

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Labyrinths

P. Boulez : *3^{ème} Sonate /Constellation-Miroir* (version 1)

F. Liszt: *Sonate h-moll*

Intermission

B. Ferneyhough : *Opus Contra Naturam*
(A Shadow Play for Speaking Pianist)

I
II (Katabasis)
III

P. Boulez : *3^{ème} Sonate /Constellation-Miroir* (version 2)

In the beginning , it was the modernist impulse: the collection of three large-scale works for the piano, chronologically very distant from each other (1854 is the publication date for the Liszt *h-moll sonate*, 1957-58 for Boulez's *Troisième Sonate* and 2000 for Ferneyhough's *Opus Contra Naturam*) which seem to trace a path of musical modernity , even if stretching considerably its ends back and forth in time, intentionally avoiding the cradle of the first half of the 20th century. Formal novelty in the context of advanced but already crystallized at their times musical vocabularies and expansion of the instrumental resources , mostly towards the direction of transcendental virtuosity, are the expected sirens of progress at display here.

In the course of my encounter with the pieces , I became aware of another potential interconnection which relieved a bit the megalomaniac gut feeling in my modernist self and was considerably influential to my learning practice. The first hint was given by my reading of Boulez's article "Sonate ,que me veux-tu?" (Sonata, what do you want of me?) . This constitutes a rather close examination of his 3rd sonata under the light of his interest in open-form and draws a fascinating network of literary references including Mallarmé , Joyce and Kafka. The idea most influential to the conception of tonight's recital was that of the maze or labyrinth as a morphological model challenging the linear nature of the work in Western classical music.

Penelope Doob gives a revealing definition of labyrinths: "It can be said that a labyrinth is designed chaos, static rather than dynamic chaos ; under certain conditions it is even necessary chaos. And it is ultimately chaos with a purpose. Its purpose includes intentionally induced confusion and complexity , the paradoxical collusion of unity and multiplicity, clarity and confusion, simplicity and complexity , order and disorder".

I soon realized that the two other works in the program can also be fruitfully approached through this model. Ferneyhough himself defines the central segment of *Opus Contra Naturam* as :

"...a form of musical diary or monstrously autonomous memory trace. [...] little has been done to suggest spurious criteria of coherence: given his fascination with the Surrealistically orderly disorder manifest by Parisian passages, I imagine that Benjamin himself would not have been entirely unappreciative of this aesthetic strategy".

But next to this direct reference, Ferneyhough's own rich theorization on the notorious and quasi-impenetrable co-existence of density and specificity of notational detail -well known in our days as "complexity"- points at a second level of his affinity for labyrinths: the push of the performer into the investigation of individual prioritisation and selection paths in the learning process , which results in works operating in quasi-open form terms.

As for the Liszt sonata , the corpus of analytical approaches to it thus far has tried to stress its "sonata-ness" , fitting the elaborate polyphonic treatment and transformation of very well-defined thematic material into pre-existent sonata models. In our mind , what is important here are not the sonata landmarks themselves , but rather the ways in which those elements are confused , super-imposed , short-circuited; the degree of self-reflexivity and artificiality which is already of a different , centrifugal , kind than that in , say, late Beethoven. Hanslick's angry criticism is revealing of that intended disorientation of the listener:

"I have never come across such a refined and daring combination of totally disparate elements, such turbulent confusion, such a bloody battle against everything that's musical".

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In a typology set up by Umberto Eco we come across three types of labyrinths : The greek labyrinth – typically that of Theseus - is unilinear , a single path to the center and then out , which would be a comfortable stroll along the corridor if it weren't for the mythical beast ,the Minotaur .Then there is the more familiar "mannerist"one: a labyrinth of bifurcating linear paths ,evincing a tree-like structure , with many alternate routes but almost all of them offering no more than false promises.The third type is non-linear and rhizomic. Each path is connected to each other ,no center, no periphery , no way out, the wanderer is the labyrinth itself. They can be described as open mental spaces whose physical manifestation cannot be but an impoverished model. Although they are not exactly structureless , they are incessantly in the process of structuration without the possibility of any fixity of structure.

A closer look at tonight's works will show very interesting resonances with the above mentioned typology.

