

Music as the art of misleading

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Music is not a “what” but a “how”. Even when the composer invents new techniques, they must be put at the service of a formal dramaturgy. If not, the piece runs the risk of functioning merely as a catalogue of effects or as an academic exercise perceptible only to experts in musical techniques.

The image shows a musical score for the introduction of Ludwig van Beethoven's Sonata n°21 op.53 « Waldstein », 2^e mvt. The score is in 6/8 time and is marked 'Molto Adagio'. It features complex harmonic and rhythmic patterns. The score includes markings such as 'pp', 'ten.', 'cresc.', 'sf', 'p', 'decresc.', 'rinforzato', and 'sf'. The score is written for piano and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Fig.1 : Ludwig van Beethoven, *Sonata n°21 op.53 « Waldstein »*, 2^e mvt

From the first measure in the example above, Beethoven destabilizes the tonality of F through a harmonic sequence with transitions through an augmented sixth and chromatic bass. This process of confusion continues in the fifth and sixth measures with a classical strategy of “surprise of the surprise”¹. In only a few measures, Beethoven utilizes numerous tools of the tonal music of his time, which confound perceptions: shifting from major to minor, changing tonal functions; augmented sixths; harmonic sequences; ambiguous harmony/counterpoint through voice leading and particularly through chromatic shifting; silences on the hard beat; syncopations, etc.

This example could have been replaced with any masterwork of the tonal repertoire: throughout history, in my opinion, the different tonal techniques have always afforded equivocal play and shifts in meaning, more than representing univocal functions with double articulation² or even grammatical functions, as music theorists would lead one to believe. Western music theory is indeed unconsciously influenced by logocentrism and comparisons with the semantic language, while it is more accurate to speak about a succession and accumulation of tools for ambiguities: analogies minor/major since the 16th century; diminished chords, augmented and Neapolitan sixths by the classics; tonal ambiguities by Schumann, Brahms or even in Bossa Nova (the harmonization in F and not in C of the *Girl of Ipanema*, and more generally the cleverness of the harmonization of the melodies); or the ambiguities between counterpoint and harmony of Wagner.

¹ I examine these « techniques of surprise of the surprise », which are indispensable for the formal progress of the discourse, in my book *Le compositeur, son oreille et ses machines à écrire : déconstruire les grammatologies du musical pour mieux les composer*, Paris, France, Vrin, 2014, p.210.

² In the sense of André Martinet (*Eléments de linguistique générale*). In art, the « content plane » and the « expression plane » (cf. Hjemslev) are irreducible (except for concept art): a discourse can be paraphrased, but not a poem, where form and content are consubstantial.

This search for musical amphibologies by composers is also present in many other cultures: consider, for instance, the position of *Sam* or the *Kaida* rules in the Hindustani music. Indeed, this principle can be found in any type of music that requires a *cognitive apperception*³. Unlike to semantic languages, music primarily finds its sense, or more generally its expression, through *double-* and *countersense*. As we already noted, these resources first deserve emergence⁴ and formal expressivity.

In my opinion, this property of equivocality entails a few aesthetic consequences:

* The consideration of cognitive apperception in music seems to have been eclipsed by too many composers of “contemporary music”. It remains a central topic in my work. Without consideration of cognitivity arises for me the risk of gestural effects without any possibility of compression/comprehension⁵ for the listener, and particularly without any possibility of anticipation and cognitive surprise. However, it is important to understand this notion as a means to create cultural “ambiguity” and not as an effort to give “meaning” to music.

* Considering cognitivity doesn’t mean regressing to tried and tested techniques that afforded ambiguity in the past, such as the classified functions of tonal music. Indeed, sensitive equivocality happens at boundaries between a known and a formerly unknown (or rather unheard of) understanding by shifting them. We should remember that the *Tristan chord*, for instance, is now an accepted cultural construction without any natural justification. In other words, *consonance is the learning of a dissonance that could make sense*.

