

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Eleven, Number Three

Void and Excess in Music

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Abstract

“Today, the first notes of a popular baroque piece like Pachelbel's *Canon* are automatically perceived as the accompaniment, so that we wait for the moment when the melody proper will emerge; since we get no melody but only a more and more intricate polyphonic variation of (what we perceived at first to be) the melodic accompaniment, we somehow feel "deceived". Where does this horizon of expectation, which sustains our feeling that the melody proper is missing, come from?”

An extract on music from Slavoj Žižek's new book on Hegel to be published in autumn 2017.

Key Words: Classical Music; Melody;

From my high school days, I remember a rather embarrassing moment when, to keep up with the new times of sexual revolution, a sex education specialist (a fat bald guy with thick spectacles, as unattractive as one can imagine) gave us a class on sex. After a lot of introductory nonsense, he finally came to the point, and did it very briefly and efficiently: he drew on the school board two triangles with a shared bottom line, the difference being that one of them had the highpoint in the middle of the board and the other towards the right edge of the board, and then he commented on it: “The bottom line stands for time, the first highpoint is the boy’s climax and the second one the girl’s climax – the whole problem is to bring the two climaxes as close together as possible”. In my nightmares, I still remember this class... This stupid anecdote is nonetheless of a profound theoretical interest: the gap that separates the two climaxes is a structural necessity of our sexual lives. Even when we achieve the (too-)much-celebrated simultaneous orgasm, we get something that is experienced as a lucky exception, as a momentary coincidence of two moments that are structurally separated by a gap.

A nice example of this gap is provided by Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, an opera whose “official ideology” is thoroughly subverted by the work’s texture itself. This subversion in a way turns around the famous Mozartean irony, where, while the person’s words display the stance of cynical frivolity or manipulation, the music renders their authentic feelings: in *Tristan*, the ultimate truth does not reside in the musical message of passionate self-obliterating love-fulfillment, but in the dramatic stage action itself which subverts the passionate immersion into the musical texture. The final shared death of the two lovers abounds in Romantic operas – suffice it to recall the triumphant ‘*Moriamo insieme*’ from Bellini’s *Norma*; against this background, one should emphasize how in Wagner’s *Tristan*, the very opera which elevates this shared death into its explicit ideological goal, this, precisely, is NOT what effectively happens – in music, it is as if the two lovers die together, while in reality, they die one AFTER the other, each immersed in his/her own solipsistic dream.

Along these lines, one should read Isolde’s ecstatic death at the end of *Tristan* as the ultimate operatic prosopopeia: Tristan can die only if his death is transposed onto Isolde. When Tristan repeats his claim that death could not destroy their love, Isolde provides the concise formula of their death: “But this little word ‘and’ – if it were to be

destroyed, how but through the loss of Isolde's own life could Tristan be taken by death?" – in short, it is only in and through her death that he will be able to die. Does then Wagner's *Tristan* not offer a case of the interpassivity of death itself, of the "subject supposed to die"? Tristan can only die insofar as Isolde experiences the full bliss of the lethal self-obliteration for him, in his place. In other words, what "really happens" in Act III of *Tristan* is ONLY Tristan's long "voyage to the end of the night", with regard to which Isolde's death is Tristan's own fantasmatic supplement, the delirious construction that enables him to die in peace.

The lesson of the redoubled/displaced climax in music reaches much further – let us begin with a (perhaps) unexpected example. There is a remarkable detail in the marriage sequence of (the otherwise rather dull) *You Only Live Twice*, the James Bond movie set in Japan (with a scenario written by Roald Dahl): Bond has to marry a beautiful Japanese girl from a small fishing village to provide a cover for his fight against Ernst Stavro Blofeld, and the Japanese secret service organizes the old-fashioned ceremony. The key moment of the ceremony – the arrival of the bride – is shot in two parts: in the first part, when the bride and her accompaniment are slowly approaching in a procession, the shots are static, as in traditional Japanese cinema, and the music is constrained to "depthless" clipping string sounds; women are stepping up the stairs with their heads bowed, and when the first two raise their head, the disappointed Bond sees they are older ladies. When, finally, the third woman, the young beautiful bride, approaches and raises her head, and Bond sees her face for the first time, the entire tone of the scene changes: the music "takes off", the tension is released, the same tune is rendered by violins as a "romantic" continuous melody, the face is displayed in a full close up, and, when Bond and his bride are posited side by side, there is even a slight tracking shot forward.¹ We literally pass here from the East to the West: from the Eastern constraint and refusal of subjectivity to the Western open display of a passion...² The first "anti-colonialist" reaction here would have been that this entire opposition appears as such only from a view that is already westernized – it would have been easy for someone attuned to Japanese spirituality to discern an "inner life" (of a different type) already in the first "static" part.³ One should thus at least supplement our first opposition (elaborated apropos *You Only Live Twice*) between the Eastern universe where music follows mechanical rules and the modern Western universe of expressive melodic music with the opposite (no less ideological couple): Eastern spirituality as organic and holistic versus the Western mechanic-scientific approach. Yes,

the West is more “mechanical”, mortifying objects, but it is only through this mechanization that Spirit can assert itself in contrast to Life.