Constellation-miroir is the third and central "formant" (meaning "partial", in a terminology borrowed from the acoustics) out of the imaginary five which constitute Boulez's *Troisième Sonate*. The only other one published is the second , *Trope* , justifying the labeling of the sonata as "work in progress" (after Joyce) .For the remaining three , there are only elaborate sketches .Of course , the whole idea sounds ironic and brilliant enough when coming from a composer who writes:

"I find the concept of works as independent fragments increasingly alien , and I have a marked preference for large structural groups centred on a cluster of determinate possibilities".

Despite the contradiction , the flirtation with incompleteness is well-rooted : Mallarmé's *Livre* , one of the main "old pool of dreams" where Boulez is fishing , had the same fate. Twelve years after starting this huge project , and facing the impossibility of accomplishing it , Mallarmé decided to reveal only " a finished fragment as an example of its glorious authenticity, while giving an indication of the remainder , which a lifetime would not suffice to complete". But we'll come back to the *Livre* later. For now , let us return to *Constellation-miroir* , two different versions of which will be presented tonight in the beginning and the end of the recital , somehow wrapping up the rest of the program.

The piece is mentioned as emblematic of the open-form genre and bears an ingenious graphic design , borrowed directly from Mallarmé's *Un coup de des*-the finished fragment of the *Livre* mentioned above: the music floats on the page, coming in fragments of unequal lengths , which are interconnected through an -often very complex- system of arrows and separated by silence. In Boulez's words, there is a certain resemblance with the plan of an unknown town. The performer is invited to discover the correct routes and pick one for a particular performance. Since all the material is to be played and nothing to be omitted (as happens in *Trope* for example) , the performer is obviously submitted in a process of trial and error ,very much like the one one might experience in the mannerist type of labyrinth.The musical fragments are further arranged in two types indicated with 2 different colours on page: green for the points and red for the blocs.The material is what the titles indicate, isolated frequencies and aggregates respectively , while there is also a group mixing both colours, a sort of microcosm for the whole of the six groups.

If the mallarmean project of musicalization of the text (which Boulez inverts with the textualization-specialization of the music) is essentially one of forging a parodied aesthetic of fullness and reclaiming of the blank spaces and of the anonymity of the hero/author, we can appreciate how forcefully it stands against the neo-German conceptions of the Gesamtkunstwerk coined by Wagner. The Liszt sonata -admittedly the only piano work which along with his symphonic poems seems more strongly to line up with the work of his son-in-law -is still potentially an epic work of gods and heroes.It is not by accident that, despite the absence of an actual program, many commentators link it strongly to the Faust myth . More modern analytical approaches have tried to fit it into the sonata form: either as a gigantic sonata form , or as a full movement sonata with all movements collapsed into one , either stressing a binary understanding (and I would add the possibility of a strophic structure of developing variations leading always to new thematic material – "pli selon pli"- in a very daring indeed connection to Boulez). In our conception, its great virtue from the formal point of view is exactly how all these structural planes are mutually both supported and cancelled through several devices: the long duration of the Sonata ; the transformation of the themes in unexpected ways;their unconventional placings and relationships ; the polyphonic treatment of the themes ;the introduction of new thematic material late enough in the sonata ;the various rhetorical gaps, fissures , collapses and all sorts of discontinuities, etc . Very much like the monodrome of a greek labyrinth , the sonata doesn't of course leave any doubts about the final destination , and it could even be unfolded in a single Ariadne's thread : in other words , Liszt displays masterfully that he could actually have composed a more academic sonata ; still it contains many Minotaurs-surprises on the formal level and more importantly : In our mind, this fluidity and freedom of the disposition of elements is already much more pregnant with further implications than the thematic unity suggests; it paradoxically points already towards the mallarmean project of the anonymity of the text , as it incorporates mutability , fragmentation and wander in a static but ambivalent design.

