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Thesis of a doctoral (PhD) dissertation under the title:

Musica Paralitica

An Essay on the Hermeneutical Turn in the Music of the Seventies in Europe

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The idea of 'musica paralitica' may suggest an illusion on possibilities of diagnosing musical facts as if the notion of *health* were unproblematic. However, I follow here a hermeneutical presupposition which concerns the relation of music and words. Since music is not only influenced by rhetorics, but it inspires words as well, it leads a long-standing dialogue (or *paragonē*) with the language. Their relation is not just one among other relations (like music *and picture*, music *and performance*, music *and structure*, music *and time*, etc.), but the most inevitable and unavoidable, as the existential phenomenon of musical work could be demonstrated only in a verbal dimension: within a verbal interpretation implicating many aspects of life-coherence.

Situated in the present horizon of musical hermeneutics formed by the German musicologist, Carl Dahlhaus, explications on the idea of 'musica paralitica' find their point of departure in the renewed relation of *logos* and *musikē* which became apparent in postmodern tendencies of contemporary music-making since the seventies, albeit it originated in the musicaesthetical *milieu* of the late 18th century. According to Dahlhaus, the turn of the 18th-19th century could be interpreted as a focus of modern and pre-modern musical aesthetics as well, because it made a significant shift in the basic music-philosophical relation mentioned above. At the same time, this shift laid the foundations of new disciplines, ordered to mediate between the newly emerged gap within the *logos-musikē* relation: the modern, non-normative musical hermeneutics and various forms of criticism.

The growing acclaim of instrumental music in the second half of 18th century, doubtlessly contributed to the emerging of a new situation, later named as the era of absolute music, but without other aspects it does not contribute enough munition to a philosophy of absolute music. Theories of autonomous instrumental music – not restricted by functions of sacral or secular representation, and not protected by poetry – may have reached a philosophical stance only supplemented by heteronomous motives, like the verbal crisis of early romanticism (the topos of ineffability), and the art-religion inspired by the theology of *sensus religiosus* by Friedrich Schleiermacher. Theorists of absolute music, like Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Eduard Hanslick, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner, produce various combinations of such motives. The idea of absolute music offers a reductive and essentialist definition of music (as *musical work*), claiming its organic, autonomous and autoreferent quality. At the same time it provides a position for music in the 'system of arts' (Kristeller), placing it as a counterpole of verbal and conceptual thinking.

From the point of view of the paradigm of absolute music, not only language-oriented postmodern repertoires (first of all the one emerged in the former Soviet sphere) prove to be paralytic, but the aesthetics of 19th century program music as well. Looking from the metaphysical standpoint of emancipated instrumental music, any verbal determination or mutuality in music makes a prosthesis apparent, and when any prosthesis is needed, loss or damage must be present. While related to the 19th century program music and the New Music in the 20th century (following Schönberg), there is an aesthetic consciousness which justifies these tendencies as autonomous, postmodern repertoires tend even closer to the opposite pole of the artistic field of modern arts, that of heteronomy. Doing that, this music countersigns the verdict of paralysis and acknowledges that verbal elements are constitutive factors of this kind of music (and maybe not only of this kind), not even in case of compositions not using vocal parts at all.

European postmodern repertoires form sharp contrasts to the myth of immanent musico-logical progression which penetrated musical poetics of the fifties and sixties, and was inherited from the 19th century. Contrary to the European neo-avantgard – which was determined by 'anxiety of influence' (H. Bloom) and fear of banality, and was following a utopia of organicity and work-immanence –, postmodern poetics of music seem resigned, heteronomous and inorganic. Being like that, it problematizes the ontology of music on a much deeper level than any avantgard could have done. Following an essay of Gianni Vattimo from 1980,¹ it could be said, that while the avantgard was reflecting only one of the three 'death-instances' of modern art (*utopia*, *kitsch* and *silence*), postmodern art (and 'musica paralitica' within it) is facing all of them at the same time.

