

GIOVANNI GUANTI

Rome

COMPOSING DIFFERENCE: THE IDEA OF 'SOCIETY' IN THE TEACHING OF MUSICAL COMPOSITION

What would a universal society without individual lands look like, which would be neither French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Tartar, Turkish, Persian, Indian, Chinese, or American, or rather would be all of those societies at once? What would be the effect on morality, the sciences, the arts, poetry?

(F.-R. DE CHATEAUBRIAND, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*)

These questions may sound very modern to many, when in fact they were formulated in a book that was ready to be printed as early as 1836, although it was published posthumously, between 1849 and 1850. These issues were already of concern to a century which, more than any other, proclaimed the rediscovery, celebration and preservation of local, regional, and national differences. The 19th century of course ignored the term 'globalization', which today crops up constantly in our speech, whether in a positive or negative sense. And yet, as suggested by the anti-Enlightenment critique of a *sentimental* author like Chateaubriand, there was already some awareness that a truly 'universal' society may run the risk of suppressing everything that, by retaining its local and provincial elements, runs counter to its unstoppable homogenizing force. This applies first of all to art, as the privileged realm of the protection and preservation of cultural diversity and socio-geographical differences, of 'local worlds'.

Hence the impossibility of a 'universal art', which can be appreciated by each and every person – a fact so evident to Chateaubriand as would be, for us today, the impossibility of identifying a work of art which does not feed on foreign influences, and which could then present itself as a pristine example of 'local world', absolutely 'pure' and 'homogeneous'. And with hindsight, since *historia semper magistra*, this impossibility can be regarded as a great luck.¹

¹ The reasons for such a categorical assertion were brilliantly summarized by J. MOLINO, *Il puro e l'impuro*, in *Enciclopedia della musica*, directed by J.-J. Nattiez, I: *Il Novecento*, Turin, Einaudi 2004, pp. 1051-1062.

Besides, if it is true that music can also be employed as «a tool to introduce us to foreign cultures», then we should equally consider it as a means «to negotiate cultural identities»,² and therefore study it to determine what it means today (not just in musical terms) to be French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Tartar, Turkish, Persian, Indian, Chinese or American... The question is, in my view, all but rhetorical; if anything, it is paradoxical – simultaneously impossible to ask and impossible to evade: 1) impossible to ask, because it is out-dated, given that the foremost concern today is the genealogical comprehension of identity-making processes, and not, as often happened in a past we have no reason to regret, a taxonomy of the different identities, seen as essences that exist *ab aeterno* and are organized according to non-modifiable typologies; 2) impossible to evade, because if we were to be deprived of certain words (Dorian, Ionian, Phrygian, Lydian, Aeolian, Gallican, Mozarabic, Beneventan, Allemande, Scottish, Padovana, Siciliana, Polonaise, Picardy third, Neapolitan sixth, Lombard rhythm, *alla turca*, *all'ungherese*, *comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française*), very little would be left of the specialized lexicon of musicology, and hence very little for us to discuss and hardly any issues to tackle.

If we reflect upon the many *querelles*, which erupted in the heyday of Enlightenment (somehow in contrast with its declared cosmopolitan, universalist aspirations), trying to establish the supremacy of this or that musical style (e.g. French vs. Italian); and if we consider how the ensuing Romantic nationalist movements shaped the course of History, including the history of music, turning it into an *instrumentum regni*, an essential tool in the ideological education of the “good patriot”,³ then we will not be surprised by statements closer to us in time, such as the following by Bruno Maderna:

In my opinion, there was a general impression that 1950 was rather different from the epoch-making milestones, such as may have been, at different moments in time, Stravinsky's *Sacre* or *Pierrot lunaire*. This has to do with: 1) the fact that the Second World War was completely different in nature from the First; 2) a new way of understanding relationships between nations and civilizations. Today, German compositions are brought to Italy and Italian compositions are performed in Germany: to you this might seem perfectly natural, but believe me: when I was 18 (on the eve of WWII) I was already at work on Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, because I was interested in specific problems, solutions, etc.; yet I, like others of my generation, thought that a work like *Pierrot lunaire*, as important as it may be, was a different thing

² N. COOK, *Musica. Una breve introduzione*, it. trans. by E. M. Ferrando, Turin, EDT, 2005, p. 155.

