Messiaen 1986: 208) to Pierre Boulez's famous dictum "Opera Houses? Blow them up!" (Boulez 1968). Nevertheless, one has to cling to that caveat "at least in its traditional form" that Žižek (and Dolar) add to the word "opera" in the very sentence (quoted above) claiming the impossibility of the genre after psychoanalysis: once the nonexistence of the Other and consequently the fundamental incompleteness of Being have been "heroically accepted", opera, far from reaching its end, renegotiates its formal structures in order to voice this new ontological understanding.

But what does it mean *operatically* to fully assume the nonexistence of the big Other? How can my claim about the fundamentally Žižekian nature of the metaphysical

ties contemporary opera has been articulating over the last thirty years be concretely traced back within the works of composers like Lachenmann, Haas, Neuwirth, Saariaho etc.? As I have already mentioned above, I will not answer directly this question here, as I intend to do it extensively in a later article. What I intend to do in the following pages is merely to set the stage for such an inquiry, to attempt by means of a significant case in point to circumscribe the position this ontological horizon assumes within the operatic genre. So, it is time to consider how Hans Werner Henze deals with the embodiment of the humanist premises that the operatic genre relies upon, i.e. the orphic myth, and in particular his late work *Aristaeus*. Here a composer who fully lived through the aporia of opera in the 20th century makes an (ultimately unsuccessful, and precisely as such significant) attempt to define the metaphysical space from which a truly modern opera, an opera fully assuming the nonexistence of the big Other and its ontological implications, could arise.

### **The pathos of being human: How Orpheus goes terribly awry**

Sometimes admiration takes on strange forms: During a short stay in Bern to conduct Stravinsky's ballet *Orpheus* in 1981, Hans Werner Henze recalled in a journal entry how upon first hearing Stravinsky's ballet under the baton of Hans Rosbaud in 1949 he immediately felt the work was "something very important for my musical thought" (Henze 1997: 246). When between 1978 and 1979 he came to compose his own ballet on the orphic subject, based on a scenario by Edward Bond, he nevertheless delivered what would seem to be a programmatic reversal of Stravinsky's glowingly praised work: if in Stravinsky Apollo in a highly Monteverdian gesture ultimately sublimates Orpheus' loss in pure song (the final apotheosis), in Henze's ballet Apollo acts as a – in the composer's own words – "crafty and cruel heavenly potentate" capable of "robbing humans of their lives, standing in the way of their happiness, and destroying love" (Henze 1996: 457). But it is at the level of the music that this strange reversal makes its presence even more conspicuously felt: what for Stravinsky represents one of his most emotionally detached scores, "whose severely hieratic tone [...] lends the action a mysterious, repressed quality – the character of a liturgy enacted beyond the iconostasis" (Walsh 2017: n. p.), becomes for Henze a music deeply rooted in his own aesthetic of expression, of "instrumental eloquence" ("*instrumentale Beredsamkeit*"), of music as "speaking expressivity" ("*sprechender Ausdruck*"). As Henze puts it, his aim with his Orpheus-ballet was:

to make a work of theatre, of instrumental theatre, in which the singing voices are replaced by gestures, postures and dance steps, and in which this muting necessitates a different, instrumental eloquence, a speaking expressivity, [...] also narrative and declamatory, and consistently focused on the plot (Henze 1979: 34).

Confronted with the myth that at its utmost embodies the humanist ties of the operatic genre, Henze, conscious of humanism's problematic position within the modernist discourse, especially after the Holocaust, opts to neither deny those ties by celebrating in a Stravinsky-esque move a noumenal dimension beyond human subjectivity, nor to deconstruct opera and humanism from within by composing an opera as the very parody of the genre and its humanist implications (like Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, which significantly premiered the year before Henze's ballet). Instead Henze seems cunningly to blend the two options: he chooses on the one hand to take the humanist dimension of the orphic myth seriously (within the ballet Orpheus acts as an autonomous agent of emancipation, as a stand-in for the subject's own power of making *human* history, as we will see more in detail in a moment, and the music is conceived as an act of expression and intersubjective communication, as Henze's words quoted above make perfectly clear), but at the same time he displaces this humanist dimension in another genre. Indeed, in Henze's ballet the bodies and the musical instruments not only convey the work's humanist appeal, but also and above all take on the task of the operatic voice, the task of expressive presence, of guaranteeing the (acoustic) tangibility of the subject. At this point a question obviously arises: why choose this displacement, this suppression of the voice (and this, from a composer who throughout his entire career before and after this ballet found his most clear means of artistic expression in opera)? If in the end Henze reifies the humanist dimension both in its aesthetic (expressive) and anthropological dimension (the category of the subject), why couldn't he compose an Orpheus *opera*? Let's take a closer look at the finale of Henze's and Bond's ballet.

In the very last scene of the work Orpheus, in his desperation at having lost Eurydice a second time, breaks the lyre and in fury turns his back on Apollo, who departs offended.<sup>7</sup> Now left alone, Orpheus takes the broken lyre and tentatively begins to play. At this point Bond's scenario reads:

"To the new music the dead rise out of hell  
They are resurrected and changed  
Calm happiness and contented joy

Children climbing over the edge of the world

Hell is emptied

Orpheus dances with Eurydice

The music of Apollo is the music of men"<sup>8</sup>

And Henze explains this final moment as follows:

Orpheus attempts to play using what is left of the shattered instrument. And he succeeds: at first just one chord, pitiful and without language. Then a second, a third, then a link begins to form between the three chords, and new music gradually ensues. The only thing that ties this new music with its predecessor is the fact that it has detached itself from and rejected it. Its basis is another: the new tonal relations draw on the experience of desperation, madness and self-destruction, yet also allow the full light of happiness and joy to be shed upon that experience. [...] Throughout the work, the thematic focus is on putting an end to suffering and superstition, and on the fulfillment of human beings on planet Earth. (Henze 1979: 42)

In this "vision of a resurrection on Earth" (Petersen 2004: 145), in which the Apollonian music, grounded in a cruelly ambivalent transcendence, becomes purely human, we see Henze's humanist commitment at its most evident. But what kind of humanism is Henze endorsing here?

