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François Nicolas: *Le monde – Musique (I – L’œuvre musicale et son écoute)*, Edition Aedam Musicae, Paris, 2014, 259 pp.

La Monde – Musique, both as an autonomous, independent, and parallel world to the real one and an expression, forms the central category around which François Nicolas (1947) develops his theoretical system, without accepting to relativize the issue of music’s essence as a self-explanatory enigma, based on Alain Badiou’s philosophical conception of the world in his *Logiques des mondes*.¹ The interpretation pursued in *Le Monde – Musique* is essentially positivist and inter-disciplinary, relying equally, besides music analysis and aesthetics, on philosophy and mathematics, which provide some of the concepts that Nicolas considers the closest and most faithful “interpreters” when it comes to translating meaning from the media of notation and tone to that of words. The philosophical standpoint that Nicolas identifies in Badiou, concerning mathematics, corre-

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¹ Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, Seuil, Paris, 2006. Badiou distinguishes between five “worlds”: the psychological world, the individual world, the collective world of closed groups, the world of the global history of humankind, and nature and the universe.

sponds to the theories of Alexander Grothendieck (1928–2014), the founder of modern algebraic geometry, an innovator who was guided by concrete mathematical problems and who, by means of categories theory, questioned basic mathematical concepts.

François Nicolas’s ambitiously conceived tetralogy, *La Monde – Musique*,² is undoubtedly a monumental, complex, and inter-disciplinary life project that addresses one of those “great”, comprehensive topics that were neglected for decades but have, over the past several years, resurfaced.³ Like other such bold synthetic conceptions, this one, too, entails a well-prepared and therefore also critically oriented readership and thus shares all the risks of such ventures, such as occupying mutually incoherent, contradicting positions, or presenting negative connotations of utopia. However, the impressive results of this first volume of a tetralogy to which Nicolas has continually dedicated himself for the last 20 years are closer to an *optimal projection* (Flaker) of a set of different methods for deciphering the secret of music and gradually building a new system of logic based primarily on a “contemporary Idea of music” rather than an “Idea of contemporary music”, whose starting point is that music is not a language but thinking and whose point of

² Following Volume 1, Édition Aedam Musicae also published Volume 2, *Le monde – Musique et son solfège*, 2014 and Volume 3, *L’Intellectualité musicale*, 2015. Volume 4, *Les Rapports du Monde – Musique avec son environnement* is forthcoming.

³ Cf. a related example from Serbian musicology: Tijana Popović Mladenović, *Procesi panstilističkog muzičkog mišljenja*, FMU, Katedra za muzikologiju, Belgrade, 2009.

origin [*ishodište*] is that music is an art of listening.

An extraordinary creative personality at the present juncture of music in France, despite having graduated from the *École polytechnique* (natural sciences and philosophy), teaching as a professor at the prestigious *École normale supérieure* in Paris, and an impressive list of works published for the most part in musicological contexts,⁴ at public occasions and in his biographical notes François Nicolas defines himself exclusively as a composer (around 30 works, published by Edition Jobert) and “thinking musician” who engages in theoretical reflections on the world of music, its autonomy, and laws. In terms of thus not identifying as a musicologist, as well as by virtue of his ambitious intent to proceed from music itself, using an innovative methodology and avoiding an anthropological approach, to the genesis and synthesis of exclusively “Western” art music, Nicolas follows in the tracks of an earlier generation of Francophone writers on music, such as the philosopher and music aesthete Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–1985),⁵ pianist and, in his own words, “musicographer” Célestin Deliège (1922–2010),⁶ composer and writer on music André Boucouréchiév (1925–1997),⁷ as well as pianist and music analyst Charles

Rosen (1927–2012), who referred to himself not as “a musicologist who plays the piano but an interpreter of music in both senses”.⁸

Openly invoking his predecessors’ inter-disciplinary approach and adopting, albeit critically, their views, especially those of Jankélévitch, whose notion of the “ineffable” floats above *Le Monde – Musique*, in “Ouverture”, his introductory chapter, François Nicolas elaborates on the underlying postulates of his system, including the distinction between a musical and musicological approach! “A musician”, he argues, “treats music as a subjectifying interiority [*intériorité subjectivante*], while a musicologist treats it as an objectifying exteriority [*extériorité objectivante*]”, a discipline of a “discursive knowledge of music (and not the art of creating music)”.⁹

Since any attempt to interpret such a reductionist position or argue against it would turn into a separate text in its own right (even just listing examples suggesting the opposite would entail a separate article), on this occasion I will attribute it to the author’s apparently limited familiarity with the horizons of musicology today and/or his intent to reach a wider circle of music lovers with his books than those of the profession and scholarship of music. At any rate, his stylistically exquisitely shaped, intriguing, lively intellectual writing, a labyrinth (at times impassable) of explications of concepts, terms, and categories, self-reflections, analyses of musical examples, a dense thicket of tables and network of bril-

⁴ Cf. François Nicolas, “Entrelacer musique et politique”, *New Sound*, 2013, 42, 28–40.

⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l’ineffable*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1961.

⁶ Célestin Deliège, *Cinquante ans de modernité musicale. De Darmstadt à l’IRCAM – Contribution historiographique à une musicologie critique*, Brussels, Edition Mardaga, 2003.

⁷ André Boucouréchiév, *Le Langage musical*, Paris, Fayard, 1993.

⁸ Charles Rosen, *Aux confins du sens. Plaisir de jouer, plaisir de penser*, Paris, Eshel, 1993.

⁹ François Nicolas, I – *L’Œuvre musicale et son écoute*, Paris, Ed. Aedam Musicae, 2014, 20.

liantly selected quotations showcasing intellectual Europe from Plato via St. Augustine... to Marcel Duchamp, as well as elaborate inter-disciplinary interpretations, although deftly structured into smaller wholes, and finally also imaginative analogies and metaphors, is more of an inspiration for an interactive reading, intuitive “listening”, and individual reinterpreting of individual moments, than a critical overview of the work as a whole. Moreover, and this constitutes his creative contribution *par excellence* that once again links him with Jankélévitch, confronted with musicological terminology’s insufficiently expressive potential or seeking to escape it, the author borrows terms from non-musical disciplines and/or seeks to establish a new lexical set of neologisms, oppositions, sonically seductive words, sometimes difficult to translate; for instance, distinguishing between *musical* and *musicien*, the former stemming from music itself, the latter from the individual making music, or between terms related to interpretation, such as *justesse* and *exactitude*; also, grading listening in terms of time and modality (*pré-écoute*, *fil d’écoute*, *sur-écoute*, *sous-écoute*), as well as his own invented term *intension*, a portmanteau of *intensité*, *intention*, and *tension*, denoting the hidden energy tension of a work that all of a sudden “bristles like a lightning bolt or instant eruption, turning a hearer into a listener...”,¹⁰ etc.

In Volume 1 – *L’Œuvre musicale et son écoute* – positing the work *per se* and not its mediators, interpreters, and/or verbal interpreters as the basis of *Le Monde* –

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 49: “[...] jaillit tel un bref éclair ou une éruption fugace ; en sorte de convertir son auditeur en écouteur [...]”.

Musique, in ten relatively compact chapters of roughly the same length (except Chapter 6, situated as the central chapter), citing numerous examples, Nicolas theorizes different ways of listening to music, such as perception, close listening (*Théorie de l’audition musicale*), comprehension (*appréhender*), religious listening (*Théorie théologique de l’écoute fidèle*), unconscious listening (*Approche psychanalytique de l’écoute inconsciente*)... The precondition that an ordinary hearer must meet in order to recognize the *intension* of a work and thereby affirm herself as a *listener* is the phenomenon of *le moment-faveur*, a *privileged*, key micro-event in the performance of a piece that, like a blow or surprise effect, illuminates the work in its entirety, comprising all of its preceding and ensuing flow, the moment when the hearer is “incorporated into the work”¹¹ and becomes its integral part. The author devotes to this insight the central, longest, and most musical chapter in Volume 1 of his work,¹² entering the role of a professional musician, active listener, and, it seems, musicologist, with no precautions or mediation from philosophy or mathematics. Namely, following a brief episode in which he refers to Hironaka’s mathematical theorem about the singularity of time¹³ and reminds us of some *privileged moments* in the domains of theatre, film, and literature, as well as those that Schumann, Berlioz, Mahler, Debussy, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Jankélévitch (whose sensible *musical moments* appear as direct models of *le moment faveur*) discovered in works by other com-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20

