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CONCERT METAMORPHOSES OF IN/VISIBLE AND IN/AUDIBLE

Abstract: Classical music repertoire and artistic music concerts have been, until recently, left apart from the audiovisual, multimedia creative space, reserved mostly for contemporary sound. In recent years, visualisation of the concert ritual on new grounds is being recognized as the spirit of time. First and foremost, the point is in the search for a visual-arts counterpart for the most popular works of the artistic repertoire from musicians' standpoint: the road leads from a recognizable sound to the new moving images, conceived for the occasion, with the mutual effort at establishing the dialogue between parallel worlds of expression, with preservation of the autonomous identity of each artistic discipline and the synchronization of traditional performing apparatus and state-of-the-art technology. Using the examples of two author projects – polyptychs which inspired this item, new emerging concert forms and their repercussion are presented: *Pictures Reframed* by Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and South African video artist Robin Rhode, and *Equi Voci* by Belgian composer and video artist Thierry De Mey, realized in collaboration with the conductor Michel Tabachnik and Brussels Philharmonics.

Key words: correspondences, concert ritual, audiovisual concert, metamorphoses, new technologies, interpreter, interactive apparatus^s

The history of the connections, coexistence, permeation, fusion of music and other arts is as old as the artistic disciplines. After the very early syncretic times, this history has been inhabited by various episodes, often utopian or demiurgic by nature, where the initiators changed, viewpoints shifted, new scientific and

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technological discoveries and profound strategies were used, which penetrated with exactitude into the individual parameters and opened new chapters of the dialogue between the arts. The intensity, discontinuity, the frequent transposition of the gravity centre from one art to another, and the laboratory-like, concealed *modus operandi* led to this *history of artistic correspondences* and its results not being equally accessible or appreciated in the past, and therefore not recognized or applied in a wider context, and so they remained in alternative and avant-garde, interspatial artistic and theoretical demarches. Therefore, the subsequent acknowledgment and rehabilitation of certain multimedia episodes, especially those *entered from music, a posteriori* gained the privileged status of the most exciting and most inspiring research fields.

Ancient theatre, which owes its multidisciplinary to the development and metamorphoses of various lyrical, dramatic and comical elements of the Dionysian dithyramb; *Camerata Fiorentina*, a polyvalent artistic group based on Neo-Platonist ideas and rallied around its patron Bardi; the fascination with coloured music in the early eighteenth century, encouraged by Newton's visionary wheel of colour and music from 1704,¹ *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner's authorial megavision of "a dramatic work as an ideal combination of performing arts",² dance and music theatre as the initiator and stage of polymedia encounters – these are significant and complementary chapters in the long exchange between the realms of the in/visible and in/audible. Presented towards the end of the nineteenth century, the alluring scientific hypothesis on *synesthesia* soon met with metaphoric artistic responses in Swedenborg's interpretations of the *correspondence of the senses*, embodied in Baudelaire's eponymous poem, in Scriabin's (1871–1915) works *Prometheus* and *Mystery*, a demiurgic, utopian, unrealized multimedia extravaganza, only to explode between 1933 and 1936 in the *colour music* experiments by Kandinsky, Alexander Laszlo and Oskar Fischinger, the shows by Bauhaus, the subversive interventions by the futurist Russolo...³ Chronologically, the opening of *the fourth dimension* of acoustic and visual space in the laboratories of Varèse and Le Corbusier⁴ and the deep penetration of experimental film and video art into the whole of artistic creation, paved the way for various hybrid audiovisual forms and concepts, such as visual music, sound installations, experimental media, developed in the authors' studios, but without any significant presence in the traditional concert halls.

The second half of the twentieth century was also dominated by avant-garde composers as the main exponents of multimedia linkages, applying at various levels the radical ideas about the spatial expansion of sound and light effects, removing them from the laboratories to public spaces. A special place belongs to

1 E.g. *ocular harpsichord* from 1729.

2 *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, Cleveland, Ohio, 2001.

