

*I will never achieve full accountability for my performance but I can be clear about my failure to do so*

Music is absent from public debate. It is as if it were expected to be mute, no matter how reverberant. We rarely speak about the way music works in more complex situations, about how it affects our consciousness, about configurations of thought that are born inside a performer during the course of an interpretation, and how these melt into the technique and the sensibility. The lack of semantic strategies linked to musical creation and listening may, at worst, signify that tradition grows stale.

Yet there is no other art form, people have always argued, that so strongly moves the senses. And if it is true that music lacks narrative systems with obvious correspondences to the world around it, what happens if we institute the *dialogue* as an active mode of working, and let it become a communicating vessel between different types of artistic work – between practice and theory?

*I have often reflected on the mechanisms of how an experience of a musical work's identity originates and how it is organized in terms of cognition. What makes a particular moment recognizable? Which are the distinguishing features, intonations and gestures that we remember, and why? What is it that separates one set of harmonic and textural elements, evoking a specific atmosphere or a scent, from any other set, arousing an entirely different atmosphere and scent? Can one locate that which is of decisive importance for our perception in a fragment – in a splinter – or is it rather through the complete course of events, the contour of the whole, where the characteristic appears to me?*

It is striking how musical interpretation, on the one hand, builds on an often complicated and nebulous reverence for the *score* as the primary source of the work, and on the other hand on unreliable ideas and presumptions about the intentional *background* of the same work – its ontological biography as it were.

One has to imagine that composition goes beyond reality – that the artefact accommodates intonations that are both personal and general, that it relays feeling as well as reason, closeness as well as distance. It is when these approximations come into conflict that the *expressivity* as such may obtain significance.

Early in the 1980s, I wrote an ambitious and lengthy piano piece that I called *Chiaroscuro*. I remember that I had great hopes that its rigorous construction – with creatively concealed references to classical form and tonality in an idiom that was indisputably modernist on the surface – would be an intelligent response to the deplorable new simplicity in art music that was gaining more and more attention at the time. Needless to say, the piece was a monumental failure in that respect.

It did, however, incorporate a plan whose delayed effect at a later point came to have a strong influence on my conception of the intrinsic dramaturgy of the music. I discovered that *Chiaroscuro*, behind the façade of fragmented and extravagantly sprawling gestures, was actually not an immutably shaped narrative flow – but rather an interconnected series of carefully noted sketches that all made up variations on a specific interior. That in turn gave rise to the idea that, as a visitor and interpreter, one could create one's own interior by altering perspective, moving or *removing* pieces of furniture, changing light and colour settings: The room will at all times be the same – and yet another! I was delighted and thought of a suitable comment. After a while the discovery resulted in my adding the following instruction to the foreword:

(Quote:) *Consider the score to be a provisionally arranged material and make of it a personal reading with deletions, tempo displacements and repetitions, even changes in the chronology if necessary. In that way correspondences are revealed that otherwise may be hard to perceive or the interplay between vertical chords and long lines gets recharged when the differences in the piece converge.* (Unquote.)

I was never really a storyteller and accordingly, I think, somewhat indifferent to *musical form*. For isn't it so, after all, that good stories greatly owe their impact to the construction of the narrative? However, I've always been fascinated by trifles and minor phenomena – by small things – and how their appearance changes with the light, the viewer's state of mind or the angle of the gaze and above all, perhaps, by how they keep coming back *the same* and yet *not the same* because the context is another: The moment of occurrence, all circumstances put together, is unique and once-in-a-lifetime. That motivated me to challenge the concept of *newness* and *progress* in music – and to ask whether, in fact, the experience of identity is to be found in the linear, perfect and reproducible arrangement of sonic events, one after the other, as is usually claimed, or could it be that what I recognize as particular is

to be found somewhere else? So instead, I chose to reflect on the work as a specific *situation* or *site*, rather than as a determined *sequence* of organized sounds. I began to envisage the performance, as well as the hearing, of a piece in terms of visiting a park with multiple entrances and many possible paths to walk. Here, though, it is crucial to recognize that the place itself is an artefact detached from *nature*; to remember that it has once been grasped and composed by someone as an artificial topology – a well-defined, cultivated terrain, perpetually in a state of *decomposition* and metamorphosis. What then creates its unmistakable, distinct identity in my awareness is not so much the perception of a formal totality, as how I – both deliberately and by chance – break up this blended topology into discrete patterns of reference points.

Time-based art – and by that, I mean music, theatre, film, dance – goes back and forth in its performance, intentionally or unintentionally, between two main positions: repetition and variation, i.e. between *similarity* and *difference*. Sometimes, when the one becomes more prominent than the other and dominates perception, the effect can move toward the *monotonous* or *chaotic*, respectively. Driven to the utmost point, both characters converge in an almost identical experience.