In 1959 the German poet Ingeborg Bachmann, one of Henze's closest friends, wrote a short but very dense essay on the relationship between music and words titled *Musik und Dichtung* ('Music and Poetry', Bachmann 1978: 59-62): this essay plays a key role within Henze's aesthetic credo and the composer quotes it almost entirely in one of his most extended programmatic writings, *Die geistige Rede der Musik* ('The Spiritual Speech of Music'), published the same year as Bachmann's essay (Henze 1984: 52-61). Bachmann's main point is her praise of song ("*der Gesang*") as that sublime point at which on the one hand words overcome the limits of signification and reach a dimension beyond meaning, and on the other, music, in a contrary move, "becomes liable" ("*haftbar*"), i.e., it enters into a dialogue with the dimension of signification, avoiding the meaninglessness of a self-reflexive folding back into an autonomous discourse of pure signifiers. If this, at least with regard to music, overtly echoes the same anxieties concerning the meaninglessness of music once bereft of its noumenal base lying at the core of the operatic genre and its invention by the humanist intellectuals of the Florentine Camerata more than three hundred years earlier,

Bachmann's argument nevertheless aims at something more than just outlining a mutually beneficial, convergent path for music and poetry (a convergent path, which clearly opposes the abstract "formalism" of the Darmstadt avant-garde, the leading musical movement at the time). Indeed, the union of both arts in *Gesang* is rooted according to Bachmann in a third element, which is the very reason for their encounter: the human voice ("*die Stimme*"). Here resides the ultimate goal of Bachmann's essay.

Rather than being that Lacanian partial object coinciding with an unarticulated, traumatic scream, song and music, in their attempt to stifle it, ultimately revolve around it; for Bachmann the voice is the corporeal support, the bodily premise of *Gesang*. It is precisely in the physicality of the voice, in its being irrevocably doomed to the finitude of a biological organ, that *Gesang* becomes the true expression of a *conditio humana* conceived under the sign of death, suffering and decay. The voice thus becomes nothing less than the ultimate pivot for reformulating the humanist project after Auschwitz; a goal she shares with a large part of the German intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s, in particular with those writers like Heinrich Böll or Günter Grass gathering in the so called *Gruppe 47* and committed to a Sartrean ideal of *littérature engagée*. And indeed just a few years before releasing the essay discussed above, Bachmann wrote a short poem on the subject of Orpheus titled *Dunkles zu sagen* (which Henze unfortunately never put to music): in the carefully constructed chiasmus between the first strophe, where the mythic singer "plays death on the strings [*Saiten*] of life" ("*Wie Orpheus spiel ich / auf den Saiten des Lebens den Tod*") and the last one, where the lyrical self like Orpheus knows "that life stands beside [*auf der Seite von*] death" ("*Aber wie Orpheus weiß ich / auf der Seite des Todes das Leben*"), Bachmann allows Orpheus to become the very symbol of this new kind of humanism rooted in the dimension of suffering and finitude, of that dimension which primarily inscribed itself in the human body. And it is this kind of humanism, which could be referred to as a humanism of pathos, that Henze and Bond celebrate at the end of the ballet.

At this point Henze's decision to retell the orphic myth by bypassing opera, adopting instead the genre of the ballet, and at the same time to let the musical instruments take over the expressive function traditionally associated with the human voice in the form of an "instrumental theatre", becomes clear: on the one hand the genre of the ballet seems to reflexively carry within itself by means of the stressed physicality proper to the dancing bodies this humanism based on the corporeality of the human condition, which is characterised by finitude and imperfection; on the other, conceiving an orchestral score as "instrumental theatre" guarantees the persistence of

that conception of music as the language of human emotions lying at the core of the operatic genre, though also inserting within it a slightly de-familiarising moment: the minimal alienating gesture of severing the bodily and the acoustic dimensions, those dimensions that opera traditionally unites within the singer's body (the orchestra generally assuming more of a commenting, sustaining function), effectively highlights the new humanism of pathos that Orpheus heralds throughout the entire ballet; one based precisely on the impossibility of that transcendence, of that sublime moment of noumenal fullness, that opera promises to provide by sublimating the character's phenomenal, physical passions (and presence) in his own singing.

Seven years before composing *Orpheus*, Henze captured this kind of "immanent" music, concretely situated within a purely human context, with the concept of "*musica impura*" ("impure music"), which he adopted from the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who formulated it as "*poesia impura*" in order to describe his own poetry with its revolutionary, emancipatory aims. As Henze puts it:

My music is 'impura', as Neruda describes his poems. It doesn't seek to be abstract or clean; it is 'sullied', complete with weaknesses, drawbacks and imperfections. [...] What I want to achieve is to turn music into language [...]; music should be understood in the same way as a language (Henze 1984: 191-192).

And indeed, even if freely dodecaphonic, Henze's music in *Orpheus* continuously strives to 'make points', to 'tell something', giving up in a very Bachmannian way every ideal of an alleged aesthetic purity. How odd it is, then, that precisely the music of *Orpheus*' big humanist finale seems to cast an immense shadow on what it was intended to "mirror," "to make audible, palpable [*fühlbar*] and comprehensible," as the composer programmatically put it (Henze 1979: 42).

Henze inarguably put a great deal of energy into constructing the ballet's last scene, which was described above as the musical manifesto of a humanism of pathos: the German musicologist and noted Henze scholar Peter Petersen noted in a detailed analytical essay on this work from 2004 how Henze at this particular moment of the score introduces a new dodecaphonic row upon which the entire final scene is based (Petersen 2004: 156-158). Tellingly, this new row begins with the last three notes of that Orpheus row which – in a generative tension with that of Apollo – had structured the ballet up to this point: the new humanity, like Orpheus' broken lyre, is thus already at the level of its tonal material rooted in that experience of death, loss and pain Orpheus went through in the course of the work. Furthermore, in order to stress the new, positive meaning that phenomenal imperfection and its constraints acquire within

the coordinates of such a redeemed humanist universe, Henze chooses to leave this row conspicuously incomplete: instead of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale, it consists of only eleven tones. Still not enough, after its tentative beginning, as Orpheus slowly learns to play the broken instrument, the finale reaches its climax with a long, increasingly tense orchestral *tutti* where Henze suddenly has the trumpets play that *Erdgeistquarten*-figure (1-5-1) that Alban Berg so prominently used in *Lulu* to characterise the protagonist's Nietzschean response of 'Yes!' to her tragic fate, clearly highlighting once again the rootedness of his social utopia in the dark regions of human suffering.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it is precisely in the very last moments of the finale, at the point where Henze overtly evokes mankind's taking on of a messianic task, that the carefully constructed climax becomes uncanny (see example 1): the stiff triolic rhythm arising from the percussion, quickly taken over from the entire orchestra in threefold forte and culminating in the perfect fifth C#-G# of the closing *tutti* accord, together with the prominent role of the wind instruments, which are explicitly associated throughout the entire ballet with the Apollonian sphere, create such a powerfully affirmative gesture that suddenly the ghost of Apollo's brutal power seems to reappear in an even more compelling form. If, as Petersen put it, for Henze the goal of art is ultimately "to shake the listener or spectator to their core, to transform them beyond all ideologems, to evoke the shocking experience that their tranquilised view on the nature of the world can be changed, that they can try out a new attitude towards the world" (Petersen 2004: 143-144), then this finale seems to oddly direct the shock not toward the listener and their discursive coordinates but rather towards itself, acoustically denying what it asserts at the level of the drama. Instead of the new common, of the realised humanist utopia of mankind fraternally accepting its own finitude under the sign of Orpheus' music, as the action on stage wants us to believe, Henze's music seems to resurrect Apollo in the guise of Orpheus, making the finale into a puzzling point of reversal, where, to put it in Lacanian terms, Kant meets the Marquis de Sade. In the humanitarian shape of a *pathei mathos*, of Orpheus' "learning from suffering," a new master is born here, by means of which power and its normative pressure reappear.

