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SILENCE AS IMPROVISATION*

Abstract: The author intends drawing a possible parallel between silence and improvisation, taking into account some of their common traits, according to which silence might be considered as improvisation. Therefore, the focus of this paper is the phenomenon of improvisational ‘performance’ that can neither be heard nor checked from the aspect of real sound. By that means this examination shifts its object from the field of the conscious and the concrete to that of the unconscious and the mental, aiming at pointing to those elements of the link between the phenomena of silence and improvisation, which then enable the existence of a rich specter of meaning and sense of their concrete, mutually depending, stimulating relationships.

Key words: silence, interpersonal silence, inner hearing, echo of energy, postural echo, pantomime

The initial motivation for writing this paper originates from my dealing with the problem circle of relationships between silence and music, more precisely, the phenomenon of silence in music, ‘as’ music, and silence ‘beyond’ music.¹ On the one hand, these include silence as a frame, a non-measured element of ‘punctuation’ and architectonics, which inevitably acts during the performing of a piece of music, but also silence as a measured, that is, structured element of a composition.² On the other hand, the motivation originates from my reflections about improvisation and my observations that a number of distinct features of the practice of improvisation bear crucial traits of the phenomenon of silence too. Besides, my readiness for risks within my own musicological interpretations, which has brought me closer to a basic characteristic of improvisation – its openness towards the unpredictable, unprotected and risky – led me to attempt to establish a link between these two sources of motivation in the sense of trying to place a ‘measure of identification’ of silence through the features of improvisation. Therefore, I shall not deal here with the variety of functions and importance of silence in the very process of musical improvisation. Contrary to this, I shall examine the question of whether silence might be considered *as*

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¹ „Читање музике тишине“ [The Reading of ‘Silent Music’], *Зборник Матице српске за сценске уметности и музику* [Matica srpska Journal for Stage Arts and Music], 22-23, 1998, 117–124; ‘Silence As a Hermeneutic Oasis of Music’, *Muzikološki zbornik/Musicological Annual*, XLIII/2 zvezek/volume, *Racionalizam magičnoga nadiha: glasba kot podoba nepojmovnega spoznavanja/Rationalism of a Magic Tinge. Music as a Form of Abstract Perception*, Zbornik ob jubileju Marije Bergamo, Ljubljana, Oddelek za muzikologijo Filozofske fakultete v Ljubljani, 2007, 333–360; ‘Ivana Stefanović: Reflections on Silence’, in: *(Auto)Biography as a Musicological Discourse*. The Ninth International Conference of the Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Belgrade, 20–23 April 2008, Belgrade, Faculty of Music (in print).

² Richard Littlefield, ‘The Silence of the Frames’, in: Adam Krims (ed), *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic*, [Amsterdam], G&B Arts International, 1998, 213–231.

improvisation and according to which elements. Consequently, the focus of this investigation is a potential improvisational ‘performance’ that can be neither heard nor checked from the aspect of sounding.

It is immediately clear that aiming at such an investigation involves a shift of focus from the field of the concrete and the directly sensual, the verbal and the auditory, into the field of individual silence and an inner, interpersonal communicative ‘signalization’; but also into the field of ‘creating’ and keeping ‘under control’ only imagined sound. Hence, when it concerns an interpersonal communication that occurs on the ‘other side’ of lingual communication, I actually refer to ‘interpersonal silence’. When it concerns the sphere of imagined sound, that is, not the real, I refer to the ‘inner hearing’. And both interpersonal silence and the inner hearing are linked by silence itself, because it is exactly the context of silence which makes both possible.

This implies that much may happen within the space of a ‘silent net of interpersonal relationships’, which is by no means equated here with a ‘deaf net’.³ For example, various emotional relationships may be established within this silent space, tacit cognitive contacts and ‘dialogues’ too. Memories may be recalled, consciousness of oneself and others raised and ‘checked’; harmony (or conflicts) of interpersonal interaction, possible common intentions and actions may be felt, ‘foreseen’, or ‘set up’. Therefore, such a space is completely unlimited and unpredictable in the sense of content, involving ‘vectors’ of all profiles, directions and power. So, these ‘vectors’ of contents can arise from different fields, stimulating the ‘appearance’ of contents of various kinds: cognitive, emotional, social, cultural, etc. Naturally, they can also refer to sound contents. Their possible roles – such as symbolic, semantic,⁴ communicative or therapeutic⁵ to mention a few - provide silence with a corresponding sense and meanings, in different ways.