However, things are much more complex.⁴ The musical-libidinal shift discernible in the scene from the Bond film is characteristic of Romantic European music and persists still today – just recall rock classics like the Stones’ *Honky-Tonk Women* or Jethro Tull’s *Minstrel in the Gallery* where the constraint (the self-blocked character) of the first part of the melodic line is released in the climactic part. The question here is: is this restrained/blocked character of the first part a retroactive illusion, does it already presuppose (and lay foundation for) the melodic outburst? The answer is, of course, yes – the whole of the scene from the Bond film, visually and musically, belongs to the Western Romantic space. So when we listen, with our Western ears, to a traditional Chinese or Japanese musical piece, and we experience it as a limit that thwarts emotional release, is this lack already there in Japanese music itself, or is this music in itself “satisfied”, haunted by no deprivation? The answer is that there is some lack already in the Japanese piece itself, but it simply doesn’t function as an obstacle and so it doesn’t set in motion any need to release it or fill it in.

How did this lack get experienced as obstacle? Let us take the opposite example, that of a melody adding itself to the rhythmic background accompaniment. Today, the first notes of a popular baroque piece like Pachelbel’s *Canon* are automatically perceived as the accompaniment, so that we wait for the moment when the melody proper will emerge; since we get no melody but only a more and more intricate polyphonic variation of (what we perceived at first to be) the melodic accompaniment, we somehow feel “deceived”. Where does this horizon of expectation, which sustains our feeling that the melody proper is missing, come from? Perhaps, melody in today’s accepted sense, involving the difference between the main melodic line and its background, emerges only with Viennese classicism, i.e., after the retreat of baroque polyphony. Recall the third movement of Mozart’s *Gran Partita* serenade: after the first notes whose status is uncertain (*today*, we perceive them as accompaniment preparing the way for the melody proper, while, in its own time, there probably was the uncertainty as to its status, i.e. it was probably perceived as already the main melodic line), there enters as if “from above”, from “heavenly heights”, the melody proper... And where does then the melody proper end? The answer is also clear: in late Beethoven (especially his last piano sonatas), i.e. in Romanticism proper, whose true breakthrough resides precisely in rendering the melody proper “impossible”, in

marking it with a bar of impossibility (the flowering of “beautiful Romantic melodies” is nothing but the kitschy obverse of this fundamental impossibility).⁵ So we have an apparently universal phenomenon (melody) which is, “as such”, nonetheless constrained, limited to a precisely defined historical period... What is perhaps the ultimate achievement of expressionist late Romanticism is precisely the notion of the melodic line, of the main motif, as something that has to be “wrought out”, sculptured, extracted from the inertia of vocal stuff by means of painful labor: far from functioning as a starting point of a series of variations that then form the main part of the piece, the main musical motif results from the painful “*perlaboration*” of the musical matter that forms the main body of the piece.

In short, complementary to this emergence of the melody is its gradual disappearance signaled by the often observed fact that, a decade after Beethoven’s death, a long, “beautiful”, self-enclosed melody all of a sudden becomes “objectively impossible”; this observation provides the proper background to the well-known vicious quip that Mendelssohn’s melodies usually begin well but finish badly, losing their drive and ending in a “mechanical” resolution (his *Fingal’s Cave* Overture, or the beginning of the *Violin Concerto*, which marks a clear melodic regression with regard to Beethoven’s *Violin Concerto*). Far from being a simple sign of Mendelssohn’s weakness as a composer, this failure of the melodic line rather bears witness to his sensitivity towards the historical shift; those who were still able to write “beautiful melodies” were kitsch composers like Tchaikovsky. On the other hand, Mendelssohn was precisely for that reason not yet a full Romanticist: Romanticism “arrives at its notion” (to put it in Hegelese) only when this failure is included in, and becomes a positive factor of, the desired effect. César Franck’s *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, the supreme case of religious kitsch, nonetheless provides a nice example of “impossible longing” in the guise of the melody, which endeavors to reach the climax, but is again and again forced to abandon its effort and, as it were, to fall back.