3 Cf. Moritz, William, *Color harmony/Color music*, Mexico City, 1994, 34–36; Harrison, John, *Synaesthesia, the strangest thing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford N. Y., 2001.

4 Philips Pavilion at the World's Fair in Brussels 1958.

Xenakis (1922–2001), who in 1973 responded to the commission of the Autumn Theatre Festival in Paris with *Polytope de Cluny*,⁵ who synthesized all of his experiences up to that date (theoretical works assembled in the book *Musique, Architecture*⁶ and stochastic theory), syncretized and synchronized the electronic torrent of sound from an eight-channel tape with an apparatus made of several hundreds of flashes, lasers, mirrors, resembling an early *light show* extravaganza... With this *light and sound action*, as he called it, which from a great height literally showered and flooded the audience located on the floor of the Gallic-Roman thermae, he actually projected a utopian-futuristic model of new media and offered a way out of the traditional collective concert ritual towards an individual experience, remaining though in the sphere of *directed creation* without an interactive dimension. The capacity of this discovery is seen in new versions of *Polytope*, technologically upgraded by *surround sound system* and the possibilities of digital technology.⁷

Today all these endeavours look like preparatory actions and portents of a *numerical, digital big bang* which incredibly accelerated the process of the approaching and fusion of verbal, acoustic, visual, spatial information, raised the issue of the redefinition of the flow, space and time of art, heralded new interactive and virtual shapes of their coexistence and enabled their easy application and expansion, but also simplified all forms of manipulating new technologies. This paved the ways for redefining the classical artistic concert whose protagonists, in spite of individual efforts, impassively observed the attempts at the organic connecting of the acoustic and visual worlds, reserved almost exclusively for experimental and modern sound which also enjoyed institutional support.

Grame (*Groupe de recherche acoustique/musique*) from Lyon, as a budgetary institution strongly supported by the French Ministry of Culture, was among the first ones which, having sound as its starting-point, “realized and supported musical actions of various forms: concert music, directed concerts, musical extravaganzas, visual and sound installations, spectacles focused on music”.⁸ Through composers’ residences and experimental artists in the visual and performing arts, with the help of various technological apparatuses, since the early 1980’s up to this day, *Grame* has produced dozens of concerts yearly and has been organizing the *Musiques en scène* biennial festival since 1982.

5 The first version of *Polytope* was presented in the French Pavilion at the World Fair in Montreal in 1967.

6 *Musique, Architecture*, Casterman, Tournai, 1971.

7 Revault d’Allones, Olivier, *Xénakis – Les Polytopes*, Balland, Paris, 1975; Bosseur, Jean-Yves, *Le sonore et le visuel*, Disvoir, Paris, 41–50; Iannis Xenakis – *Electronic Works 2*, I. Xenakis CDS, 2008.

8 “Les actions musicales produites et soutenues par Grame prennent différentes formes: musiques de concert, concerts mis en scène, spectacles musicaux, installations plastiques et sonores, conception et réalisation de grands événements spectaculaires centrés sur la musique”; cf. www.grame.fr.

Similarly to the previous episodes, the initiators of these new correspondences remain music creators, above all contemporary composers followed and/or creatively interpreted by certain performers taking an equal part in contemporary projects. In the process, the classical concert repertoire still remains enclosed in the rituals established in the nineteenth century, although visual and theatrical dimensions have always been latently present in a live music performance as prerequisites of successful communication with the audience, whose standards changed in keeping with the spirit of the times. The dramaturgy of a stage show, the control of movements and facial expressions, body and/or gesture language, lighting and *mise en scène*, recently have become obligatory study courses, and ironic or amusing directed gags are trademarks of the increasing number of chamber ensembles.⁹ Also, we should not neglect the influences absorbed by the music scene from the growing music industry which, from the late 1960's and the first projections of psychedelic imagery as a complementary ambiance at the performances by *The Doors*, Hendrix, later on *Pink Floyd* and other bands, promoted and enhanced *video design* as an unavoidable part of every concert.