Nearly twenty-five years later, in *Aristaeus* Henze seems to reflect on this impasse by addressing once again the orphic myth and the powerful link between subjectivity and music it entails, but this time – at least tentatively – *beyond* any humanist framework whatsoever. And precisely in order to properly understand Henze's late and renewed involvement with Orpheus and the humanist legacy, we first

596

fl. 1 2

ob. 4

cor angl.

clar. 1 2

bass clar.

bsn. 1 2

hr. 1 3 5

tr. 1 2 3

tr.b. 1 2 3

bass tb.

guit.

cel.

harp

pno.

perc. I

perc. II

perc. III

perc. IV

viol. 1 5 6 9

vla. 1 4

vcl. 1 4

d. b. 1 3

1083

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Example 1

Hans Werner Henze: *Orpheus. Eine Geschichte in sechs Szenen* von Edward Bond, last page.



have to outline the contours of the uncanny stalemate to be found in the finale of the *Orpheus* ballet highlighted above. Indeed, the fact that the establishment of a new humanism grounded in the dimension of pathos seems to acoustically generate its own opposite should be considered not as a musical or compositional problem, as a somehow inadequate artistic rendering of the renewed humanist agenda Henze and Bond were trying to outline with their work, but as a genuine philosophical problem, as a flaw within the work's metaphysical premises. And this has everything to do with that *enjeu* between sublimation and the sublime that Žižek so compellingly articulates throughout his entire work.

### **On apes, chameleons and the empty space between canines: Humanism and its biopolitical surplus**

In one of his later works, the Swedish naturalist and father of modern taxonomy Carl Linnaeus writes:

Just as the shoemaker sticks to his task, I must remain in my workshop and consider man and his body as a naturalist, who hardly knows a single distinguishing mark which separates man from the apes, save for the fact that the latter have an empty space between their canines and their other teeth.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Linnaeus is defending himself against the protests triggered by his bold gesture of assigning man (*homo*) to the order of the *Anthropomorpha* in his magnum opus, the *Systema naturae* from 1735: by means of this classification Linnaeus had actually compelled man to share the same place within the natural order as other “manlike” animals like the lemurs or the apes. And indeed, what distinguishes man from his anthropomorphic fellows is for Linnaeus not a physical feature but a sort of categorical imperative, i.e. that adjective ‘*sapiens*’ Linnaeus adds to the name of the species *Homo* starting from the tenth edition of his *Systema*. For Linnaeus it is only the extent to which the species *homo* is able to “know himself”, to be aware of his own being in the world, that sets man apart from the apes.

In his 2002 book *The Open*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers among others to this taxonomic anomaly in Linnaeus' system, which he claims compelled the Swedish naturalist, precisely when it came to classifying man, to make an exemption to his own rules and conflate bodily with “spiritual” features: Without this exception man would irremediably fall back into the animal kingdom. And it is not

without a degree of irony that Agamben turns his attention in the next chapter of his book to the foundational text of Western humanism, i.e., Pico della Mirandola's oration *De hominis dignitate* from 1486. As he puts it:

The paradigm that it [Pico's oration, A/D] presents is anything but edifying. For the central thesis of the oration is that man, having been moulded when the models of creation were all used up, can have neither archetype nor proper place nor specific rank. [...] Insofar as he has neither essence nor specific vocation, *Homo* is constitutively nonhuman; [...] and Pico can ironically emphasize his inconsistency and unclassifiability by defining him as 'our chameleon' (Agamben 2004: 29-30).

Further, Agamben provocatively concludes: "The humanist discovery of man is the discovery that he lacks himself" (Agamben 2004: 29-30). What Agamben points out here is the fact that any attempt to define a specifically human domain (and together with it every form of humanism) involves creating caesuras within man himself, "holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human" (Agamben 2004: 29). What every humanism relies upon is ultimately a zone of indifference, within which uncanny creatures at the same time more and less than themselves dwell, like the overcomatose as that man who doesn't know himself anymore; the *homo alalus* or "ape-man" ("*Affenmensch*") as that primeval form of man which still deprived of language was the "missing link" in the passage from ape to man in Ernst Haeckel's influential theory of evolution at the end of the 19th century; or, of course, the Jew under the Third Reich as that biological being considered more than animal but less than human. It is because of this immanent by-product, of this continuously shifting place of a "ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae [between man and animal, A/D] and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew" (Agamben 2004: 38) that any "apolitical" appeal to a "common humanity" whatsoever becomes a highly political matter. Accordingly, Agamben writes that, "in our culture, the decisive political conflict [...] is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics" (Agamben 2004: 80).

Nevertheless, Agamben seems to conceive of this uncanny dialectical reversal, by means of which humanism transforms into its exact opposite, as both a baffling stalemate and inescapable event. In a captivating monograph from 2011 titled *The Royal Remains* the literary scholar Eric Santner instead approaches it from a Žižekian perspective and attaches to this zone of indifference a more concrete historical profile by at the same time inserting it within a well-defined theoretical context. It is by briefly

considering Santner's own reflections on humanism and biopolitics that we can find the intellectual coordinates for understanding both Henze's own impasse with the orphic myth at the end of the ballet and his puzzling retelling of the Orpheus story nearly twenty-five years later in *Aristaeus*.