Clearly, the initial source, reach and effects of these latent contents originate from the ‘flexibility’ and richness of personal associative paths. Depending on their intensity, the power of their inner, mental energy, these contents may also ‘encroach’ on the space of interpersonal silence. Here, they can act as a driving force of silent interpersonal ‘agreement’, communication without conceptualization. In fact, they function as impulses for a tacit communication. This is why I would say that this kind of communication is ultimately based on an exchange of energy, but also on possible postural echoes among ‘participants’ in such a communication. With reference to all of this, the range of latent, immaterialized contents including specifically those of the sound nature is primarily the result of the ‘inner hearing’.

³ To a certain extent and from different aspects I examined the problem of silence defined through sound in all texts I quoted in the upper footnote.

⁴ I wrote specifically about this in a study ‘Silence as a Hermeneutic Oasis of Music’, op. cit.

⁵ Julie P. Sutton, ‘Hidden Music: an Exploration of Silence in Music and Music Therapy’, in: Irene Deliège and Geraint Wiggins (eds), *Musical Creativity: Multidisciplinary Research in Theory and Practice*, Hove, Psychology Press, 2006, 252–272. (*Music Therapy Today* online, Vol. VI, 3, 2005, 375–395, available on <http://www.MusicTherapyWorld.net>); Julie P. Sutton, ‘The Air Between Two Hands: Silence, Music and Communication’, in: Nicky Losseff and Jenny Doctor /eds/, *Silence, Music, Silent Music*, Hampshire, England – Burlington, USA, Ashgate, 2007, 169–186.

In other words, the inner idea of sound can only appear in one's personal silence, which is completely open for the 'appearance' of various sound 'sensations' and materials. So, there occur evocations of different sounds in the inner hearing: 'restoration' of memorized fragments of musical unfoldings, but also new ideas and 'projections' of sound materials. Also, the inner hearing implies all those 'uninvited' and mutually unconnected sound materials – sound 'phantoms' - actually everything which 'turns up' within one's inner hearing and which is usually totally accidental, unpredictable and 'uncontrollable'.

All traits of personal and interpersonal silence emphasized above, especially regarding possible sound contents that stem from the inner hearing, also point to some vital elements of improvisation. One convincing, I would even say 'symbolic', indicator of these similarities is a 'segment' of silence which always precedes an improvisational performance. It concerns the silence in which a short soundless 'rehearsal' of a single performer or an ensemble occurs, in which musicians 'check' their improvisational 'code' and, when referring to a collective improvisation, their musical 'agreement', before the process of their musical improvisation actually begins. In other words, their playing starts without sound. Of course, this kind of 'preparation' is typical of any performance, not only improvisational, but it is just within the course of improvisation that the silence of preparation is supposed to include improvisational 'tissue' or at least its basic sound substance and the main indications of its development. And neither can be heard.

So, the playing that does not occur in the real musical time but starts before it or, more precisely, before the real playing, belongs to the space of performers' personal and interpersonal silence. It is exactly in this silence that their tacit 'conversation' begins, that their playing actually starts. The function of silence directly preceding a collective improvisation encourages me to generalize my comparison between silence and improvisation in the sense of the consideration, explanation, and experience of silence as an improvisational potential and 'material'.⁶ Hence, in the next step I would conclude that the limitlessness and position of the contents of one's inner hearing, their unpredictable appearance and connections as well as their freedom, which is difficult but not entirely impossible to keep under control, 'equate' silence with improvisation exactly according to their common features: freedom of 'choice' and inner relations of materials.