The aggressiveness and technological perfection of that new audiovisual culture, the signs of crisis among the aging concert audience and, at the same time, growing competition among the interpreters of classical music have raised questions among the younger generations of performers who have lately begun to give the first interesting individual answers.

At the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, the music stages of Brussels, open to innovations and still nurturing their symbolistic and surrealist heritages, were the location for the premiere performances of about a dozen various audiovisual projects, connected with the search for a visual arts counterpart for a standard repertoire of artistic music, precisely from the musicians' standpoint. This road leads from a recognizable sound to new moving images, conceived for the occasion, with a mutual effort at establishing a dialogue between parallel worlds of expression, but preserving the autonomous identity of each artistic discipline, and the synchronization of the traditional performing apparatus and state-of-the-art technology.

With the conclusion that the multiplication of these new concert forms raises new questions about the art of interpretation and continuing future of the traditional artistic repertoire, on this occasion, asymmetrically according to the degree of innovation and accomplishment, two projects-polyptychs, emblematic for the subject at hand, will be presented: *Pictures Reframed* by Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and South African video artist Robin Rhode¹⁰ and *Equi Voci* by Belgian composer and video artist Thierry De Mey, realized in collaboration with the conductor Michel Tabachnik and the Brussels Philharmonic.¹¹

9 E.g. *Kremerata Baltica* with Gidon Kremer, *Eben String Quartet*, *Gudači svetog Dorđa*.

10 Premiered on 24th November 2009, Palais des Beaux-arts, Brussels.

11 Premiered on 26th November 2009, Flagey Cultural Centre, Brussels.

Scenes from the childhood of music

Wondering, according to his own words, about the future of artistic music and looking for concrete solutions (“On dit aujourd’hui que la musique classique a un problème. Comment peut-elle conserver sa pertinence dans la société ? Pour quelqu’un de ma génération, il me semble logique de tester des choses différentes.”),¹² the forty-year old pianist at the peak of fame turns to a ten-year younger visual artist who comes from a different culture, relies on street art and graffiti in his video works and *has little experience in classical music*. One can assume that, as the child of a technological and visual civilization who came wandering into the *craft* and auditory landscapes, the renowned pianist specialized in the early Romanticists sensed his other *self* and heard latent music in those very nuanced, ludic, slightly humoristic and ironic video works without sound, which seem to be fleeing from the Johannesburg noise. With their senses open to the in/visible and in/audible, the two authentic artists focused their collaboration on Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (“When you are using images, music may lose because of the intensity of sight. I think that in this work music has a chance”).¹³ Not leaving the painter Hartmann and his “exhibits” completely aside, Rhode, far off from any explicitness, creates black-and-white, simple but ambiguous moving images whose emphatically geometric elements seem to be dancing to Mussorgsky’s music and playing with the nature of artistic music and its exponents. (“Mon intention était que la publique puisse trouver de petits fragments significatifs autant de moments de plaisir visuel. Je ne voulais pas obliger le public à réfléchir.”)¹⁴

The first and the last pieces of *Pictures* are dedicated to the piano, the monster – an instrument which is, in comparison with Rhode’s minimalist standpoint, used by the composer and pianist to its utmost limits. *Gnome* opens the space for *Wire Ballet* and enables the deconstruction of the instrument. *Promenade* is showered with glittering pebbles shaped as cut diamonds. *The Old Castle*, right in front of our eyes, is constructed in the form of a pentagram; dragons fly over the *Tuileries* – as mirrors which reflect the tree-tops; *Bydło*, transformed in time, moves over abandoned rail tracks; *Chickens* dance to the rhythm of a compass which leaves circular tracks; *The Market at Limoges* shows white chalks on a dark background which switch places at the same rate as the piano keys; while in *The Catacombs* strokes of white ink split the dark skies apart, and the silhouette of a man, in the

12 “They say classical music has a problem today. How can it preserve its social significance? It is logical that someone from my generation tests various things.” Interview with L. O. Andnes in the programme booklet, Beaux-arts Music 2009, 25.