* The composer’s preoccupation with apperceptive ambiguities implies a narrow path, aesthetically and sociologically, since he/she is *taking both the risk of experimentation with the risk that he/she wants it to be perceived*. Therefore, he/she will satisfy neither those who desire to listen and fetishize that which created ambiguities in the past, nor those who, as an excess of distinction⁶, even perhaps snobbism, or as an ethics of tolerance and progress, remain hostile to any perceptive scheme which could be partially understood, even if this means for them favoring chaos, the perceptibly incompressible as a more or less unconscious ideal. Some denounce this attitude with the term “*negative aesthetic*”, an attitude from which some composers take advantage as a posture, or even as an imposture...

These principles of cognitive ambivalence and perceptive risks have accompanied my work for a long time.

Still as a music student, I have developed techniques of *trans-parametric inflection*, where one change affects different musical parameters in analogous relations. The listener

³ Leibniz used the concept of *apperception* instead of *perception* as a disagreement with the mechanist explanation for perception by Descartes (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadologie*, 1714, § 17). For Leibniz, apperception emerges from the representation of an object via the *cogito* through the presence of the subject. Kant then characterised the different apperceptions according to their proximity to the sensitive, in differentiating them from the conscious mind (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of pure reason, transcendental analytic*, 1787, § 16)

⁴ As defined by John Stuart Mill or George Henry Lewes: a result by emergence is not reducible to the sum of the properties of its components. See also Edgar Morin

⁵ “Cognitive Compression” in the sense of Information Theory and of Kolmogorov-Chaitin Complexity Theory (Cf. Lévy, *op.cit.*, chapter on complexity, p.129).

⁶ In the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction, critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Minuit, 1979. See also : Harvey Leibenstein : “Bandwagon, Snob and Veblen Effects in the Theory of Consumer Demand“, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 64.-2, 1950, p.183-207.

perceives something but is unable to detect which parameter is affected. Also, my works typically like to thwart different musical categories: a quartet is not written for four voices, but for many virtual voices which pass from one instrument to another. The listener cannot be sure whether certain surfaces are simply textures or if it is necessary to discern certain lines or other salient elements. In *Hérédo-Ribotes* (2001) for solo viola and 51 orchestra musicians, the viola is sometimes a soloist, sometimes an acoustic component of a timbre which blends that of its colleagues, and sometimes part of a whole comprising “small elementary virtual instruments” which dislocate and spread from the soloist to other musicians while changing size and identity. In *Soliloque sur [x, x, x], commentaire par un ordinateur d’un concert mal compris de lui* (2002) (Soliloquy about [x, x, x], commentaries of a computer on a misunderstood concert), the computer recreates a piece by using samples of the programmed musical pieces of the evening. Do we deal with a work, a meta-work or a simple commentary? In *Als Gregor & Griselda* (2015), a perfect “Vuza” vocal canon, polyphony vanishes and each voice becomes a mere element of a monody by contributing syllable-notes which, taken together bit by bit, reveal the erotic meaning of the vocals to the audience.

In the music of the Pygmies, one of the artistic devices of exchange and ambiguity consists of passing the rhythmic cells from one voice to the other. The sum of the voices remains the same while the listener gets lost between the different exchanges (fig. 2).

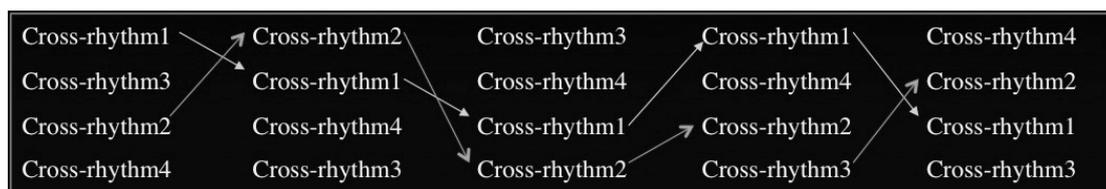


Fig. 2: technique of “cross-rhythm”

Since 2003, I have combined different techniques of cognitive ambivalence by using *generalized cross-rhythms* (an imperfect term to describe what I am aiming at). Generalized cross-rhythms (fig. 3) extend the Pygmy’s technique to other parameters (rhythmic motive, instrumentation, morphology, profile of pitch within a given harmonic field, space). These parameters are exchanged between the different voices, but take different directions so that the listener perceives an overall regularity as well as isotopies, yet remains unable to follow the voices or to perceive any exact repetition.