However, the paralysis in question could be admitted not only by presenting a prosthesis (ie. that of musical-conceptual symbiosis), and could be comprehended not only as an accident caused by heteronomy, but as a consequence of contradictory factors within the 19th century philosophy of music. Albeit it was veiled for a long time by critical theories of 'musical logic', the idea of absolute music was burdened by ungradability from the beginning, and the very conception, which elevated music on an unparalleled level among arts, especially in Schopenhauer, caused at the same time its paralysis. Since compositional practice – following Hegel – identified itself on the one hand with the radical artistic individuality historically conceived through and through, but on the other hand with a timeless autonomy of musical composition. This contradiction created an aporetic situation.

¹ Vattimo, *Morte o tramonto dell'arte*, in *Rivista di Estetica*, 1980, no. 4, pp. 17-26.

For in a cultural era in which art can exist only in the form of fragments and conceived only historically (F. Schlegel), the *timeless* totality lying within the idea of absolute music, leads to a paradox.² Opposition of historicity and timelessness may have been balanced in Hegelian theories, today only broken totality is recognized in it, which can be described as variations of paralysis, disfunctionality and diffusion. If the idea of absolute music was meant to guarantee health, wholeness, and *bonne chance* of music, then the idea of *musica paralitica* warns of the fragility of this organism, and of the self-consumptional fate of every essentialism. Thus, artistic paralysis, which limits the force of autonomy as a *passivum* and as an agent of heteronomy, does not mean any program in theory or poetics, but it is conceived as the present state of art music. The task of the theory of *musica paralitica* is to diagnose and etiologize the state in question.³

Besides the aspect of avoiding any verbal meaning, further momentums of paralysis are embedded within the paradigm of absolute music. They are the irreconcilable principles of (music)rapture and (music)history, *jouissance* and *Bildung*, aesthetical and historical consciousness. Irreconcilability could be discernible first of all in the moment of switch over into the opposite, which is noticeable both in creation and reception. Carl Dahlhaus effectively demonstrated that the very emergence of absolute music had been this kind of switch over (*metabolē*). From the judgement of taste which considered instrumental music as a pleasant but fruitless human activity (Kant), the metaphysics of 'poetic' and 'philosophical' music emerged like a shot at the turn of the 19th century. The new sensibility found its adequate way of reception of symphonies in the contemplation for its own sake (E. T. A. Hoffmann, F. Schlegel), and even more in rapture not disturbed by verbal mediation (Wackenroder). Nevertheless, rapture is not so much an act of culture as that of cult, and this fact implies important consequences. For forms and subjects of this act need alteration or renovation only when acts of cult turn out to be surrogative. While in terms of contemplation, multiplicity and variability are held in evidence, rapture refers only to the One.⁴ To the question, how to compare the abstract-religious musicrapture to the concrete multitude of musical compositions, Wackenroder offers a dialectic answer: "*I have always experienced that whatever music I am hearing seems to be the best and most exquisite, and makes me*

² See Dahlhaus, *Hegel und die Musik seiner Zeit*, in: *Klassische und romantische Musikästhetik*, pp. 230-247.

³ See Dahlhaus, *Über Sinn und Sinnlosigkeit in der Musik*, in *Die Musik der sechziger Jahre*, hrsg. Rudolph Stefan, Schott, Mainz, 1972, pp. 90-99. o.

⁴ Exemplifying the idea of the One work interlocked with the experience of actual fragmentality, Manfred Frank recalls Novalis: „Novalis worked always on the One work, and he achieved only fragments.” (See Frank, *Philosophy of Style*)

forget all other kinds.”⁵ Thus, meeting some basic (and here not specified) conditions, every composition has a chance to be the One, since the latter arises in an approach transformed into rapture, and rapture refers always to only ‘one’ (and ”makes forget every other”).

The paradox, emerging from the musicaesthetics of rapture, was not brought to the surface in the beginning. The new sensibility was linked harmoniously with the notion of ‘classical’, and was united with the birth of a new repertory based on the emerging historical consciousness, which defined genre by genre the works that should be considered as timeless models (Palestrina in mass, Händel in oratorios, Gluck in drama). Even if this 18th century canon disappeared to be succeeded by the all-encompassing Beethoven cult, it barely alters the situation that posterity cannot identify itself otherwise than with producing ‘footnotes’ to the classics.