³ For an accurate analysis, see M. GERVASONI, *Le armi di Orfeo. Musica, identità nazionali e religioni politiche nell'Europa del Novecento*, Scandicci (Florence), La Nuova Italia, 2002.

from what we did. It was 'German', just like we were 'Italian'. Today there is no such feeling, neither in Germany for Italian authors, nor in Italy for German composers.⁴

Maderna's commentary is helpful in two ways. It explains that 1) there was a time, which came to an end with WWII, when the vast majority of individuals (including musicians) still had a clear picture of what it meant to be German, Italian, etc.; 2) well into the 20th century, it was still taken for granted that national identities (and consequently "musical styles") were immutable essences (types, models, archetypes), not cultural artefacts shaped by history, and hence liable to be revised and deconstructed in their genealogy.

In this perspective, on the basis of Ludwig Finscher's paradigmatic *Haydn, Mozart und der Begriff der Wiener Klassik* (1985),⁵ somebody went as far as drawing a fascinating parallel that postulates deep structural analogies between the 'Viennese Classical Style' (A) and our modern-day 'World Music' (B):

(A)

- (1) It was built on music from different social classes, collected from different parts of Europe.
- (2) It had a new public, an intellectual, progressive, middle-class public, interested in innovation.
- (3) New methods of communication created the possibility for spreading the interest in modern styles, combined with advertising and selling handwritten and printed music to the urbanised parts of Europe.
- (4) A new type of listening required an increase in the qualities of, and innovations in, the music.
- (5) Melody, rhythm and harmony were subordinated to loose musical forms, which were easy to recognise.
- (6) It was advertised and sold according to new economic laws.

(B)

- (1) World music is built on music from different social classes, collected not from different parts of Europe but from different parts of the world.
- (2) The public is the same: 'an intellectual, progressive, middle-class public, interested in innovation' and most of them from the richest parts of the world.
- (3) The ways of communication have also given world music 'the possibility for spreading the interest in modern styles'.
- (4) We can also establish that 'new type of listening, requiring rising quality of, and innovations in, music'.
- (5) Melody, rhythm and harmony are subordinated to the medialisation of music,

⁴ L. PINZAUTI, *A colloquio con Bruno Maderna*, «Nuova Rivista musicale italiana», VI/4, 1972, pp. 545-552: 546-547.

⁵ L. FINSCHER, *Haydn, Mozart und der Begriff der Wiener Klassik*, in *Die Musik des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by C. Dahlhaus, Laaber, Laaber Verlag, 1985 («Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft», 5), pp. 232-239.

the recorded sound being equivalent to the form structures of the eighteenth century.

- (6) Classic music was launched from the newly born capitalistic market, world music is linked to the global economy and global distribution of products.⁶

It would not be hard to demonstrate how little resemblance the progressive internationalization of music (which Maderna, from his Darmstadt studio, viewed as a no longer reversible, “virtuous” process) bears to today’s growing international enthusiasm for *World Music*. Not unlike the sharp difference that separates *World Music* in the strictest sense (the music which, in a nutshell, contextualises the “sounds of the Others” by relying, among other things, on the knowledge of musicologists and ethnomusicologists) and *World Beat* (which, on the contrary, delocalises those same “sounds of the Others”, with forays into syncretic empiricism and doubtful experiments in *crossover* that are as disorganized as they are fanciful).

There is one academic work which, in its pragmatic fundamentalism, seems particularly fit to illustrate this thesis – the *Sinfonia de las Americas* by R. Tizoc Ceballos, whose compositional plan, devised by the author, is reproduced in the following page.⁷

The score, composed between 2008 and 2010, is in my view the most convincing proof of the inherent cause-effect (or, if you prefer, image-mirror) relationship existing between the process of breaking down barriers we are witnessing right now in our globalized world, and the disappearance of ethnic music records from the shelves of specialized shops, and their subsequent reappearance in general, mainstream media stores. In other words, it is the proof that a new sensibility has emerged in the public, as well as new notions to analyse it – ethno-musical hybridization, the “global city” of music, ethno-musical patchwork, expanded ethnicity, and the idea of *glocal* in music.

Hence the question at hand, whether it is desirable that these new notions and new sensibility be introduced into Conservatories, composition classes in particular, and how this could be done. And whether today we still have musicians who, like Richard Wagner in his *Was ist deutsch?* (1865, revised in 1878), make aggressive statements based on ontologies (identity as origin and starting point) and aesthetic mythologies (nationalism, regionalism, localism, chauvinism).