\* \* \*

Santner's starting point is Ernst Kantorowicz's magnum opus *The King's Two Bodies* from 1957; this monograph, in which the historian famously lays bare the peculiar intertwining of politics and theology within the western discourse on sovereignty from the Middle Ages to the early Renaissance by considering the concept of the king's two bodies, i.e. the fundamental distinction, conceived in analogy to Christ's dual nature, between the natural, physical body of the king, subject to decay and death, and his "supernatural" one, characterized *angelicus*, which makes the sovereign, albeit a mortal man, the very embodiment of the community, of the body politic. In this respect Santner asks a simple, but very specific question: what way of life arises when, starting with the French Revolution at the latest, the dual nature of sovereignty, gradually losing its theological support, becomes self-reflexive and rooted in the immanence of a purely human, finite horizon? Or, more concretely, how does it affect our lives when sovereignty passes from the king, legitimated by God, to the People, legitimated by themselves? As Santner succinctly puts it in a later monograph on the subject, resuming his main line of argumentation:

My claim was [...] that the 'stuff' of the king's glorious body – the virtually real supplement to his empirical, mortal body – was in some sense dispersed into new locations as a spectral materiality – I called it a *surplus of immanence* – that summoned on the scene new forms and practices of knowledge, power, and administration charged – or rather, *surcharged* – with coming to terms with and, indeed, cultivating these 'royal remains' injected into the life of the People (Santner 2015: 23).

Santner's point is that in modernity the "supernatural", transcendent second body of the king, which is what makes him the very embodiment of the community, persists within the finite, purely human horizon of our socio-political space as an uncanny surplus, as something which – inadmissible as such within the secular, immanently discursive coordinates of modernity – constantly resurfaces, displaced and misplaced, in symptomatic forms (the Aryan community, the communist society, Fukuyama's neoliberal end of history etc.). Santner's point is thus that the true nature of modernity, both in its political and cultural meaning, lies in this intermingling of transcendence and

immanence, or better in a *surplus of immanence*. More generally, our entire modern condition has to be understood as revolving around this *excess within immanence* itself clinging to our purely human offices and duties and thus disrupting from within our socio-symbolic, cultural space; an excess that Santner calls “the Flesh”.

Accordingly, for Santner biopolitics means not only the control of politics over life, producing the surplus of a zone of indifference by means of which every “ideal man” generates his own uncanny negative, as Agamben highlights in the monograph quoted above. For Santner “the Flesh”, this excessive zone of indifference within humanism’s proclaimed immanence is not only a spectral by-product, but a libidinally invested space representing the very locus from which the entire dialectic between bio- and *thanatos*-politics, between humanism and its internal doppelganger, originates.<sup>11</sup> And it is here that Santner makes a much less Lacanian and far more genuinely Žižekian move by conflating the Kantian sublime with Freud’s sublimation in the form of Žižek’s theory of the “sublime object”:<sup>12</sup> indeed “the Flesh”, that “impossible” space at the intersection between the biological facticity of our bodies and the culturally constructed network of signs, roles, offices and meanings constituting the dimension of the symbolic, is nothing more than the empty space, the Real, that the Žižekian sublime object stands for; that Real, which the sublime object at the same time both conceals and embodies: the excess within immanence itself forever haunting our purely human political space and more generally the anthropological horizon of humanism thus reifies itself in those mysterious, ungraspable ‘things’ (persons, ideas, functions, items etc.), which precisely by being ultimately nothing more than empty signifiers serve to channel and focus our enjoyment, our libido, and thus guarantee the experience of a “meaningful” universe; like the king’s *corpus angelicus* did within the political space prior to its rearticulation within a humanist, finite horizon, these sublime objects successfully offer stand-ins, objects of libidinal investment for the disrupting, meaningless presence of the Real.

For Santner, then, biopolitics is first of all the management of these objects vibrating at the “sublime” point where our culturally constituted space of functions, titles, offices, goals etc. encounters the meaningless life-substance of our enjoyment. It is precisely by means of this encounter that this symbolic space becomes “meaningful” and worth investigating, the locus in which our sense of existential legitimacy, of being embedded in a life-world is rooted. As such, these sublime objects thus linger at the same place where Agamben locates the by-product of biopolitics, i.e. the zone of exception. As empty, purely functional vessels capturing our enjoyment within the

symbolic network, sublime objects thus can be positively as well as negatively connoted “things” (Freedom and Terrorism) and are often both at the same time (the Woman or the Jew in Fritz Hippler’s ominous “documentary” *The Eternal Jew* from 1940, in which the Jew is depicted as both a “less than human” rat-like creature and as the decadently sophisticated seducer of high-class German girls).

In addition (and we are now thus gradually returning to the more aesthetically related concerns our inquiry began with), the Flesh is also for Santner the subject matter of aesthetic modernism: in his view modernism neither mourns transcendence, nor seeks to reformulate it under new premises, nor sings of the liberating power of pure immanence. Instead, aesthetic modernism constitutes itself as an exploration of the interstitial zone between immanence and transcendence that modernity revolves around, of the continuously open “in-between” between finitude and the infinite, between our biological being and its cultural inscription. As he retrospectively puts it:

My further claim was [in *The Royal Remains* from 2011, A/D] that a variety of modernist aesthetic projects had found their own ways to elaborate and give provisional form to the *informe* surplus of immanence pushing against the skin of “modern man,” to the inflammatory pressure emerging at a newly configured jointure of the somatic and the normative, [...] of man’s being as animal and his being as locus of initiative in the space of reasons, commitments, responsibilities (Santner 2015: 24).

\* \* \*

When we now come back to Henze’s Orpheus ballet and its celebration of a new humanism rooted in the dimension of pathos, of finitude and suffering, we can clearly see that what music did in the ballet’s finale, by opening a spectral abyss in the very core of its explicit humanist message, was merely to expose, to lay bare the dimension of the Flesh concealed by the humanist narrative of the drama. What Henze’s music did was to make it clear that the humanism of pathos so characteristic of German culture after Auschwitz was nothing more than a sublime object.

Indeed, while working on the ballet Henze had an intriguing dream. Almost twenty years later, in his autobiography *Reiselieder mit böhmischen Quinten* from 1996, the composer recalls:

[I, A/D] dreamt about two groups of people engaged in discussion, workers who were divided by a fence or barrier. They say the goal is to use contemplation to arrive at peaceful solutions and lead happier lives. And I heard how the Pope decreed that,

wherever a contradiction – a gap within the structure – should arise, it was promptly to be covered with a cloth of crimson velvet (Henze 1996: 463).

At this point it is easy and almost banal to read the “crimson velvet” concealing “the gap within the structure” as a quite literal (and *ante litteram*) embodiment of a Žižekian sublime object. In his dream (and in his music) Henze thus confronts the real truth (or the truth of the Real) concerning his own attempt to establish a humanism of pathos: by framing humanity in a Schopenhauerian move as “*Leidenwesen*”, as a being of and in pathos, Henze and Bond are merely reiterating with inverted poles the previous, “Apollonian” humanism of rational control and hierarchic harmony, of man as the rational animal, the defining trait of which consists in its ability to overcome nature. They are merely creating a new caesura within man himself and displacing it within a new sublime object.