¹² *Ibid.*, 117–75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

posers, Nicolas presents and explicates his own imaginary anthology of 16 privileged moments in emblematic works by Mozart (Symphony No. 40, first movement), Brahms (Symphony No. 2, second movement), Bach (St. Matthew Passion), Wagner (*Parsifal*, Act I, leitmotif), Sibelius (Symphony No. 5, first movement), Ravel (Concerto in G, first movement)... From those examples, selected by some unstated criteria, one may conclude that the author most readily refers to well-known pieces from the regular concert repertory (probably guided by his own preferences and dramaturgical trajectories in his writing) and that the *privileged moments* he highlights do not significantly diverge from the horizon of expectations of an informed auditorium. Thus in Bach's *Passion*, Nicolas stresses the moment when there is a "collective cry" (*Barrabas!*), which sounds like an "intrusion of the masses into the order of the state",¹⁴ sheds new light on the work's previously serene flow, and affects a change in the overall perception of the work, while in Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*, the author focuses on the development section, the moment (score mark No. 22) when "the soloist's rising line brutally and unexpectedly stops at the edge of the abyss, yielding, for a moment, that void to the fragile sound of the harp, before the pianist returns, leading also the listener, with the full import of that word... Of course, it all depends on the interpretation",¹⁵ the author asserts, for a moment re-signifying himself as a music critic advising his readers how to listen to music and doing it with an unconcealed emotional investment.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 158–60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167–68.

In contrast to monumental works from earlier times, where those privileged, decisive moments occur either toward the beginning or, at the latest, midway through, in 20th-century works by Schoenberg (*Farben*, Op. 16, No. 3), Carter (*Night Fantasies*), Boulez (*Structures II*), and Brian Ferneyhough's *La Chute d'Icar*, Nicolas typically detects such moments toward the end. Also verifying that claim on a piece of his own (*Duelle* for violin, mezzo-soprano, and *Timé*), he concludes that in contemporary pieces, the *moments faveurs* correspond to their endings! Aware of the seductive as well as arbitrary character of the conclusions he makes in this chapter, which is positioned as the central chapter of the book, and perhaps also confronted with the danger that precisely this chapter may divide and confuse his readers (in case some of them might identify precisely that chapter as the *privileged moment* of the entire book and then absorb themselves in it, while others, taken aback by this turn that departs from the preceding theoretical considerations, might abandon the rest of the book, which is devoted to listening to music), Nicolas intelligently anticipates that possibility and right in the middle of his central chapter, between the music examples and analyses mentioned above, by way of a self-interview, poses questions about the resulting confusion and incoherence and offers answers.

Question: "What happens to the work if there is no *moment-faveur*?"

Answer: In such a case, the absence of that moment forecloses the hearer into a hopeless and disoriented *pre-listening*; or, worse, into expert over-listening.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

Accepting the risk that this answer may partly refer to some of my questions and dilemmas as well, I will conclude this confused impression of my first reading of Volume 1 of François Nicolas's four volumes with a concise paraphrase and reinterpretation of two metaphors of two different approaches to listening that "rule" *La Monde – Musique*, which the author positions in the final chapter, titled *Coda*.

The first metaphor is that of a river, that is, the possibilities that open up to us when we are confronted with a flowing watercourse. Similarly to a musical flow, we may also observe/listen to this flow of water from the riverbank and follow its changes in dynamics, colour, and sound; or, alternatively, we may embark on a secure vessel with a comfortable seat reserved under our name, safe from all risks, therefore – moored in the author's triad of pre-listening: perception/audition/understanding of music. Or, we may, holding on to a branch (a *moment-faveur*) of a tree trunk (*the privileged dimension of music*) floating in the river (*intension*), embark on an unpredictable journey to self-oblivion, which ends when the swollen river stops or empties into an even bigger river.

Nicolas juxtaposes this metaphor, close to Bachelard¹⁷ and Jankélévitch in approximating the traits of natural elements to the qualities of artistic artefacts as second nature, to images of street mass events, which likewise offer us the roles of a passive observer (hearer) or active participant (listener).

From a *music of waters* to a *music of noise!* That is how François Nicolas, at the end of this "journey of adventure", as he himself calls it more than once, through the autonomous, parallel, and *meandering* world of *La Monde – Musique*, takes all of us who have remained with him to the end, from a metaphysics of waters and the imagination of artistic music, brutally, physically, to the daylight of reality, remaining faithful to his convictions of a leftist from the generation of '68.

At the very end of the book, might we witness one of those decisive, privileged moments (*moment-faveur*), which, according to the author, turns a passive *auditeur* into an active, vigilant *écouteur*, who becomes an integral part of the Work, be it a work of music or a work about music, blending with *Le Monde – Musique*?

Let us remember: the presence of the privileged moment depends on the performance and in contemporary works that moment usually comes at the very end. Judging from the flow and ending of Volume 1 of his tetralogy, we may conclude that François Nicolas, a composer and thinking musician, provides a virtuosic "composition", interpretation, and performance, or verbalization of a set of complex assumptions about the musical work and the act of listening to it, combining them into an open work that stimulates the intellect and the senses and that one may read just like (according to Nicolas) one listens to music.

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, José Corti, Paris, 1942.