Published and first performed in 2000, *Opus Contra Naturam* forms part of Ferneyhough's opera *Shadowtime*, set to a libretto by Charles Bernstein; conceived as a "thought opera", *Shadowtime* revolves around the suicide of German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin in 1940 on the Franco-Spanish frontier. As Ferneyhough explains in his composer's note,

"[*Opus Contra Naturam*] plays a key role in [*Shadowtime*] in that it represents the orphic descent of Benjamin's avatar into the Underworld, through whose portals he is welcome [...] *Opus Contra Naturam* is a term taken from renaissance alchemy and signifies one of the essential moments of transition/transformation which typify that arcane discipline. The piece itself is to be played by a Liberace-like figure or Joker and is to be accompanied by a silent film projection encompassing the chaotic intersection of scenes from fin-de-siècle Berlin cabaret, medieval labyrinths and images from the hyper-dissimulatory environment of present-day Las Vegas. Formally the work is composed of a large central body of disordered and clamorous fragments framed by a lyrical Introit and a concluding Processional, both of which latter, in the opera, are accompanied by distorted and superposed plainchant quotations. In keeping with its hallucinatory imagery, the central segment is a piano transcription, commentary and prolongation of an entirely disorderly and prolix body of materials assembled over the space of several months as a sort of musical diary or monstrously autonomous memory trace. Apart from rendering it for piano, little has been done to suggest spurious criteria of coherence: given his fascination with the Surrealistically orderly disorder manifest by Parisian passages, I imagine that Benjamin himself would not have been entirely unappreciative of this aesthetic strategy."

Here again, the fragment as a symbol of a shuttered and unattainable whole assumes a pivotal role, albeit very differently than in the previous works. The Boulezian-Mallarmean affinity for the fragment as a signing, rather optimistic gem of the whole floating in silence, has been substituted with the accumulative pile of fragments after the catastrophe. The lack of direction which shows to the rhizomatic type of labyrinth mentioned above is still relieved by islands of order and punctuation: Namely, some surprising deviations towards distorted late-Romantic tonal harmony, the (often suffocating, but still present) survival of *hauptstimmen* and thematic elements, the design of a tempi-based structure and very importantly, the inevitable punctuation offered by the speaking part of the pianist. The latter is "to be spoken as if the pianist is engaged in a private, if somewhat conflictual conversation with the piano", standing in brilliant contrast to the hyper-expressionist quality of the music. In fact, this very element of self-reflexivity on the part of the performer might be said to point towards the poetic treatment of the music as a quasi-autonomous layer, an unconscious channelling of memories (since it is a diary) or history (since we are talking about Benjamin) through the "helpless" performer.

In any case, and despite all those "strange attractors", the rhizomatic labyrinth is very existent for any performer involved in the learning and performance of this piece. As is the case with other sorts of complex music, the extreme specificity of the notation paradoxically acts so counter-productively to the clarity of the sound image in its continuity, as to beg the development of a perpetually refineable navigational model on the part of the performer almost in substitution of the high-modernist ideal of absolute accuracy. After all, the liberties uttered by Ferneyhough himself in his performance note are unthinkable, as compared with f.e. his earlier piano piece "Lemma-Icon-Epigram": the choreography is the performer's exclusive responsibility as no attempt was made for an attainable "keyboardization" of the material on the part of the composer, pedalling falls in the same category, and even the coordination of the text with the music appears to be rather loose. What remains unnegotiable, is the projection of the elaborate polyphony to the degree this is possible (according to the composer's own admittance of unattainability).

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In an essay about Mallarmé's *Livre*, Jaques Scherer writes:

"Here we find, in opposition to the concept of history as enslaved to succession in irreversible time, an intelligence capable of mastering a subject by reconstructing it in all directions, including the reverse of temporal succession. The same double movement can show, at one end, a book perfectly composed and at the other a collection of sheets that is essentially external, a simple album in fact. [...] Before this operation the book may appear to resemble an ordinary book; [...] but when it has shown, as no ordinary book can show, that it is capable of achieving the clearly sensed diversity of an album and then of recomposing that as a structured whole, it has proved that it is the book. The confrontation is a creative one".

It is exactly this double movement, folding up into a designed whole and unfolding into a series of fragments, which is masterfully exhibited through tonight's works, forever stressing the fictionality of the work-concept as a graspable, invariant unity and giving a new meaning to performance as navigation and choice rather than reproduction of a given object. The labyrinth is the influential space articulated by this movement, plus an inexorable reminder of the unattainability of any total understanding of the world, unless one actively chooses involvement and performance.

