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THE PEDAGOGICAL NATURE AND POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF THE NOTION OF ‘MUSICAL COMPOSITION’

Let me start from a lexicological premise. The verb ‘to compose’, its derivatives, and the equivalents currently in use in the modern national languages (en. *to compose, composition, composer*; it. *comporre, composizione, compositore*; germ. *komponieren, Komposition, Komponist*), have a common root in the Latin expressions *componere* and *compositio/compositor*, documented respectively from the 2nd century b. C. and mid-1st century b. C.¹ The Latin verb in turn comes from the juxtaposition of the preposition *cum* and the verb *ponere* – “put together” –, a terminological combination that has turned out to be extremely productive on the semantic level, and has found application, both literally and figuratively, in common language use as well as in specific sectors of literature, arts and science.

The second aspect I would like to stress is the age-old connection between this lexical field and the educational setting, primarily the teaching of rhetoric in schools. *Compositio* was the term used to describe a specific ability, which teachers had to pass on to their pupils: how to build the structure of a sentence, and organize word sequences, so as to deliver or recite the text forcefully and effectively. With respect to the five classic domains of rhetoric (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio*), this particular ability was traditionally ascribed to *elocutio*, for its relevance to the stylistic aspects of discourse, or its ‘decoration’. The latter meaning is unrelated to the technical aspects that have been prevalent in the history of musical composition as a category, where the core element is not so much the mode of expression as the architecture, or structure, of the work. Despite this discrepancy, the notion still holds some interest because of its relationship with the pedagogical context – a semantic association, which later resulted in the appropriation of the term by the modern jargon of literature teaching, albeit in a broader sense: in several languages, such as English, French, and Italian, the term ‘composition’ still describes the school exercise of writing on a given topic.

The pedagogical reference is evident even at the earliest stages in the development of a specific musical terminology. In the basic teaching of Latin

¹ For the terminological details see M. BANDUR, *Compositio / Komposition*, in *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*, ed. by A. Riethmüller (after H. H. Eggebrecht), 24. Auslieferung, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996.

music theory, *componere* and *compositio* were the terms used to refer to the process of assembling primary musical elements into superordinate structural forms. The terms went on to describe the categorization of intervals on a numerical basis (often with reference to the “simple/compound” dichotomy), and also entered the domain of notation – in particular, in the mensural system, they described the linking of notes with ligatures and the adding up of small values to greater time units. Without going into further detail, it suffices to say that from the 11th century onwards this semantic development branched out into two separate paths. On the one hand, it referred to the idea of assembling different rhythmical-sound elements in order to build a melodic line, either written or sung extemporaneously. On the other hand, it described the invention of a new melodic line that could be associated to a pre-existing theme. From this second meaning, around 1300, the notion of ‘composition’ began to take shape, as a tune made up of different voices. With the emergence of polyphony, as is well-known, the idea of musical composition began to be associated not just with the horizontal unfolding of a melodic line, but also with the vertical perspective, what in modern times is referred to as harmony. The story of the term continued under the sign of this dialectical opposition between horizontal and vertical level, with definitions that alternately emphasized one or the other aspect. Here are some examples from the 16th and 17th century that show the meanings in pedagogical contexts, swinging between the two poles of melody and harmony, and only to be reconciled through the teaching of counterpoint:

Per il che volendo il studente componere più tetracordi o vero essacordi di quelli che sono nel sopradetto Introduttorio, potrà duplicare o triplicare il medesimo, così ne formerà quanti ne gli faranno bisogno; oltre di ciò i scrittori dicono che Guidone formò il sopradetto Introduttorio con sette deduzioni o vero essacordi a imitazione de’ sacerdoti d’Egitto, li quali con il suono di essi che sette ancora erano pronunziavano le note delle sacre cantilene.²

[For if a student intends to compose several tetrachords, or hexachords, of the kind described in the above mentioned Introduttorio, he will be able to double or triple it, so as to obtain the quantity he needs; besides this, the authors say that Guidone formed the above mentioned Introduttorio with seven deductions, or hexachords in the manner of the Egyptian priests, who uttered the notes of the sacred chants through the sound of these chords, which also had seven sounds]

essendosi fin qui mostrato a pieno tutte le singolari, e principali vie de’ contrapunti come si vede, quest’ultimo modo di comporre in contrapunto a quattro con le parti

²S. CERRETO, *Della pratica musica vocale e strumentale. Opera necessaria a coloro che di musica si diletano ...*, Naples, G. I. Carlino, 1601, p. 21. This and the following two quotations were partly normalized and graphically modernized.

fugate, con obblighi ed assonzioni di fughe, ad alcuni riuscirà molto difficoltoso per esservi doppie obbligazioni; ma non però lo scolare punto se ne doverà sgomentare; perché, con l'assiduo studio, se le farà pronte e facili.³