A music without bar-lines... Certainly an intimation of metric groupings is to be found here and there, but they may continuously be altered and reinterpreted. It resembles a mechanical clockwork, carrying cycles of different lengths overlaid with each other. The model is the basis for extensive improvisations that either expand the material in absurdum or else reduce it until only a few tones remain. Caused by the friction between the tempos and ratios, a spiral-like turbulence arises that produces a duality where the music seems to slide away on its metric displacement, moving both forward and in circles. I am interested in a multifaceted tonality, a sound fabric that is orchestral and dense but still allowing for distinct values and characters. Hence, the ensemble, collectively as well as individually, is encouraged to explore the outermost reaches of frequency bands and let extreme registers be exposed – sometimes drowned in crackle and noise. I especially wish to test a genuinely collaborative way of playing that contains both polyphony and virtuosity when significant within the context, but refrains from self-complacent solo excursions. And under no circumstances should it be idyllic. On the contrary: there is surface

tension, inherent suspense and room for conflict. But also, for magic – as when they all, in a breathless moment, pull in and listen to the noise.

I imagine that the music has a strong kinetic energy, where configurations meet and glide apart with an emphasis on the individual phrasing patterns. At the bottom lies a pulsating beat. It serves as engine, is transformed and fluctuates in velocity according to certain given proportions, or marks time in slow motion with quicker subdivisions in shifting relief. The articulation can be fragmented and hollowed out, whereas the *flow* is prominent – massive, insistent or feather-light, like ripples on a raspy surface. The forward-leaning energy is amplified by the periods of different durations that overlap each other asymmetrically and wind the music onwards in a *perpetuum mobile*. Another unique characteristic is the airy cascade with only a few tones that are mixed and pounded in dialogic layers, oscillating between dense cluster formations and wide-open intervals. It is modal, coloured by microtonal inflections and in- and outward fades between pure and distorted sounds.

The piece rises and falls with the degree of inner mobility and a minute understanding of the overall tempo rhythm – for how the proportions of the formal parts interact and produce a contour. The performance thus alternates between plastic, poetically transparent textures and dynamically coloured, orchestral waves of sound. And one must not lose energy and focus in the transitions, especially in positions where density decreases or the sounds sink back into a *pianissimo*.

I cannot conclusively describe what I am doing. What I can bring about is a temporary account of a series of properties *connected* to what I am doing, thereby proposing a field of possible points of view whose assemblage of discrete observations may eventually produce meaning. A meaning, however, that will never cease to be ambiguous, incomplete, deceitful and migrant – constantly seeking to transmute.

*The Russian philosopher, critic and semiotician, Michail Bakhtin, seems to have regarded literature, writing as well as reading, as a deeply existential human involvement, where the unfinishedness - a rebellious refusal to perfect - becomes an important concept that challenges the reading act and turns it into an acutely responsible performance, fully equal to that of the author.*

In his essay *The Death of the Author* from 1967, Roland Barthes, reflecting on the act of reading, proposes a strategy where one's attentive empathy connects with the shared discourse that the literary work generates over time as a result of a continuous sedimentation of contradictory meaning and understanding – rather than with the biographical imprint of the author. Barthes rejects the idea of a finite message of the work and what he calls the *tyranny of literary critique*.

A couple of years earlier, Susan Sontag draws a similar conclusion in her essay *Against Interpretation*. There, distancing herself from what might be labelled the sickness of speculative pursuit of content and biased over-interpretation by critics, Sontag is encouraging us to let the work work and to sharpen our recognition of how it appears and *does whatever it does*. She opposes hermeneutic strategies and finishes with the notorious appeal: *In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art*.

In Julia Kristeva's pioneering text, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, it is primarily the exposition of the concepts *genotext* and *phenotext* that interests me. Furthermore, her ideas about *rupture* and *Mimesis* are indeed persuasive with regard to a different musical awareness, as well as how Kristeva defines *feminine* as every single action that undermines the authoritarian *masculine* discourse – in other words: that which excites freedom. Finally, the temporalities attributed to her theory of the *semiotics* – the being before language – are so close to music.

Departing from these rudimentary meditations and inspired by another essay by Barthes, *From Work to Text*, I have considered various possibilities of thinking about musical composition in terms of a *rhizomatic archive*. By that I mean a place, rather than a narrative – a process, rather than an artefact. Barthes makes a distinction between *work* and *text*, suggesting that the work refers to the physical object – the book, the canvas, the score – and the text to the accumulated layers of significance, interpretations and discourses contained within the work.

I set out to conceive of a non-linear music, the accomplishment of which was founded on the image of exploring a terrain, choosing at any given moment one's path through a topology of constituent, very distinct elements that occupy a strong identity. Another important property was the notion of *ambiguity* – of unfinishedness, uncertainty and doubt – and of being *in between*. I wanted to investigate the potential of a musical *text* that never winds up.

*Traces of Oblivion* for 11-stringed alto guitar materializes as a kaleidoscopic, incomplete outcome of extensive dialogues with the guitarist and researcher Stefan Östersjö. Through practical as well as conceptual elaborations we explored endless procedures inspired by the instrument's characteristics with regard to timbre and architectural design. Gradually, two particular aspects came to play a significant role: On the one hand a construction feature of the alto guitar with five scale-tuned strings in the bass followed by six chord strings (simultaneously proposing, as it were, historical resonance *and* unbiased experimentation) and, on the other, a scordatura whose micro-tonal deviations constitute the acoustic habitat of the music. The core organizing principle is made up of carefully chiselled gestures, some of which are recorded sound files layered in loops and activated in the course of the performance as an archive – memory and oscillation at the same time. Moving through transient, winding passages and circular patterns, it is as if *Traces of Oblivion* evoked images related to a sense of loss.