Nevertheless, the motion of switching over has never been held under total supervision, and the idea of absolute music has never controlled completely musical practice. It is clearly discernible from the momentum in which the ideal totality, in a renewed interpretation, proves to be ‘almost nothing’ (*‘presque-rien’*) from one moment to the other. The idea of absolute music made autonomous work of music defenceless against renewing interpretations and hermeneutical turns, because in the practice of rapture every possible context of a work is suspended, and the unavoidable recurrence of contextuality is not taken into account. (However, it happens every time when the object of cult is being rewritten into the endless texture of culture).

As a counterbalance to the cult of rapture and the timeless classics (which are out of context), emerging historical consciousness threatens the idea of absolute music from within, because in the eyes of the evermore historically oriented 19th century, every achievement belongs to constantly changing contextual frames. In a permanent recontextualisation, historicity becomes an immanent momentum of every creation, and the works themselves become preludes to the ensuing ones. Still, this future oriented approach is not enough to give up the classics as highest standards, and to be able to forget and ignore, as pre-modernity had done. Historical consciousness makes art music paralytic in putting the seal of lateness to it, while at the same time it still provides a timeless ontological status for the artwork. From the point of view of musica paralitica, the innovative, historically informed poetics of absolute music (still in force in the avantgarde of the fifties and sixties), has undergone transformation into hermeneutical postludes. It has happened basically from the beginning, and emphatically

⁵ Wackenroder, *Werke und Briefe*, L. Schneider, Heidelberg, 1967, p. 211. (Cited in Dahlhaus, *The idea of absolute music*, transl. by Roger Lustig, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London, 1989, p. 82.)

since the seventies. In artworks conceived as hermeneutical postludes, intertextuality becomes a constitutive part of creation and reception alike, and since oblivion is impossible, every innovation turns out to be relative.

In a stricter sense, *musica paralitica* refers to works belonging to the repertoires of East and Central Europe in the seventies (and later). These works consider the tradition of absolute music as a paralytic, deformed, banalized one, nevertheless they do not aim (or are not able) to overstep this broken tradition. As the Ukrainian composer, Valentin Silvestrov claimed the paradox *Kunstwollen* of this poetics: „departing from the music without... leaving it.”⁶

These works often identify themselves with the aesthetics of ruins, which opens up the hermeneutical circle of remnants (or *objet ambigu*), never completely realizable. Impossibility of oblivion interlocks with amnesia, and articulates itself in the form of lament and threnody. It is the notion of the classical, autonomous work of music which is lamented in the aesthetics of *musica paralitica*.

From the point of view of the compositional turn in question, hidden for a long time and existing only in private circles under communist regimes, the nineties yielded a radically new situation. As a consequence of an unforeseen dumping of highly original works from the former Soviet era, unknown before, the European contemporary musical scene had to renew its self-definition for the last time. An unprepared audience, oscillating between wonder and incomprehension, fashion and snobbery, was facing mature works of significant Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani or Baltic composers. This experience offered a new (or rather *different*) view on modern music history, on avantgarde and on conservatism alike. This difference can't have been conceived as an other culture, but rather as the otherness of the self.

East-European and ex-Soviet/post-Soviet repertoires – which were only slightly, incidentally and by chance determined by western avantgard, and produced a different progress – did not turn out to be mere exotism in the emerging western reception, indeed, thanks to its appearance, western thought discovered some hidden or suppressed aspects of its history. The issues of that *other* European music again revealed, that the paradigm of absolute music, inherited from the 19th century and held in evidence until the late fifties, has for a long while gone through a mutation. As Adorno puts it: „today the only works which really count

⁶ Cited in Tatjana Frumkis, *Echoes*, in *Valentin Silvestrov: Metamusik*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart, ECM New Series 1790, 2003, p. 29. o.