The fact that, notwithstanding the refined formal strategy of splitting the operatic union of body and song by means of an instrumental theatre in ballet form, Apollo’s authoritarian gesture acoustically shines through when Orpheus’ new, purely human music resounds at its utmost is the very proof that Henze at least in his music doesn’t act like the pope, to put in the metaphorical terms of his dream: Henze, both *through* and *in music*, succeeds in questioning precisely those aesthetic and intellectual premises that his composition rests upon. Ultimately the disquieting question the ballet-finale asks us, precisely through its affirmative tones, is how we can overcome the logic of the sublime object, of the “master signifier”, that quilts the symbolic space by capturing our enjoyment. But in *Orpheus* Henze – and this is actually *the* point of our analysis – fails to answer this question: despite acoustically questioning its own overt agenda, Henze’s music doesn’t assume in itself *the nonexistence of the Other*, i.e. it is unable to work through the impasse at the core of the sublime object, to “traverse the fantasy” of a mankind conceived as “*Leidenwesen*” and to make the void that the sublime object revolves around the very starting point of the composition. To put it in Santner’s terms, Henze acts like a *modernist* composer by openly dealing in the ballet with the excessive dimension of the Flesh, with the “surplus of immanence” at the core of both the old Apollonian humanism he openly criticizes and the new, more Dionysian one he overtly champions while at the same time calling it into question, at least acoustically. Nevertheless, what Henze does not do is to transform the awareness of the excessive dimension of his humanism of pathos, of its being nothing but “a little piece of the Real”, a libidinally invested sublime object, into the very position from which his music “speaks”. Nearly twenty-five years later, by returning one last time to the orphic myth in his melodrama *Aristaeus*, the old composer seems to take a step

in this direction, tentatively exploring a dramatic and acoustic/compositional dimension beyond the sublime object.

### **Nothingness is not enough: The beekeeper always whistles twice**

After having published around the year 38 B.C. his first major work, the *Bucolics*, which celebrated the consoling power of an idealized nature against the backdrop of the difficult political situation in Rome following the murder of Julius Caesar six years earlier, in the *Georgics* the Roman poet Virgil uses the metaphor of agriculture to praise the transformative power of man's work, which can successfully bring together nature and culture. In this respect, one of the most prominent figures in the poem is Aristaeus, the beekeeper, son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene, who, driven by his sexual desire for Eurydice, involuntarily causes her death and consequently loses his beehives. After having discovered in the course of a long journey the link between the two facts, he thus sacrifices four heifers and four bulls at Eurydice's grave. After nine days a new colony of bees is born from the rotting carcasses.

Virgil's Parsifal-esque story of sacrifice and redemption, promising a new covenant between man and nature and letting resound a proleptic echo of Wagner's *Karfreitagszauber* (Good Friday Spell), is precisely what we *don't* find in Henze's melodrama. On the contrary, the composer, who also wrote the libretto, seems to aim at inverting this narrative by leaving Aristaeus deadlocked in a gloomy realm between life and death. Indeed, in Henze, too, the beekeeper chases Eurydice and by distracting her with a loud and quite rude whistle causes her death by snakebite. Nevertheless he is not allowed to cross the Styx and thus to bring Eurydice into the realm of the dead, which seems to be the true, Tristan-esque motive for his puzzling behaviour. Aristaeus becomes resentful and as soon as Orpheus, oddly masked like a silly operatic tenor, comes to the rescue, makes him glance back at his beloved with another of his whistles: Eurydice now does traverse the Styx and leaves Aristaeus behind, locked in this desperate limbo. The work ends with the speaker reciting some verses Henze pieced together from the Orpheus episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. They depict mankind's tragic destiny, compelled after a brief moment of exception to eternally inhabit the "silencing emptiness" ("*verstummenden Öd*") of the "charmless region" ("*anmutlosen Bezirk*"):

"We all wend our way to thee, king of the charmless region.

Deep in the night when our time has come,

Sooner or later we will all roam to the same abode.

As such, Henze's late melodrama would appear to be a resigned commentary on the Orpheus ballet, explicitly reversing its great humanist finale. If Henze in the previous work celebrated man's power to accept his own finitude, in *Aristaeus* a sombre tone of defeat prevails: here, mankind bows its head when faced with the overwhelming tragedy of its own destiny. And the music itself seems to confirm this retrospective, mournfully self-reflexive approach: essentially, *Aristaeus*' music is nothing more than a collection of extracts from the composer's previous works, mostly from his Orpheus ballet, but we can also find the first forty-four bars of the orchestral *Barcarola*, which Henze wrote in memoriam of Paul Dessau in 1979, and three episodes from his five-part cycle for a cappella choir *Orpheus behind the wire* from 1983, based on Edward Bond's poems protesting the dictatorship in Argentina, now transcribed for orchestra.<sup>13</sup> So, are we ultimately dealing here with the melancholic wisdom of an old composer looking back, both musically and in terms of his *Weltanschauung*, on the false hopes of his youth? Is the composer here "just" recognizing the failure of a humanism of pathos? Yes, undoubtedly; nevertheless, that's certainly not the whole truth.

Indeed, in dealing with this late work the real question to be asked is another one: how does Henze frame both musically and at the dramatic level the failure of his former humanism of pathos in *Aristaeus*? If the odd finale of the Orpheus ballet can be successfully interpreted within the coordinates of Žižek's theory of the sublime object, can *Aristaeus* too be effectively read along these lines? Or, to put it another way, by openly dismissing his previous humanism of pathos is Henze making an attempt to assume the nonexistence of the Other in *Aristaeus*? Is he trying here to overcome the logic of a master signifier quilting the symbolic space by capturing our enjoyment, which lies at the core of the sublime object, without falling into some kind of nihilistic stance? Let us first consider the work at the level of the drama and ask a very simple question: who is Aristaeus?

\* \* \*

One of the most prominent techniques Edward Hopper adopts in his canvas in order to construct that peculiar visual experience dubbed 'the American Sublime' is notoriously to depict a real existing object as if an absent, intangible frame were at work, enclosing it. It is not simply that 'something is missing', but on the contrary, precisely by being absent, not visually there, this implicit frame is oppressively present, thus structuring the entire field of vision, and the woodhouse at the top of a hill suddenly becomes the sublime, ungraspable and somehow disquieting object the



viewer is compelled to fantasize about (What does the house mean? Why is it so important? Did something happen there in the past? etc.).<sup>14</sup> Once again, what we see here is the Žižekian logic of the sublime object at its most elementary: not the object as such (the house, the bar at night etc.) but the void surrounding the object, framing it, is what makes the object 'sublime', i.e., ungraspable and as such the focus of our libidinal engagement within the field of the visible.