13 Id.

14 “My intention was for the audience to find small fragments of meaning, but also the moments of visual pleasure. I did not want to force the audience to think.” Interview with R. Rhode in the programme booklet, op. cit., 28.

authors' own words, is a discreet homage to Hartmann. *Baba Yaga* is populated by holistic and symbolic forms of South African witch-doctors in traditional vivid colours, while *The Gates in Kiev* is a *reality film* about the slow advance of a tide which eventually floods a grand piano on the shore ("The relentless flow of the water into the grand piano acts as metaphor of purging history... The piano as an object becomes an antique of our time that at first has been hidden and then finally is revealed before our eyes.")¹⁵

Projected upon a dozen screens which form a shell around a darkened stage and radiate unequally – intensively dimly by turns, according to the perfectly precise, expressive and kaleidoscopically colourful pianism of Andsnes – these reinterpreted audiovisual images flood the hall, gaining not only new boundaries, but also reshaped content by our senses; as dynamic, parallel, autonomous worlds which reflect, play with or occasionally confront each other, or grow apart from and make one another strange, not questioning their own expressive codes, but influencing the change of angle in listening and watching.

Although *Pictures at an Exhibition* are the beacon of this audiovisual project and its great finale, the metamorphoses they underwent are experienced only within the total dramaturgy which remains emphatically of a concert type, driven by the pianist's aesthetic notion and feeling for the relationships between the parts and the whole. Mussorgsky's unpretentious *Childhood Memories*, illuminated by Rhode's gentle animation *Kid Candle*, and the composition *What Becomes*, with traces of jazz improvisation, by the Austrian author Thomas Larcher (1963), containing traces of jazz improvisation and inspired by Rhode's animated variations on childhood, give a completely new framework for Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, which the pianist plays in a completely darkened hall, this time alone, without the moving imagery. *Visual silence* which, by inertia, still conjures up images, the ludic and pianistic richness of Schumann's fragmentary visions and Andsnes's transcendent pianism, open the unexpected dimensions of the in/visible and in/audible, reaffirm the great synesthetic potentials of the music and its interpreter, and resound as the dramaturgical and artistic peak of the project, whose coherence is masterfully confirmed by *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Unlike the visualised parts of this polyptych, which confront the pianist with additional rigorous discipline and control of synchronization with the projected video materials, *Kinderszenen* without images and without lighting, apart from the bare minimum above the keyboard, surrender musical time to the pianist, enabling him to employ an infinitesimal elaboration of light, ecstatic games shadowed by miniature dramas with imprinted traces of Rhode's previous animations. At the end, from this new context, the leit-subject of the concert emerges: the return (of music, of art) to childhood innocence.

Although, judging by the interviews, both artists strive to avoid pretentious explanations and definitions of their joint work and insist on concrete details of

15 R. Rhode, comments in the programme booklet, op. cit., 15.

their cooperation, their original and highly stylized result, rich in meanings, necessarily evokes hidden analogies of meaning which surpass artistic and aesthetic categories. Apart from the correspondence of two artistic disciplines and their mutual metamorphoses, what is obvious is the rapprochement of two historically, geographically, socio-psychologically and politically very distant codes: European musical Romanticism on the one side and the contemporary African visual code on the other; there is also a coexistence of the artefact, the pianistic craft and high technology. Between those remote instances, the pianist acts as an intermediary, and at the same time as a guardian, a conservator of the nineteenth-century original, the receptor of various interpretations of Schumann's and Mussorgsky's works and an active participant in a new age, facing a redefinition of the basic parameters of West European culture, the changes of which he wants to be a part of... The synchronicity of various factors in flux generates a latent dramatic situation which, during the programme, proved to be capable of reaffirming the traditional concert ritual, renewing the fatigued perception of the regular concert audience, opening the senses of new potential listeners in the making, without anticipating the individual experience and focusing on musical time as the basic parameter.