⁶ J. LING, *Is 'World Music' the 'Classic Music' of Our Time?*, «Popular Music», XXII/2, 2003, pp. 235-240: 237 and 239.

⁷ R. TIZOC CEBALLOS, “*Sinfonia de las Americas*” for Orchestra: *Creating an American Musical Identity Representative of the Diverse Cultures and Musical Styles Present in the United States in the Twenty-First Century*, A Project Report Presented to the Bob Cole Conservatory of Music (California State University, Long Beach) in partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Music in Composition, Ann Arbor, UMI, 2010, p. 17.

Overview of Influences Utilized

Sinfonia only adopts a few cultural influences, which are primarily in the Middle section of the piece. The Introduction establishes the atmosphere, and the Finale culminates with the incorporation of the last two cultural influences.

TABLE 1. Proportions of Musical Influences Utilized

Influence	Introduction	Middle Section	Finale
Native American	mm 33-40		
Indigenous to Several Different Cultures	mm 40-50	mm 81-89	
Mexican	mm 70-73	mm 103-115, 241-279	mm 299-305
Japanese		mm 115-136, 166-194	
African		mm 115-136	
"American"/European			mm 280-306

Sinfonia de las Americas is a uniquely American piece because it embraces the American-ness of the different cultural sources incorporated. While many other styles and influences exist, the goal is to use various influences to create an eclectic style rather than choose influences that are intended to stylistically define American music.

Fig. 1 – Scheme of *Sinfonia de las Americas*

The answer might well be positive. But it may also be that these individuals are a residual minority, considering that, as Maderna suggested, the second half of the 20th century saw the beginning of a process that led everybody (however unwillingly) towards a kind of music which is no longer «French, nor English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Tartar, Turkish, Persian, Indian, Chinese, or American» and, precisely because of this, sounds particularly rich and enigmatic, both in its poetic diction and in its implications for didactic transmission.

Whether this music is to be identified with international pop, which has undergone a radical change into a variety of *World Music* that can be legitimately included in the globalized cultural industry; or with the kind of “experimental music”, addressed to a niche public with elite ambitions, a music indebted to the Western or European cultivated tradition and, by reflex, also to its 20th-century experimentalism – is an issue that is still being debated, and will probably continue to be for a long time.

If, however, we listen to the works of Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996) or Guo Wenjing (1956-) focusing on their re-reading of, respectively, Impressionist timbre colouring and Modernist constructivism *à la Shostakovich*, instead of asking for the umpteenth time which elements of their styles are of French, Russian (or German, Italian, Spanish, etc.) derivation, a more helpful question would be: what sounds typically and unmistakably Western in these works? And the immediate answer is: not only the choice of violins or piano in lieu of the *shamisen* or *pipa*, but the music project itself is distinctively European, in that it centres on the management of sound complexity through writing. In other words, because the musical identity of the European sound space is essentially based on determined sound, with the physical-acoustic reality subjected to a Pythagorean ideal of order, it would not be too far-fetched to claim that the ‘Western Genius’ of music expressed itself particularly in the *ars combinatoria* of polyphony-counterpoint.

So why should we build the didactics of composition around these disciplines? Because of their eminently cultural character which, from the very rudiments, allows for the use of formalizations and modelizations that are as persuasive as they are functional, whereas the grammars and syntaxes of harmony are influenced by the problematic, ambivalent nature of its foundation – both natural (sound physics) and artificial (scales, chords, etc.). As a sector of technical-artistic knowledge that developed autonomously *in vitro*, but also through an indirect confrontation with the dominant ideals of natural organization and naturalness, and the various forms they have taken throughout history, the *ars combinatoria* of polyphony and counterpoint allows us to see through the genealogical development of the very idea of a ‘European culture’, over and beyond any contributions from the many homelands, small or big, or from the countless individuals who, although coming from very distant geographical areas, have consciously identified with it and still take it as a reference. It also provides an appealing opportunity for teachers to use the sweet bait of music to impart knowledge (basic or advanced) about mathematics, geometry, acoustics, information technology and computer science, etc. All this in the hope that the so-called “conflict of two cultures” can reach a new agreement, as it did at the time when you could legitimately claim that *ars sine scientia nihil est*.

(Translation by Elisabetta Zoni)