In Henze's work the beekeeper represents precisely this void, the absent frame itself. Indeed, the fundamental error in reading this melodrama is to interpret his protagonist as a character, as a somehow 'real' person. On the contrary, throughout the entire work the beekeeper has no real profile himself; instead, he is caught up in a whole range of strange *non-sequiturs* (Why does he whistle twice and then apparently regret having done so? Why does he want to be a murderer, instead of living somewhere with Eurydice or just raping her? etc.). At the dramatic level Aristaeus is nothing more than an acousmatic whistle, impossible to pin down, to be reckoned with, to be brought back to a coherent psychological profile, even a mentally ill one: he is merely the agent of a double loss. As such, Aristaeus is that hollowness which the work of sublimation relies upon, nothing more than that uncanny zone of exception between nature and culture, between life and death, which – as highlighted above – lies at the core of every sublime object: by means of his whistling, he makes Eurydice that ungraspable, always-already lost object Orpheus sublimates in his singing.

And so, when at the end of the work Henze affirms that with Eurydice's death "the world has transformed itself back into a stage for tragedies", he is not (just) saying that human existence is sad, deadlocked between the longing for eternity and finitude. Instead, we have to take him quite literally: he is using the word "tragedy" intentionally, explicitly drawing a link between the void as the background, the absent frame from which alone the sublime object arises, and artistic sublimation. Like tragedy itself, Orpheus' singing is only possible from the background of the – through Aristaeus' repeated intervention – lost object, namely Eurydice. What Henze is affirming here is that the tragedy of the human condition originates from precisely the same mechanism of sublimation from which the work of art arises, thus linking subjectivity, art and society around the tragic logic of the sublime object. Nevertheless, Henze concentrates in *Aristaeus* not on the dynamic of the sublime object and on the inescapability of its dialectic as the "tragic" source of artistic creation as well as the root of the human condition, thus mournfully singing of some kind of Agambian zone of exception. On the

contrary, precisely by means of the puzzling figure of the beekeeper, Henze focuses his retelling of the Orphic myth on the void itself. Let's clarify this point.

It is important to point out that what is at work in the passage from the ballet to the late melodrama is a dialectic process, and a strictly Hegelian one: if in the *Orpheus* ballet Henze negated the humanism of logos and triumphantly established a new humanism of pathos, what we find in *Aristaeus* is nothing more than a Hegelian negation of the negation. This doesn't mean that Henze returns to some kind of newly articulated humanism of logos; on the contrary, just as in Hegel's dialectic, what Henze achieves here is the dimension concluding the entire dialectical process, i.e., that of absolute negativity. What *Aristaeus* ultimately is about is thus the very lack, the very stain of negativity at the core of both humanisms that Henze's compositional and personal path revolves around: by exposing their fundamental openness/negativity, revealing their status as false totalities, Henze attempts in *Aristaeus* in a very Žižekian/Hegelian move to consciously embrace this impasse, to reflexively inscribe the negative lurking at the core of Orpheus' humanist myth and the operatic genre into the work itself, thus reaching that point of absolute negativity at which the dialectic process ends.

At this point the coarse mistake to be avoided is to conceive Hegel's absolute negativity as *the* zero point of absolute stillness, where nothing else happens, where some kind of ultimate truth, even if a negative one, reveals itself. Absolute negativity is not a gloomy nirvana of desperate certainty, it is not 'Nothing,' but a strange place before nothingness itself, or, as Žižek puts it, it is 'less than nothing': Henze's melodrama and its music are at no point sarcastic or grotesque, distanced from the drama they unfold and cynically speaking from some external vantage point of ultimate truth; they are not telling us that everything, once the curtain of sublimating song is stripped away, is truly bad out there. (But out of what? Of the limbo *Aristaeus* is dwelling in? And how can limbo be the place to find metaphysical truth? Isn't limbo precisely *the* place where ultimate truth is *per definitionem* impossible?). Henze's *Aristaeus* is not telling us that art, singing and ultimately meaning itself are merely "made-up": the work is not a simple nihilistic act of radical desublimation. On the contrary, absolute negativity and Henze's melodrama are the uncanny point at which there is neither truth nor falseness, neither something nor nothing, but both are suspended, out of order, caught up within that void lying at the core of the binary logic of the sublime object, of truth and untruth, of pathos and logos. So, ultimately, we have to conceive *Aristaeus* in its dramatic content as an exploration of this zone of

indeterminacy between life and death, between nature and culture, which constitutes the pre-ontological status from which sublimation and thus every kind of humanism, the arts and ultimately the entire symbolic network structuring our 'reality' originate. But how does this dimension of absolute negativity inscribe itself into the music?

Henze begins his melodrama with an overture extrapolated from the music concluding the first act of his Orpheus ballet; the overture is thus nothing more than what in the original ballet was the dispute between Apollo and Orpheus after Eurydice's death and the refusal of the latter to be consoled by the former: *Aristaeus* thus begins where Monteverdi ends, rejecting the Monteverdian solution of sublimating Eurydice's loss in Apollonian song. The music is structured around a clear contrast between the wind instruments with their syncopic, aggressive gesture and the tormented 'espressivo' of the strings; a device used to represent the antagonism between Apollo and Orpheus in the original ballet. But here the acoustic opposition, which Henze cunningly allows to resonate throughout the entire work, even in the pieces not extrapolated from the Orpheus ballet, is decontextualized and reflected back onto *Aristaeus* himself, the only figure of this solipsistic drama, and a figure, as highlighted before, with no psychological consistency of its own. *Aristaeus* as a mere empty whistle is thus inscribed in a music that, to put it bluntly, goes nowhere; a music that keeps the "speaking expressivity", the "instrumental eloquence" of the original scores but which at the same time no longer "means" anything, the antagonisms it referred to (Apollo vs. Orpheus, the present misère vs. the utopian future etc.) being no longer present in the new dramatic context. The music paradoxically reaffirms Henze's aesthetic of a humanist "*musica impura*", while at the same time remaining utterly meaningless, deadlocked as it is in antagonisms alienated from their contexts of reference.