However, the limitlessness and position of the contents of one's inner hearing also 'equate' silence with improvisation according to the phenomenon of 'interaction', since, in principle, as an

⁶ It is important to stress that I shall not deal here with the question of latent improvisational aspects of the Cagean silence, although it appears to be a considerable corroboration of the theme of my investigation and the chosen direction of its elaboration. As Cage claimed, 'there is no such thing as silence'. In other words, there is no space without any sound, which means that silence always includes a sort of sound, even most diverse sound contents, accidental and arbitrary. That is what Cage demonstrated through his project *4'33''*. However, at the same time, he pointed to the fact that the arbitrariness of the sound of silence necessarily depends on a global sound profile of the corresponding setting. So, being of such a sound nature and according to accidental and independent appearances of 'its' sound materials, their possible overlapping, permeation and friction, the Cagean silence might be considered as a metaphor for the nature of sound contents within the inner hearing. Conditionally speaking, the Cagean silence is a 'structure' determined in an 'improvisational' way. As if it 'schematically' makes audible the spheres of the inner hearing. That is why I consider the Cagean silence as a certain materialization of the nature of sound contents which emerge within the inner hearing and 'procedures' according to which it functions.

inaudible, possible net of relationships among humans, silence implies an interaction of the humans in the same sense as improvisation does. Only that, as I have already stressed, the interaction within a silent context occurs exclusively at the level of the latent echoes of complex energy – psychological, cognitive, social etc., – not at the level of a concrete exchange of materials, e.g., musical.

Thus, the position of listening to the other under conditions of interpersonal silence is different from the position of listening as a necessary prerequisite for and basic feature of a real improvisational musical shaping. Not only is the exchange of sound contents that occurs within an interpersonal silence uncertain, but there is also the question of whether someone's individual silence implies any imagined sound at all which could become the object of an unstated musical improvisation. That is why the mutual 'responds' of sound materials belonging to the inner hearing of the participants in an interpersonal silence, not being 'pre-arranged' in any way, seem not to be a relevant category for the silence of imagined sound.

Rather, I would claim that instead of the listening to the other, which is typical of and crucial to improvisation, it is exactly 'postural echo' which analogously acts within an interpersonal 'musical' silence. But one should not forget that postural echo has a significant, sometimes even decisive role in a collective improvisation, as if the gestural is a layer parallel to an improvisational shaping, acting as a kind of visual hint of it. Sometimes, the gestural may be intense and functional to the extent that it creates an impression of being 'separated' from 'its' corresponding musical unfolding, tending to become its corporal 'variant'. And this is a real basis for the assumption that under conditions of interpersonal silence gestural communication might be understood as a suggestion of an imagined sound, visualization of a sound flow which does not really exist. Ultimately, this appears to be the only way in which an immediate exchange of 'sound' contents might be materialized in the sphere of the inner hearing of the protagonists of interpersonal silence.

I would claim that the genre of pantomime is the best proof of this, because it can also choose imagined or imaginary sound as an object of its dramaturgy.⁷ By these means a pantomime artistically conceives, embodies, articulates and formalizes an important creative field regarding the possible consideration of silence as a kind of sound improvisation. In other words, pantomime may be understood as an artistic metaphor for silence *as* improvisation. Exactly from this aspect, silence may 'demonstrate' creative implications in the way in which improvisation does.

Therefore, in the context of tacit improvisation, as its capacity and 'material', more accurately as 'improvisation' belonging to the 'other side' of the audible, silence shares with real improvisational practice important and characteristic features: freedom of 'choice' of material and its 'elaboration'; communication and interaction; and creative implications in the field of possible gestural articulation. Thus, regardless of the fact that silence lacks the most significant, defining improvisational trait – a direct

⁷ Not to mention the communication methods of deaf-mute people.

musical communication based on real listening – silence comprises some obvious elements according to which it can be pondered also as improvisation.

And *vice versa*, *improvisation as silence*, which somehow appears to be a supplementary category to *silence as improvisation*, occurs foremost in the field of the problem circles of the audible. Therefore, improvisation as silence is to be elaborated from another aspect: from the aspect of the concrete improvisational ‘organization’ of a musical flow.

САЖЕТАК

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ТИШИНА КАО ИМПРОВИЗАЦИЈА

Тишина као окружење импровизације која се не одвија у реалном времену, која се, дакле, не чује, а као потенцијал и ‘материјал’ те импровизације, тј. као ‘импровизација’ с ‘оне стране’ чујности, дели са реалном импровизационом праксом битне, за ту праксу карактеристичне одлике: слободу ‘одабира’ материјала и ‘захвата’ над њим, специфичну комуникацију и интеракцију, креативне наговештаје путем гестикационе артикулације. Зато и без обзира на чињеницу што јој недостаје најважнија импровизациона црта – комуницирање на бази слушања – тишина садржи довољно елемената на основу којих се може промислити и из аспекта импровизације.