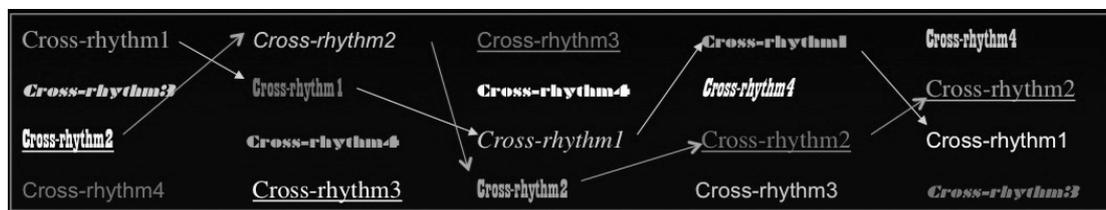


Fig. 3: technique of “generalized cross-rhythm”, formal scheme.

Three parameters are especially promising for cognitive musical amphibologies:

- a. *Space* (à tue-tête, for nine spatialized instruments (2014); *Hérédo-Ribotes*, for solo viola and 51 orchestra musicians (2001); *Soliloque sur [x, x, x]* (2002 ; *Les sonneries de Cantenac* (2008)), because spatialisation allows for the exchange of virtual instruments in space, the decentering and the loss of geographical markers;

- b. *Timbre*, by creating with advanced playing and orchestration techniques changing hybrid sounds beyond notes;
- c. *Rhythm*.

Indeed, rhythm is a highly cognitive parameter. It is first important to assert that rhythm is in no way reducible to the alphabet of the same name. This is a typical misconception of a Western culture focused on writing and separating the musical phenomena into independent parameters and ascribing distinct alphabets to them. For instance, the rhythm of the *augures printaniers* in the *Rite of the Spring* is not a sequence of quarter notes, but rather a cognitive grid of an irregular sequence of orchestrated accents (i.e. changes of timbre and dynamics) inside a regular pulsation. Another example, a superimposition of quintuplets inside triplets, themselves inside sextuplets, as can be seen in some works of the “complexity school”, is not in my opinion a rhythm, but a gesture (fully justified by an intent of tension, but it is another question). These rhythms are cognitively incompressible, in the Kolmogorov-Chaitin sense, and therefore induce no possible rhythmical apperception.

To me, rhythm is primarily a mental construction of an arborescent partitioning of time where only a few signals are played in order to let some unuttered cognitive structures emerge (in playing on different stratum of pulsation –minimal, nominal, metrics–, on syncopations, metrical shifting changes of minimal pulse, etc.). Rhythm is fully apperceptive. Rhythm is an idea of the implicit and explicit inside a cognitive grid of striated time with multiple dimensions. It is for instance the role of the meter in the Western music (fig.4), which is only indirectly heard, even if explicitly written.

