

Amongst others

The author brings forward a number of critical questions with regard to the musical ethics of 'openness' thematized in a various articles in this issue, particularly referring to the 'interactive dissertation' of Marcel Cobussen. This contribution ends with a short analysis suggesting a different approach to the problem of musical or musicological 'ethics', using the theological resonance of certain philosophical concepts.

I

When I was first acquainted with the theme of the meeting this issue intends to be a reflection of, my thoughts spontaneously roamed the distant fields of ancient music philosophy. Music and ethics – a theme recalling the respectable Damonian tradition concerning the social and psychological effects of music. I imagined the countless re-enactments of the scene of the musician and the drunk youth in philosophical and theological literature, I pondered the arcane interactions between the soul and the cosmos, and stumbled once again over the Platonic problem of disharmony. To a certain extent, these are all problems of order, of limits and limitations, of distinctive values and the need to make choices.

But as it happened, the meeting did not exactly discuss these issues. It rather celebrated the relative absence of ethics in contemporary music related debate. It did not in fact intend to design a contemporary ethics or an ethical philosophy of music (which I believe we will be increasingly needful of), but through a persistent rhetorics of resignation intended to 'leave things open'. This latter word – 'open' – and its grammatical and semantical affiliations dominated the 'ethics' of a number of contributions, amongst which Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman's presentation reprinted above. In the final section of her paper, Veselinović-Hofman pleads for a musicology of 'openness to the other' and 'tolerance', which according to her can best be realized if one takes the 'fractal structure' of this discipline into consideration.

In the following, I will not discuss the idea of fractalism as such, but rather point out a few problems with regard to the idea of 'openness'. This idea also and notably occurs in the 'interactive dissertation' of Marcel Cobussen, the presentation of which formed the backdrop to this meeting.¹ I will address a few passages from this dissertation in order to clarify my critique.

II

Let me first of all summarize briefly the issue as I see it. Why 'music and ethics' in the first place? What is the pre-history of this 'ethical turn'? In his section "Of New Musicology", Cobussen mentions several critical forces that have till now been operative. To name a few: the dominance of formalist and hermeneutic approaches, the increasing isolation of music research in the field of the humanities, the deepening abyss between musicography and musical practice, the persistent exclusion of academic minorities with diverse agenda's, the neglect of new research trends informed by cultural theories. In the mid-1980's, these tensions have cracked the walls of the musicological 'cloister' (Edward Said) and have led to an increase in cross- and interdisciplinary music studies. Chronologically and also strategically, these studies follow the footsteps of similar studies in the field of literature (and, later on, visual analysis).

Being a movement of emancipation, the so-called New Musicology that resulted from these events is pervaded by the pathos often found among left-wing radicals: the identification with the oppressed, the marginalized, the exploited; the libel against the ruling powers; the promise of a better future; the activism for the good cause of those suffering – the pattern is well-known. But what if music and music studies are concerned? Who, or what, is (the) oppressed? Apart from the obvious injustice done against academic minorities (both personal, institutional and theoretical), it is often 'music itself' that becomes the subject of liberation. Against the various 'traditional' approaches, it has become an issue to invent strategies that somehow let music 'speak for itself'. Strategies are designed to allow 'the musical other' (oppressed by ruling 'tradition') to find its freedom, its voice, and to gain public recognition (liberated, justified). The justification of music 'as music', 'as other' or even as 'Other' in an absolute sense, becomes the horizon of a new, 'ethical' musicology – one advocated in particular by Marcel Cobussen.²

1 See www.cobussen.com.

2 M. Cobussen, *Deconstruction in Music*, loc. cit, section "Music, Deconstruction, and Ethics".

III

What does this musicology look like? Although he generally accepts the innovations of the New Musicologists and their linking up with contemporary cultural debates, Cobussen distances himself from their methodological approach. This approach might well be fractured, strategic, and eclectic as opposed to the pre-meditated and ultimately reductionist methods of the musicological 'tradition' – he judges them still too 'extrinsic'. Cobussen intends to track down an 'intrinsic' deconstructive movement within (and apparently proper to) music, minimizing in this way the distance between music and description. Musicography should ideally 'talk music', i.e. it should ventriloquize the 'deconstruction' within music, which as such forever remains 'other'. The task of musicography therefore is to remain open to 'the invention of the other' (the latter term often being capitalized). It should 'get ready' for this invention, it should 'make this step destined to let the other come, *come in*'. Thus, Cobussen professes to try and 'open an ethical space for the invention of the other *off/for/with/in* music'. The *via regia* to this alterity is – as almost every page of the web site underscores with reference to *auctoritas* Derrida – that thing called 'deconstruction'.

IV

Before looking more closely at the ethical content of this program, I would like to ask what *kind* of ethical thought this 'openness' to 'the invention of the other' is. Of course, this is not the proper question, for, according to Cobussen, deconstruction is *sui generis* and should not be taken to be of whatever kind. But still, his presentation and use of Derrida's thought point toward a number of phenomena that seem familiar. As I will show, these at once destabilize his argument and open a new horizon for it. To start with: his plea for 'the other' and for 'otherness' at first seems meaningful, justified and scrupulous, but gradually loses its depth and significance, and becomes a dogmatic gesture. The notion of 'the other' is not just employed – it is kept empty and exploited for the purpose of a politicized discussion about music. It secures the monopoly of a certain discourse to speak properly about music – however negative ('apophatic') this discourse may be, or may want to present itself. The 'ethical', deconstructive musicology Cobussen advocates puts music in the position of the slain saint, the oppressed one, who remains excluded but morally superior. It is us who killed the Other – guilty we are and we know it – and all that is left is to wait in 'fear and trembling' for the footsteps of his or her coming. Of course, I am drawing a caricature. But the poli-

tics of this ethics is well known: it combines the strategies of the apostle, whose mystical proximity to the Other remains unreflected, and the former political radical, whose self-imagined proximity to the oppressed is transformed into an ethics of infinite social guilt – an ethics also known by the name of 'political correctness'.