Ecological fairy tale for adults

Coincidentally presented in Brussels two days after *Pictures Reframed* within the Ninth Dance Biennial, the project *Equi Voci* by Thierry De Mey roughly follows Andsnes's basic ideas: from the position of an active contemporary, the goal was to visualise a classical, in this case orchestral, concert programme consisting of Debussy's and Ravel's famous works, from the standpoint of a vital and topical discipline such as filmed dance, avoiding illustrativeness and insisting on the autonomy of different artistic and performing codes. De Mey's parallel voices, as much as in Andsnes's *Pictures*, shape a monumental multi-movement and symmetrical dramaturgy with an introduction (*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*) and three monumental movements of various proportions (*La mer*, *Ma mère l'oiseau* and *La valse*). Like in the previous example, the works of more serious musical substance, i.e. the first and the last movements, are presented without the visual dimension, in all of their impressionistic, i.e. post-impressionistic acoustic splendour.

For the benefit of a clearer dramaturgical flow, De Mey takes the liberty of re-naming Debussy's *Faune* into *Prélude à la mer*, with an expressive choreography by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker,¹⁶ filmed in the fascinating regions of a salt desert in Kazakhstan. The wilderness of arid, searing, monochromatic landscapes left behind after the recession of the Aral Sea, often shot from a great height, and the

16 On 16th February 2010 in Brussels opera *La Monnaie*, with the choreographer Jérôme Bel, mezzosoprano Sara Fulgoni and the Chamber Orchestra of the Opera, she presented the project *3Abschied*, three choreographical versions of Mahler's movement from *Das Lied von der Erde* in Schönberg's transcription.

faces and bodies of ballet dancers Marc Lorimer and Cynthia Loemi, removed from the stage to hot, uneven ground, which is unsuitable for dancing, dramatically correspond with the suggestive, smooth waves of sound and nuances of Debussy's score; the lack of any colourfulness in the mise en scène and the superb dance of the two members of the *Rosas* company, acting as the intermediaries between dream and reality, life and death, exteriorize and additionally emphasize the refinement, ephemerality and charm of the music inspired by Mallarmé's visionary work. Although occasionally, the androgynous choreographic concept is associated more closely to the poetic text and its search for an impossible dream than to Debussy's music, De Mey's camera, successful to the point of virtuosity, follows exactly the inner structures of the music. After the final chords of the *Prélude*, the dance continues in silence while the last shot shows the approach of a water surface on the horizon. That moment, with the images of a dry seabed still impressed upon one's mind, is the starting point of the three symphonic sketches *La mer*, which Debussy completed in 1905 on the English coast of The Channel. The very ambiance of the concert, especially the filmed *Prélude* as the introduction, made the rendering of the Brussels Philharmonic and its conductor a first-class experience in the continuous exchange between the in/audible and the in/visible. In a live performance of overlapping micro-motives and continuous development, a listener can very rarely hear and see the sparkling of the orchestration (*De l'aube à midi sur la mer*), the torrent of aquatic and aerial onomatopoeias (*Jeux de vagues*) and "forces - instead of subjects - driven by the principle of metamorphoses"¹⁷ (*Dialogue du vent et de la mer*), and thus appreciate the accuracy of the claim by composer and analyst Jean Barraqué that *La mer* is the first open work in the history of music.¹⁸