In this respect it is significant how Henze chooses to conclude the work: this time he doesn't select a piece from the Orpheus ballet, selecting instead the last song from his later cycle *Orpheus behind the wire* for a cappella choir from 1983.<sup>15</sup> The text by Edward Bond evokes, just as the preceding ballet had, the triumph of "the still music of Orpheus" over man's suffering and the brutal exercise of power, presenting this triumph as being achieved within the space of the short poem: the first strophe ends by still yearning "*I wish for the still music of Orpheus*", while the last instead positively affirms in the here and now: "Then *I hear the music of Orpheus / Of triumph / Of freedom*" (Bond 2006: 33, italics mine). It is interesting to note how already in the setting for a cappella choir Henze (unlike Bond) seems to have become aware – at least musically – of the problem at the core of his previous celebration of Orpheus' triumph in the

ballet. Indeed, on the one hand, unlike the triumphalist consonance of perfect fifths concluding the ballet and acoustically undermining the work's explicit agenda by evoking in the guise of Orpheus the spectre of Apollo, in *Orpheus behind the wire* Henze sets the final verses on a nearly static B-major chord dissonantly enriched with a minor ninth in threefold forte (see example 2): by means of the dissonance Henze in the song cycle more aptly links Orpheus' triumph to the dimension of suffering proper of the humanist pathos that he and Bond still intend to celebrate. On the other, in the penultimate bar of the score we have a sudden diminuendo to a threefold piano, thus shifting Orpheus' painful triumph to a remote acoustic horizon: Henze highlights here, unlike in the previous ballet and without any textual support (Bond's poem suggesting in fact exactly the opposite, as we have highlighted above), an open-ended, always-already 'still-to-come' character of Orpheus' triumph and at the same time lightens, as it were, the dissonant texture of the music by allowing it to resonate in some kind of auratically sublime distance. So, having become aware (at least musically) of the problematic stance of his humanism of pathos and confronting the same task of composing a music celebrating Orpheus' triumph like he did in the ballet four years earlier, Henze cunningly opts in the song cycle for a compromise of sorts: acoustically, this triumph is not only "painful" (the dissonance) but also, thanks to the sudden diminuendo, not really there, caught up in a messianic dimension, in the absolute futurity of a Derridean *à-venir*; something that at the same time, as highlighted above, avoids the risk of undermining by means of an all-too-strong presence of the disruptive dissonance the very triumph the music is meant to celebrate.

Nearly twenty-five years later Henze sets the same music, this time transcribed for orchestra, at the end of *Aristaeus*. Nevertheless, and this is, as it were, the whole catch here, he foregoes the concluding diminuendo (see example 3). Also considering the new, outright gloomy dramatic context in which the music resounds (Bond's poem is, of course, not recited by the speaker), what we are facing here is a wholly 'new' finale: by potentializing the dissonantly open dimension of the music and renouncing every celebratory intention in the drama, what Henze accomplishes here is to make out of this former "sublimely" triumphant music an acoustic signpost for the over-present anguish of the Real, for being trapped like Aristaeus himself in the formless 'less than nothing' preceding sublimation, deprived of any sublime object whatsoever by means of which reality could be structured. So what we see here, to put it in visual terms, is the passage from Hopper to Lucio Fontana: from the void as the absent but for precisely that reason overpresent frame making up the sublime object (the 'still-to-come' triumph of Orpheus evoked by the sudden pianissimo at the end of

51 *allargando* *ppp*

I  
S  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

II  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

I  
A  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

II  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

*allargando* *ppp*

I  
T  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

II  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

I  
B  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

II  
51 *ppp*  
- - - - - dom  
- - - - - heit

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**Example 2**

Hans Werner Henze: *Orpheus Behind the Wire*, last page.

111

$\text{rit.}$   $\text{♩} = 80$   $\frac{5}{4}$  69 *allargando*  $\frac{6}{4}$

Fl. 2  
Kl. 1  
Bkl. (3)  
Alt-Sax.  
Ob. 1  
E.H. (2)  
Hph. (3)  
Fg. 1  
Kfg. (3)

Hr. 1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6

Tr. 1  
2  
3

Pos. 1  
2  
3

Btb.

Schlz. I Röhrenglocken  
II Metallplatten  
III Vibraphon  
IV Glockenspieler

Cel.  
Klav.

$\text{rit.}$   $\text{♩} = 80$   $\frac{5}{4}$  *allargando*  $\frac{6}{4}$

Vi. I div.  
Vi. II div.  
Va. div.  
Vc. div.  
Kb.

51 410

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**Example 3**

Hans Werner Henze: *Aristaeus. Drama in musica per voce recitante e orchestra*, last page.

*Orpheus behind the wire*), to the void itself in its meaningless power of continual disruption (the empty antagonism between two different musical textures undermining from within the “speaking” character of the music, the open-ended superimposition of dissonance to a consonant chord no longer “softened” by any diminuendo etc.); that void so impressively articulated by Fontana’s most famous canvas, with its cuts disrupting from within the field of vision itself. Musically, there is no melancholic sublimation of death and mourning as the ultimate stronghold of our *Dasein*, and no sublime *Liebestod* is at work here. Instead, Henze leads us to an oxymoronic acoustic space: by explicitly “telling (but) nothing”, his *musica impura* has become uncanny, it becomes its own question, openly assuming the meaningless void of the Real at the core of every sublime object. Ultimately, here Henze’s music reflects back into itself the very incompleteness of being, its inherent lack.

### **Are we (still) missing something? Plato’s *Ion* and the limits of Henze**

In the chapter on Henze from his intriguing monograph on the compositional reception of Mahler’s work during the 20th century, Stephen Downes highlights as the most characteristic trait of Henze’s music “fragmentations and discontinuities”, which “combine with polyglot signals suggesting intertextuality in the Kristevan sense – providing a dynamic dimension to structuralism (through intersections, transformations and juxtapositions that are textually and politically subversive) and, furthermore, generating and intensifying celebratory heteroglossia, a transposition of various signifying systems stimulating reading or listening beyond overt, intentional allusions” (Downes 2013: 233). So, according to Downes “Henze may be pictured as the passionate poet of Plato’s *Ion*, who [...] is inspired to sing or speak with a transgressive plurality of languages with a licence against authority: creative, affirmative, yet dangerous and potentially destructive – struggling to find beautiful forms for the expression of delirium and death, love and horror, a nomad banished by the ruling powers of the repressive Republic” (Downes 2013: 235). In Downes’ account all of these debasing strategies point towards a “tensed, anti-organic position”, and he specifies: “the sense is often one of an approach towards a kind of negative dialectic” (Downes 2013: 204); an aspect that he ultimately ascribes to Henze’s intense relationship with Mahler’s music. It is from this long-standing engagement with Mahler’s work that, according to Downes, originates “his [Henze’s] preoccupation with the conjunction of beauty, love, death and regeneration, in a visionary art that promises the

possibility of 'redemption' but one which is 'multilayered' in its 'illusions and Utopias'" (Downes 2013: 208).

