

Music – source of immense joy or of disturbing frustration?

Gabriel Mălăncioiu

West University of Timișoara | Romania

Abstract: In this essay we highlight the importance of the complementarity between an uninhibited vision, in which music is approached from a perspective that implies overcoming our cultural conditioning, and a vision that implies the integration of the cultural conditioning coming from the past. In the first part of the essay there are general references to the musical phenomenon, bringing into light aspects related to the compositional process later on. Finally, I discuss the importance of a holistic approach that encompasses polarities in education – in the field of music composition studies.

Keywords: openness, tradition, complementarity, polarities, composition

This essay¹ approaches aspects related to one of the greatest fears of the human mind, the fear of the unknown, and the way it reflects in the musical field. Could it be that this same fear is responsible for undermining the composer's attempt to give birth to his/her innermost feelings, for compromising the performers attempt to recreate the musical world imagined by the composer, or for not letting the music to permeate the listener's consciousness?

Let us try to shed some light on this problem from the composer's perspective. There is a big difference between a mind driven creation of new structures, timbral combinations, theatrical situations and the case in which a composer is just trying to express what is revealed to him: sometimes, that expression will fit the current expectations, as it is Mozart's case for many works, in other situations the invention of new structures are required, as it is the case for many of Beethoven's works. Since both perspectives are proven to be equally valid, any attempt to forcefully recreate these situations will have as a result either an imitation or a promethean effort to create something original at all costs. I think that in time both cases will be proven to be failures, because the natural balance between known and unknown, which is inherent to every great work of art, is broken.

The same fear of uncertainty will determine the performer to try to fixate every detail of a performance in advance, so that on stage he will just try to reproduce the setup memorized beforehand. If there is no room for the unexpected to surface during a performance, I don't think that the spontaneity that brings freshness to a piece of music would be replaced by any of the mentally predetermined plans. Without the playful energy of the improvisation, the performance will have the sense of sterility that the artificial flowers have, if compared with the natural ones. Though many advantages of the predetermined plans will be present, the music will not flower to its fullest potential in the listener's consciousness. There are, of course, many other issues that the performer has to confront regarding the conditioned perspective from which he acts: how to move away from the critical voices in his head – in the opposite case having to face the famous “stage fright problems”–, how not to fall into the trap of imitation, how to infuse his studying time with joy and contentment.

Listening from a conditioned perspective to a piece of music that is provocative (because of the music itself or because of the unconventional way it is performed) will determine a strong reaction

¹ The essay is based on revised versions of two articles published in 2015 in QUANTUM CULTURE MAG – Revista de Cultura y Ciencias (Spain), a cultural online magazine which exists no more: *Openness to the unknown* and *The joy of being a composer*.

that actually has its roots in the fear generated by unfamiliarity. The usual way of diminishing that fear is to try to widen the scope of the conditioning, so that the view will become more inclusive. That progressive path, realized through education, will last until our last breath, and it's an important part of our lives. But I believe that there is a more direct path, accessible to every human life form, an innate intelligence that is capable of enjoying every form of art, irrespective of the received education; that is capable of finding the cheerful energy of improvisation in the performance of any musical work and to feel the gratefulness arisen in every composer that is expressing unimpededly his innermost feeling. A simpler way, which does not take any time, because that capacity is already in us: an openness to the unknown, in spite of the fear generated by our own limitations; an innocent welcoming of whatever appears in the field of consciousness.

Is it possible, under the burden of conditioning, to still listen with clear ears, without expecting, without comparing with what we have already known and listened to? We will only have to look deep inside of us, to establish clearly what is our position we are looking from, to see if there is a place from where even the old habits of conditioning are seen. If my position is above the complex conditioned machinery, then I do not have to do anything to escape from it, and my every action will glow of freshness and energy because it will not be hampered by the past.

Let us take one example to see how the fear of the unknown is disconnecting the listener from much of the music created in our times. Our musical culture (especially the one governed by tonal hierarchical relations, but not restricted to it) is, without any doubt, structured around the idea of repetition. That process appears when we are looking to the musical works in their entirety or only observing their microstructure. From one very potent musical cell repeated in various forms, Beethoven created a whole work, as one can see in his 5th Symphony. Musical motives are repeated to create musical phrases, which, by repetition, will create musical forms such as theme and variations, sonatas or fugues. It is not surprising that the most accessible musical form, overused in pop music, is the rondo form, a way of structuring the musical material that is highly repetitive. If I try to listen to non-repetitive music having the expectations built through years of listening to repetitive music, the single result will be a frustrating, irritating feeling, in which my expectations are grievously trashed.

The French mystic Jean Klein considers that the great works of art have such a strong force of attraction over centuries because of their innate harmony that will resonate with something

intimately close to us, our own natural harmony. For an authentic experience to occur, one single requirement is necessary for the composer, performer and listener alike: a detachment from his own conditioning, so that the music can spring unconstructively in the composer's mind, being recreated by the performer without egoic interference, and being received by the public with an innocent and open mind.

Let us try to dive deeper into the process of writing a new musical work, to see how the perspective from which we are positioning ourselves will greatly influence the outcome! Maybe we will understand why there are so many composers, who, although enjoying a real success in the professional life, always seem frustrated, and the process of creation seems to be an endless struggle, while other composers radiate the joy of creating, a joy that permeates many aspects of their daily life. I will put into light a very personal approach on the process of creating a new work being an eminently subjective action.