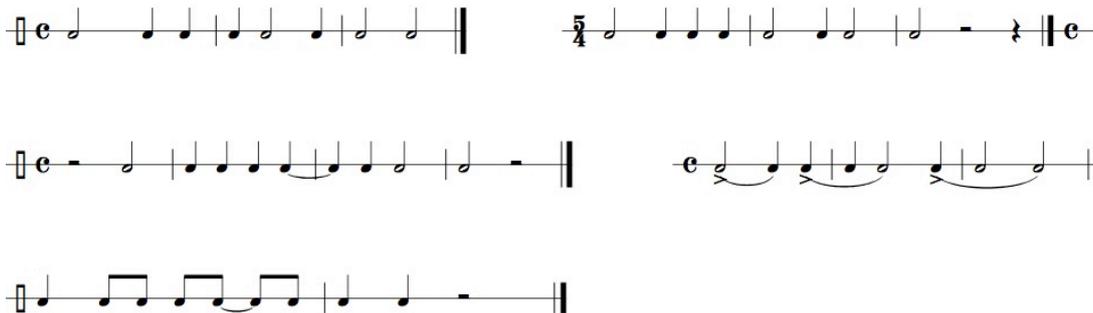


Fig.4: Rhythm as a mental construction rather than as a written sign: the metric problematic.

Rhythm is therefore an ideal parameter to thwart cognitive expectations, wether by installing and then challenging minimal, nominal or metrical pulses, by playing with different polymeters and polyrhythms, or by creating syncopations.

I am sometimes amazed at how the brilliant generation of composers born around 1925, (those who were in their 20's at the end of WWII, the actors of the *tabula rasa*), were deeply immersed in the Structuralism, and therefore largely reluctant towards any concept of ambivalence. On the contrary, they fantasized that music could function like science or semantic languages, with clear, univocal and explicit musical rules. Of course, there were some exceptions, like Ligeti who praised the importance of the game in music. Also, this generation came before the postmodern revolution, and more exactly the deconstruction movement, which questioned representations and particularly the logocentrism of the Western thought. Their Zeitgeist was definitively not interested in double-meaning.

In contrast, the young generation, younger than me, born after the 80's, seems mostly interested in obtaining unexpected sounds, in the inheritance of Lachenmann, Sciarrino, or the spectral composers (but without their formalism). They often use instruments for what they are not made for, and technology. The game is everywhere, but mostly timbral (see the wonderful works by Mark André, Francesco Filidei, Franck Bedrossian, Clara Iannotta, Alex Mincek or Mauro Lanza), or in its commentary of the music (Johannes Kreidler, Carola Bauckholt, Simon Steen-Andersen), and mostly intuitive. They thwart our ear and are far from the intellectual speculations of their forefathers.

Maybe because I belong to an intermediary generation, perhaps because I studied and taught mathematics and was quite mediocre in natural sciences which seemed to me not abstract enough, possibly because I studied with Grisey who was, in contrary to his spectral colleagues, less interested in timbre and more in the arrow of time and in sequence of surprises and expectations, also maybe because I believe more in culture than in nature –we listen to with our brain and not with our ears-, in my works, I am more interested in cognitive games which are more inductive than analogical, more cultural than only the timbral, even if I admire the extreme inventiveness in that domain of many of my younger colleagues.

More generally, a thought of paradox and of deconstruction offers efficient and inspiring methods for my compositions. It points out the limits of our cognitive representations, and shift them, if possible. In contrast to other arts, which have a longer autonomous history, Western art music has been mainly formatted by two short centuries, those of the great absolute music (before and after that period, music was mostly in service of other genres: dance, theater, church service, video, drinking a beer). The genres that appeared during this period configured most of the current organizations of Western art music: orchestras, conservatories, instruments (who writes for viola da gamba today?), operas, musicology, but also our musical representations (a narrow concept of work, of timbre, of instrument, of concert, of concert hall, of virtuosity, of complexity, and of musical intelligence). Therefore, the goal of deconstruction is not only to go beyond the signs and logocentrism, and to find new grammatologies in trying new graphemologies. It is also to rethink culturally formatted representations and finally, to offer new misleading ways for music beyond signs⁷ and logocentrism.

⁷ *“The constitution of a science or a philosophy of writing is a necessary and difficult task. But a thought of the trace, of difference or of reserve, having arrive at these limits, and repeating them ceaselessly, must also point beyond the field of the epistémè“*, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1967, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1997, p.93.