are those which are no longer works at all”.⁷ At the same time, this meant, that a renewed interest in the philosophy of music could illuminate the overshadowed backstage of the idea of absolute music, obscured for ages by music history. (The latter being a study of technical-poetical progression in music.) The idea of *musica paralitica*, originated in the post-Soviet boom in contemporary music, makes a muddle in the ontology of musical opus, conceived as a correlatum to the idea of absolute music. Since the former considers everything as a *postlude*, hence it absolutizes the paradox status of ‘opus posth.’ (work dated after its author’s death, in line with ‘opus posth. music’ as such which, following Vladimir Martinov’s theory, comes into being after the age of composed music). Thus, *musica paralitica* could be interpreted also as a kind of ‘absolute’ art, viz. it’s an absolute postscript – raising serious problems of parergonality.

Consequently, *musica paralitica* is not imagined in terms of style, or music history, albeit it has connections to both of them. Actually, their connections are negative ones, since *musica paralitica* demonstrates shortcomings of efficiency in terms of style, and articulates the lessening of historical power reserves in terms of music. Thus, *musica paralitica* does not resemble any aesthetical thesis, poetical program or artistic declaration; on the contrary, the theory of *musica paralitica* is an act of observation of the recession of theses, programs and declarations. *Musica paralitica*, in my view, has a complementary relation to absolute music, that’s why actually it is not an idea or a counter-ideology in any sense, but a junkroom of the philosophy of music. In this way, the phenomenology of *musica paralitica* – in parallel with that of a junkroom, which is a kind of strange, non-hierarchical catalogue – must not stop in any individual example of itself, but the observation of many different versions of musical paralysis are needed.

My work is based on the phenomenological experience, that the momentum of creation (or production) seems divided into two parts today, repeatedly raising the question of primacy and secondariness. It does not only mean the interpretative doubling of music, but the task of the contextualisation of musical works. On the one hand, it is an evidence, that works and performances occur. On the other hand, individual art productions do not fit evidently in a general communicative context (in terms of *sensus communis*), in other words, there’s no extensive cultural *milieu* behind and around the artwork. That’s why the productions of artists have been completed for a long while by efforts of a hermeneutical practice, which creates

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, translated by A. G. Mitchell and W. V. Blomster, The Seabury Press, 1973, p. 30.

contexts to texts. The meaning of the above completion seems worth to be questioned, since it does not mean only the individual hermeneutical efforts of any interpreter, but rather a poeticized transformation of certain institutions (parallel to exhibitions of fine art 'staging' in museums, musicians should investigate activities of record companies). The simultaneous business- and art-like creation of contexts seems to become an a priori condition of public existence for an artwork.

The consequences of such considerations could for the author be but a dismissal of the *monographic* approach (in terms of an *oeuvre*, a history of an idea, a definition of a genre or style), in favour of a *polygraphic* viewpoint. *Polygraphy* need not be more loose or inaccurate than *monography*, on the contrary, its aim is a closer fidelity to the artwork by considering it not as a mere object, but as an ever-changing facet of a dynamic composite, which offers the age old hermeneutical task, embedded in the relation of the whole and its parts.

Following the primacy of context over texts, before presenting a survey and interpretations of modern and postmodern repertoires and works, in the first chapter the essay introduces and analyses, as its main subjects, themes like creation and publication, canon and collection, fragment and remnant. From a standpoint of radical contextuality, the second chapter presents some basic patterns (or archetypes) of the *posthistoire* sound-ocean (Toop), accentuating aspects of works by the late Liszt, Satie, Ives, and narrating a hidden (or fictitious) history of new music through the lenses of the viola repertory. After having a contextual and historical background, the essay reaches its starting point only in its third (and last) chapter: *oeuvres* of Luigi Nono, György Kurtág, Giya Kancheli, Valentin Silvestrov and Henryk Górecki are treated as nearly contemporary versions of the stance called in my essay as 'musica paralitica'. Their relations to the concept of history, organicism, encyclopedism, memory and identity, demonstrate not only various shortcomings of timeless totality embedded and expected in the idea of 'absolute music', but bear effective witness that art has always existed under the condition of mortality, and its dignity comes from this very fact.

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