V

Let's have a closer look at the *technique* of this musical 'ethics', for this will show why it would be more appropriate to speak of aesthetics. The talk of the 'other' – a concept that maintains an *écart* between music and 'itself' and precludes any simple self-identity – effectively puts the notion of 'music itself' in a movement of infinite regress. The idea of getting to know music 'here and now', in full consciousness of its form and meaning, remains forever in suspension – a broken dream. The same applies to the fulfillment of ethics in the ultimate, face-to-face encounter with the Other. The Other remains other, divided against him/her/itself, thrown as it were into an infinite movement of self-alienation. If one thinks this regression radically, it destroys any pretence at knowing or having (experiencing, etc.) music; it is the skeptical *epochè* in its utmost radicality. What then remains is the figure of regression itself – a figure of infinity, of endless *Sehnsucht* for 'the other'.

Nevertheless, one should not forget – and Cobussen rightly indicates this, but does not seem to live up to it – that deconstruction is not just that: it is no simple breakdown of all affirmation, it is no endless negation, deferral or suspension. It rather affirms, in its own way, a saying 'yes'. As long as one simply keeps repeating the movement of suspension and infinite regression, one remains in the *esthetic* domain, performing the Kierkegaardian 'movements of infinity'. Openness for the undetermined, as worked out by Cobussen on the basis of Cage's 4'33" and *Waiting*, is not enough – or it is self-contained.³

To 'get ready' for the invention of the other means also to get ready for saying yes, for decision, for 'amen'. One has to prepare (oneself) for *presence*, that impossible and discredited figure of obsolete metaphysics. Why? Because otherwise one would pretend to know the radically other beforehand, to have a certain 'mystical' pre-knowledge of its identity (and this Kantian 'superior tone' I sometimes hear in Cobussen's text). In my view, an 'ethical', deconstructive musicology cannot take itself seriously as long as it keeps repeating a rhetorics of 'otherness' with an implicit claim to the (negative) identity of this musical alterity. 'Openness' and 'tolerance' will not do as keywords of a musical ethics – one has to 'get ready' for saying 'yes' to the arrival of the musical 'other' as a concrete singular (or, according to Derrida, for saying 'yes *again*').⁴

3 Ibidem, section "Silence, Noise, and Ethics".

4 J. Derrida, "Nombre de oui", in: *Psyché*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.

VI

A short final discussion of a key passage from the ethical section of Cobussen's *Deconstruction in Music* will illustrate my point and suggest an alternative direction for musicographical 'ethics'. In a subsection on "Deconstruction in music", Cobussen quotes Derrida's description of 'the absolute arrivant' (from *Aporias*)⁵ as a model for the relationship between deconstruction and music. Derrida writes:

'I am talking about the absolute arrivant, who is not even a guest. He surprises the host – who is not yet a host or inviting power – enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage. [...] This absolute arrivant as such is, however, not an intruder, invader, or colonizer, because invasion presupposed some self-identity for the aggressor and for the victim. Nor is the arrivant a legislator or the discoverer of a promised land'.

Surprisingly, Cobussen translates this scene of quasi-transcendental hospitality (or hostility – who will know?) directly into music. He says quite simply: "The arrivant is deconstruction, the host is music", and proceeds with Derrida's statement that deconstruction 'is' neither this nor that. The obvious question is: how could the *absolute* arrivant be equated (cf. 'is') with deconstruction? According to Derrida, the arrivant is 'not even a guest', it was so to speak 'before' any identity of the one coming, just as the host (supposedly 'music', in whichever sense) 'is not yet a host'. Cobussen either turns the quasi-transcendental and 'absolute' into a schematic representation, reducing the differential aspect of the absolute to the flatness (the French *platitudo*) of immanence. Or – different reading – he appropriates the absolute and turns music into a witness of the absolute arrivant, leaving all schematism behind.

VII

This latter reading, I suggest, offers a way out of the suffocating mantra of immanentized 'otherness'. As theology and metaphysics have often stressed, music can be a witness to the absolute – though no longer in a simple, testimonial way. Derrida's thought gives ample reasons to (re)consider the modalities through which the seemingly obsolete idea (and ideal) of *musica sacra* (i.e. of a music which somehow 'betrays' the absolute) is still in place. The *epochè* described earlier, for instance, can be

considered one of the figures that help this reflection get under way. As Derrida has pointed out in "Faith and Knowledge", the very movement of *religio*, of scrupulous and respectful distancing is re-enacted by phenomenological suspension.⁶ The performance of this suspension as well as the reflection on its effects calls for a different idiom than the discourse of 'ethics'. The suspension of *religio* does not decide for itself and for others – as 'ethics' does on a humanistic, ethical and political level – to 'call for' and/or to 'pay respect', but is informed by the sheer *impossibility* of ever becoming emancipated, of ever getting a voice and a place of its own, that seems to characterize the phenomena of music as such. The *religio* is a 'fear and trembling' before the impossibility to either thematize the musical 'other', to speak from the standpoint of 'deconstruction in music', or to pretend that we simply do not know.

Because Marcel Cobussen would probably agree with this, I can only intend this critique as an Augustinian exhortation to stir up our love for the absolute – music?

5 J. Derrida, *Aporias*, transl. by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

6 J. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", in: J. Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion*, transl. by Samuel Weber. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.