De Mey, in the game of contrasts, confronted this Debussy-esquely forceful and successful wing of the polyptych with the musical world of Maurice Ravel. The film *Ma mère l'oie*, made in the forests around Brussels, after Ravel's suite of the same title, transports us into the world of a fairy tale for adults, inhabited by the alienated, self-ironic characters of *commedia dell'arte*. By means of the skilful and flexible shooting of various black-and-white and coloured areas, where the characters and situations succeed one another, De Mey suggests a circular flow of Ravel's subjects, while the pale greenery and dead leaves emphasize the melancholy in the music. In spite of the indubitable, added values, the repetitive and fragmentary visual version of the suite and similarity in the visual and narrative treatment of its various movements-ambiances, neutralizes the ambiguity and ludic character of the quasi-naïve music which is identified with monotonous moving images. In spite of all the effort by the conductor Tabachnik, the audiovisual version of *Ma mère l'oie* falls short of *Equi Voci*,

17 Barraqué, Jean, *Debussy*, Ed. Du Seuil, 1962, 190. (Ces forces - et non plus ces thèmes - connaissent des métamorphoses conductrices...)

18 Ibid.

thus its role within the concert dramaturgy is reduced to “the calm before the storm” in the shape of the virtuosic and apocalyptic *La valse*, when the Brussels Philharmonic brilliantly re-enters the stage.

Although renowned precisely for his impeccable sense of rhythm which generates the rise and fall of the sections and controls the balance of large forms, this time De Mey failed to harmonize the entirety of the audiovisual project *Equi Voci* with his antiglobalistic and ecological ideas. The sea receding before the desert, stunted forests where “big urban children” find refuge and the idealized freshness of music in contrast to nature injured by the human hand leave the impression of an unfinished project, stretched between artistic aspirations and the illustrative poster, monumental orchestral sound and high technology.

Unfortunately, the most important breakthrough of this perfectly executed audiovisual programme, although announced, remained relatively invisible to the audience. Thanks to the perfected interactive apparatus, the moving images on giant screens unfolded in real time, following the orchestral tempi, so the filmed choreography was actually adjusting to the conductor and “followed” the music in real time and not vice versa, as is the case on the opera and ballet stage. The fact that the members of the orchestra and the conductor enjoy complete musical autonomy in relation to the visual versions of the works performed, whose sequences are activated synchronously with the conductor’s movements, speaks of a revolutionary innovation whose consequences cannot be fully appreciated at this moment.

On the other hand, the fact that De Mey, with the institutional support of the Dance Biennial, after his years-long research in the area of audiovisual installations¹⁹ chose highly popular musical literature from the beginning of the twentieth century and put it in the context of a technically complex, expensive and risky endeavour whose production requires extensive logistics, confirms that the metamorphoses of concert forms and the regeneration of the classical repertoire are becoming a regular part of the commercialized music life of Europe.

However, in spite of technology being ever more affordable, given that this form of highly complex, artistic mega-project requires vast investments and a large number of competent participants, one can assume that, for a long time, it will be accessible only to the stars of performing arts and to environments that already live a “coloured” world.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

19 *Barbe-bleu, Deep in the Wood, From Inside* for interactive apparatus.

Ана Котевска

КОНЦЕРТНЕ МЕТАМОРФОЗЕ НЕ/ВЕИДЉИВОГ И НЕ/ЧУЈНОГ

РЕЗИМЕ

Последњих година, трагање за технолошки унапређеним визуелним панданом класичном музичком репертоару стиче све више присталица међу врхунским интерпретаторима. На примерима два ауторска пројекта, представљене су нове концертне форме у настанку и њихове реперкусије: *Pictures reframed* норвешког пијаниста Леифа Овеа Андсенса и јужноафричког видео уметника Робина Рода (Rhode) и *Equi voci* белгијског композитора и видео уметника Тијерија Де Меја (Thierry De Meu) оствареног у сарадњи са диригентом Мишелом Табашником (Michel Tabachnik) и Бриселском филхармонијом.

Кључне речи: кореспонденције, концертни ритуал, аудиовизуелни концерт, метаморфозе, нове технологије, интерпретатор, интерактивни диспозитив