Downes' insights are surely right, we nevertheless need to be more specific here: as we saw above, Henze's "visionary art" with its pointing towards "a kind of negative dialectic" by nevertheless promising "the possibility of redemption" has its ultimate roots in Henze's humanist convictions. In his memoirs from 1996, Henze still steadfastly claims as proper to his music "a concept of beauty that had something to do with the notion of truth – *inner truth, one's own private truth*" (Henze 1996: 152, italics mine). So, the "impossible" centre that Henze's multi-layered utopias and polyglotism revolve around is nothing but his humanist concept of subjectivity as inwardness, as the very locus of an authentic, non-mediated "inner truth" and therefore of music as the privileged language for speaking this truth. This is the "sublime object" from which Henze's dialectic between negativity and utopia originates. And, as we saw above, Henze's Hegelian move in *Aristaeus* consists in "traversing" the hold of this object, in laying bare the void of the Real that it conceals: in *Aristaeus* Henze assumes both at the dramatic as well as the musical level the very fact that at the core of the subject there is no "inner truth", no wealth of ungraspable "deep" feelings, pains etc. marking humanity's own finitude as he celebrated at the end of his Orpheus ballet. On the contrary, in traversing the fantasy of his previous humanism of pathos Henze reveals the fact that in a very Hegelian way the inner truth of the subject is nothingness itself, the emptiness of being nothing more than a purely "heretical" act, a rupture within the texture of being; as Žižek puts it: "to 'unmask the illusion' does not mean that 'there is nothing to see behind it': what we must be able to see is precisely this *nothing as such* [...], *'nothing' which is the subject*" (Žižek 1989: 195). This is the kind of nothingness, of "negative dialectic", to put it in Downes' terms, that Henze fully embraces in *Aristaeus*.

Nevertheless let us conclude by briefly pointing out the limits of Henze's experiment in "tarrying with the negative". First of all, as we highlighted above, his music very well speaks of the "nothing which is the subject", but it does so by employing an unusual degree of self-referentiality: all the musical features we highlighted as acoustically conveying this negative dimension (the "meaningless" antagonism between two different musical textures alienated from their original context of reference, the open-ended superimposition of dissonance to the closing consonant chord of the work etc.) can be perceived as advocating a dimension beyond humanism only if one closely reads the differences and similarities in Henze's use of his own pre-existing music. Without this kind of "philological" work, the music in *Aristaeus*



merely sounds somehow sad and slightly out of touch with the narrative context, thus easily being misperceived as a further articulation of the old *vanitas* topic, as some kind of nihilism with a skewed, surrealist touch.

And second (and last), the fact remains that Henze, in dealing once again with the orphic myth and its humanist ties, refuses just as he did in his previous Orpheus-related works to confront the conundrum lying at the core of every involvement with the operatic genre after the end of humanism, i.e. the uncomfortable presence of the operatic voice itself. In strictly dramaturgical terms, Henze's decision to bypass the operatic voice by means of a spoken text programmatically conveys the anti-humanist turn of the work, effectively marking singing, *ex negativo* as it were, as that "sublime" (and deceptive) moment of presence, of inner, authentic "truth", as that orphic (and humanist) ruse of a "monodic self" (Chua 1999: 34-40 and Chua 2011) that the work seeks to overcome. Nevertheless, at a more strictly musical level, Henze's decision to drastically silence the operatic voice by simultaneously retelling its seminal myth remains utterly unsatisfactory: by delineating both dramaturgically and musically the metaphysical space in which opera must be situated after the end of humanism, Henze nevertheless fails to take the very last step in his own endeavour, refusing to address at the compositional level the crucial question of the voice: ultimately, *Aristaeus*, notwithstanding Henze's telling characterization of it as a "*dramma in musica*", is and remains a monodrama and not an opera; in this sense (but *only* in this sense) one can indeed claim that *Aristaeus* is a "minor" work.

Confronting the operatic voice and its tradition within the coordinates of an anti-humanist universe is the daring musical challenge that composers like those Till discusses in the article mentioned at the beginning of our text have been willingly accepting in the course of the last thirty years. In similar vein, considering this compositional venture from the perspective of Žižek's ontology and his theory of subjectivity is the challenge that we will gladly accept as the subject of a later article.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In this respect the disappointment of Henze's modernist colleagues like Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Pierre Boulez was enormous. In an interview for *Der Spiegel* from 1967 Boulez labelled Henze as nothing more than "a slickly gelled haircut that cherishes a completely superficial form of modernism," and as one who, "just like de Gaulle, can screw up in every way imaginable [and nevertheless] believe he's still the king" (Boulez 1967: 166).

<sup>2</sup> See also my article "The Sound's Remains. Some Thoughts on Harrison Birtwistle's *Orpheus Elegies* (2004) or: Timbre from Kant to Hegel", *Contemporary Music Review* (forthcoming).

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<sup>3</sup> See also Till 2007: 102-114.

<sup>4</sup> See also Tomlinson 1999: 109-142.

<sup>5</sup> Metzger 2009: 175-237.

<sup>6</sup> Here Till refers to Deleuze/Guattari 1987, especially pp. 246-341.

<sup>7</sup> See the scenario in Bond 1979: 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Bond 1979: 30.

<sup>9</sup> See bars 579-581 and 586-588 of the score. On Berg's use of the *Ergeistquarten* in *Lulu*, see Hirsbrunnen 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Linné, Carl von, *Meinnskans Cousiner*, ed. Telemak Fredbärj, Ekenäs, Uppsala 1955, pp. 4-5, quoted in Agamben 2004: 24.

<sup>11</sup> As Santner puts it: "I will argue, however, that this conception of an 'immunological dialectic' [here Santner is referring to Roberto Esposito's reflections on biopolitics, in particular to Esposito 2008 A/D] whereby shelter becomes its own kind of life-threatening exposure, immunity becomes autoimmunity [...] fails to capture the full complexity of the phenomena in question. Something falls through the cracks of the dialectic and keeps returning to its place to initiate the whole process again [...]; this something is the dimension I am trying to capture with the notion of the flesh that both does and does not belong to the life at issue in the efforts at immunization it seems to call forth over and over again" (Santner 2011: 7).

<sup>12</sup> On the originality of Žižek's move and its non-Lacanian roots, see in particular Belsey 2005: 141-148.

<sup>13</sup> There are also a few bars extrapolated from the concluding passage of the third and last movement (titled *Aristeo*) of Henze's sonata for violin solo composed in 1976-77, shortly before the Orpheus ballet.

<sup>14</sup> On this point see Žižek 2000: 33.

<sup>15</sup> On the genesis of this work see Fürst 1998: 93-111.