Being a composer can be rather challenging, as you already might find out reading Berlioz *Mémoires*. Many of the skills of the nowadays composers have often very little to do with the musical field. I intend not to speak about these difficulties, but of the energy that keeps the composer active and creative. I would like to take into consideration four stages, each of them able to generate great suffering or the biggest joy, depending on the composer's personal perspective: the creation process, the work with the performers, the distribution process and, finally, its impact on the audience.

The composer's greatest joy is, without any doubt, the undefinable moment of creation, when something fresh and alive emerges from the unknown. Far from feeling this moment as a burden, trying to capture with tremendous difficulty the initial moment of inspiration, I am thinking more in energetic terms: if there is a flow in expressing the musical ideas, I know that I'm on the right track; if not, I have to come back to the moment when the natural flow was interrupted. This way, composing is a joyful process for me, regardless of the musical content of the piece, irrespective of the esthetical orientation.

Other significant moment is that related to the fortunate situation when the composer meets inspired performers, who deeply understand and express his musical ideas. Many meaningful situations are possible: an inspiring working session with the performer, in which I can see that the work has greatly benefited from the collaboration, or, without any previous contact, I can hear the musical ideas so clearly expressed, that I can actually feel that the initial energy that sustained the

creation of the work is now so organically expressed by the performer. Of course, ideal situations are rarely present, but I think that a very rigid position of the composer regarding his piece is far less constructive (and much more painful for himself) than a more flexible one.

The next phase I bear in mind is the moment when I want to make known to the world the recording of my work. This is also a situation that can generate enormous frustration or can be a joyful one, depending on my actions. If my music was released under a label, it will take care of the distribution process. If my music was not released on physical CD's, there are many online alternatives. A crazy run after "Likes" on Facebook, YouTube or other medias, will not add much fun to the process, irrespective of how much attention my work would receive. The pure joy of sharing, without too much emphasis on the results of that sharing, will make everything become rather easy and natural. I can tell, by experience, that a violent promotion will provide less significant results than a more passive approach. By "passive" I do not mean not to do anything to distribute the work. On the contrary, today there are so many ways in which I can make my work available: my personal website, YouTube, Soundcloud, Ulysses Platform and many other online music networks. My intention is to make my music accessible to the world, without losing a lot of energy trying to impose it, forcing peoples to listen to it.

The last stage I take into consideration is the one known as usually generating very much suffering for the composers: the listener's opinion. If I expect that everybody who listens to my works unexpectedly falls in love with the music, then of course the hell will be quite close to me, because this will probably happen only in my imaginary world – and it is known that the musicians are very inventive beings. I also do not resonate too much with the very specialized music writing, in the sense of writing works for composition competitions – where the members of the jury have certain musical expectations, or for a particular music festival – where the organizers are imposing certain stylistic orientations. I also do not believe in the idea that contemporary music is addressed to an elitist circle of "connoisseurs"; I am convinced that music is really a universal language, having the capacity of influencing the human consciousness.

I believe that the whole process of education is not just an endless accumulation of information, but also a process of transcending the limitations imposed on us by ourselves and by others. And again, the right balance between the polarities will make the difference.

Speaking of education in the field of musical composition, I encountered two polar

approaches: a perspective that implies a strong anchorage in the musical tradition, with a thorough training in assimilating the already existing compositional languages; the second approach implies almost a denial of the musical tradition, an exclusive focus on discovering unmapped sonic territories. Considering the complexity of the musical phenomenon, perhaps the best solution is the ancient “middle way”, in which the two approaches become complementary. An exhaustive focus on the musical tradition could determine the emergence of good musicologists, but thinking about the compositional process it can undermine the creative momentum. The lack of knowledge due to the denial of tradition can lead to the appearance of semi-professional composers; they can be very inventive, but without the possibility to express their ideas clearly, lacking the power to construct complex musical structures into intelligible forms.

If we talk about the delicate subject of guiding the young composers, the metaphor of the tree is perhaps the most appropriate: the deeper the roots (knowledge of the musical tradition), the higher the branches into the sky (creative freedom). It cannot be determined a priori which will be the right balance of the two aspects, it depends on the individuality of each student.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriel Mălăncioiu’s works have been performed by Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Slovenian Chamber Choir, Ensemble Aventure, L’Arsenale, THReNSeMBle, Trio Contraste, Florian Mueller, Bjorn Wilker (Klangforum Wien), Richard Craig, Gudrun Hinze, Luca Piovesan and conductors such as Huba Hollókői, Michael Wendeberg, Eduardo Narbona, Martina Batič, Filippo Perocco, Remus Georgescu amongst others. Some of his works were released by Navona Records / Parma Recordings (USA), Ablaze Records (USA), Col Legno (Austria) (digital release), Stan Music (Germany) and Blowout Records (Italy). Gabriel Mălăncioiu is currently teaching Composition Techniques, Orchestration and Musical Analysis at the West University of Timișoara, Faculty of Music and Theatre. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9979-221X>. E-mail: gabriel.malancioiu@e-uvvt.ro