Back to Pachelbel’s *Canon*, we can experience the historical cut we are dealing with at its purest if we compare *Canon* with an old European pop music kitsch tune, *Rain and Tears* (Demis Roussos, *Aphrodite’s Child*), whose beginning closely resembles the beginning of *Canon* – however, the melody then explodes pathetically, and we are deep in kitsch... So where does musical kitsch begin? The original sin was committed already by Beethoven, whose music undoubtedly often verges on kitsch – suffice it to mention the over-repetitive exploitation of the “beautiful” main motif in the 1st movement of his *Violin Concerto*, or the rather tasteless climactic moments of the *Leonore 3* Overture. How vulgar

are the climactic moments of *Leonore 3* (and 2 its even worse utterly boring version) in comparison with Mozart's overture to *The Magic Flute*, where Mozart still retains what one cannot but call a proper sense of musical *decency*, interrupting the melodic line before it reaches the full orchestra climactic repetition and, instead, jumping directly to the final staccatos! Can one imagine this overture rewritten in Beethoven's *Leonore 3*-style, with the bombastic repetition of the melodic line? Perhaps, Beethoven himself sensed it, writing another, final overture, the *Fidelio*-Overture – brief and concise, sharp, the very opposite of *Leonore 2* and 3. (The true pearl, however, is the undeservedly underestimated *Leonore 1*, Op. 138, whose very date is not sure – it is Beethoven at his best, with the beautiful rise to a climax without any embarrassing excesses).

In this passage from Mozart to Beethoven we find another surprising case of the dialectics of lack and surplus: the strict correlation between the thwarted melodic culmination (the blocked climax) in Mozart and one of his most beautiful signature specialties – when the deployment of a musical piece seems over and one expects only the final cadenza, a surprising addition takes place, joy exploding in wild rhythm, from the finale of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* to *The Magic Flute*, where the tender music of the “water and fire trials” is supplemented by an exploding fast conclusion sung by the chorus. These explosive surpluses express the excess of energy thwarted by the restraint that prevents the full climax of the main development – the thwarted energy is displaced onto this excess. Which means that once we follow Beethoven and allow full climax, these excesses are no longer possible.⁶

The climax displaced from its “proper” place to the appended surplus provides the minimal structure of subjective representation: the subject thwarted from its “proper” expression at the climactic moment of the melodic deployment returns in a supplementary moment that represents it for the main body of the musical piece. What happens in Romanticism, which opts for the full melodic deployment up to its climax, is the attempt to *subjectivize* the “pure” empty subject, to identify the subject with the wealth of inner subjective life striving to express itself. The modern subject proper (the Cartesian *cogito*, the Kantian transcendental subject, etc.) is, of course, not the Romantic expressive subject, the “person” trying to express all its inner wealth; it is rather the abyss of a self-referential void internally excluded from every signifying structure, the void that can only be registered/represented through a thwarted structure.

Notes

¹ When, in this scene, the music “takes off”, it is not melody that is added but a deep emotional background (violins, etc.); the libidinal effect is the same as when melody is added to the background accompaniment.

² This subjectivity is clearly displayed in Wilhelm Furtwangler’s conducting, whose two main features are a permanent tension that is never resolved and an uninterrupted “organic” flow that blurs clear distinctions. The two features are intimately connected: the flow goes on since the continuing tension doesn’t allow for any stop. This is why Furtwangler is the ideal conductor for Beethoven and the composers who come after him (Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner) while his attempts to do Mozart miserably failed. (Suffice it to recall his Salzburg *Don Giovanni* from 1950, which sounds ridiculously “heavy”, like a Mozart approached through Beethoven’s lens, a Mozart deprived of the characteristic “lightness” of his music – in short, what Furtwangler does here is almost the exact opposite of Karl Boehm’s Bayreuth live recording of Wagner’s *Ring*, where his aim was to conduct *Ring* as if it was written by Mozart).

³ Unfortunately, Furtwangler also follows this cliché when he opposes Stravinsky’s mechanical brilliance to German living spirituality.

⁴ Among other simplifications, one should bear in mind that we refer to a break that can occur at different levels: between the background and the melody proper, within the melodic line itself, between its preparatory part and its climax, etc.

⁵ Maybe this accounts for the unique position of Schubert who, although already a Romantic if there ever was one, was the last composer who was able to write authentically beautiful melodies (with Schumann, such melodies are already marked by a certain impossibility).

⁶ Another nice case of the surplus exploding at the end of a piece is found in the Jefferson airplane version of *Wooden Ships* (from their *Volunteers* album). Similarly to *Cosmic Dancer* (T.Rex), the main melody fails to reach its implied conclusion (it remains within the ascending tension), and it is as if this failure is supplemented by the elevation of the background rhythmic pattern into a main motif towards the end of the piece.