[so far we have shown all the main different ways of counterpoint – as can be seen, somebody may find this latter way of composing a four-part counterpoint with fugato parts, with the restrictions and obligations of fugue, extremely difficult, since there are double obligations. But the pupil should not be scared away by this – for, by way of hard study, it will become familiar and easy to him]

La composizione a tre è la più perfetta di tutte, perché in quella si può avere la triade perfetta dell'armonia, senza l'aiuto d'altra parte, non essendo quasi altro l'unione della terza o di più parti che una ripetizione d'una certa parte già esistente nella triade armonica; onde quasi passò in proverbio: chi ha l'abilità di far bene una composizione a tre, tiene altresì aperta una via larghissima di comporre a più parti.⁴

[Three-part composition is the most perfect of all, because there you have the perfect triad of harmony, without the help of any other part, since the union of the third part, or more parts, is nothing but a repetition of a certain part that already exists in the harmonic triad; hence the almost proverbial saying – whoever has the ability to create a good three-part composition, also holds the key to part composition in general.]

To further narrow the focus on the theme of my contribution – aside from the educational aspect, I would like to stress a further common feature shared by the semantic varieties of the lexical field of composition, i.e. the constant reference to a rational principle of aggregation of different elements. The act of composing, in all its possible expressions as a project of sound organization, is always reducible to this principle. In some respects, therefore, the rules of musical composition in the Western world, whose evolution is reflected in a vast corpus of treatises (aimed at conveying specific knowledge and abilities), are nothing but the condensed-formal expression of two basic elements, which are inherent, so to speak, in the nature of the term itself: didactical-pedagogical, and project-aggregative. Composing music thus means learning to combine sound elements that are different in their frequency, intensity, timbre, and duration, according to a project idea; or, in other words, learning a method for

³ L. ZACCONI, *Prattica di musica, seconda parte. Divisa, e distinta in quattro libri*, Venice, A. Vincenti, 1622 (anast. repr. Bologna, Forni, 1967), p. 278.

⁴ J. J. FUX, *Salita al Parnasso. O sia guida alla regolare composizione della musica ...*, it. trans. by A. Manfredi (orig. ed. *Gradus ad Parnassum, sive manuductio ad compositionem musicae regularem ...*, 1725), Carpi, Carmignani, 1761 (anast. repr. Bologna, Forni, 1972), p. 79. The three sample quotes are drawn from the database of *Lessico della letteratura musicale italiana 1490-1950*, ed. by F. Nicolodi and P. Trovato, with the collaboration of R. Di Benedetto, eds. L. Aversano and F. Rossi, Florence, Cesati, 2007 (handbook and bibliography + CD-ROM).

generating new sets from single, pre-existing units. Which is to say that composition is not merely a process of artistic creation, but also the set of norms and rules that govern such creation (considering that the deliberate denial of traditional rules, just like the choice of aleatory music, is itself a normative principle). The idea of musical composition thus rests on the principle of indivisibility of the creative and formal levels, and therefore on the relationship between artistic creation and the transmission of educational models, which is also of primary importance in the formation of critical thinking.⁵ If we look at the intersection of tradition and modernity in a socio-political perspective, we can also notice an analogy between the idea of musical composition and that of modern society. Art music, always poised between a written text and the interpretation of it, is deeply akin to the legal paradigm that underlies any social organism: a written code, interpreted each time in a different way. This is an obvious fact, despite the claims of critics who persist in confining «the esthetic and normative levels to separate non-communicating spheres».⁶ As I mentioned, the word ‘composition’, in its etymological-

⁵ On these aspects, in particular on the possible contribution of musical composition to the formation of critical thinking, in the domain of applied didactics, see R. BERKLEY, *Teaching Composing as Creative Problem Solving: Conceptualising Composing Pedagogy*, «British Journal of Music Education», XXI, 2004, pp. 239-264; M. KASCHUB - J. SMITH, *Minds on Music: Composition for Creative and Critical Thinking*, Plymouth, MENC, 2009; R. POZZI, *Il compositore come educatore. La prospettiva pedagogica nei musicisti del Novecento*, in *Educazione musicale e Formazione*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and F. Frabboni, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2008, pp. 210-229; M. SEGAFREDDO, *Compositore nell'attualità, in un'ottica formativo-sociale*, «L'Ozio Letterario e d'Arte», II, 2001, pp. 213-218.

⁶ G. RESTA, *Il giudice e il direttore d'orchestra. Variazioni sul tema: "diritto" e "musica"*, «Materiali per una Storia della Cultura giuridica», XLI, no. 2, 2011, pp. 435-460: 436. In his well-argued essay on these key aspects, the author maintains that «ogniqualevolta ci si propone di colmare tale divario, enfatizzando l'elemento politico-normativo delle arti e quello estetico del diritto, s'incontrano invariabilmente resistenze e perplessità di vario tipo. Né varrebbe a molto, per dissiparle, rievocare quella lunga storia di intersezioni tra la musica e il diritto, fatta di pratiche istituzionali comuni, contiguità culturali profonde, funzioni simboliche convergenti, ed emblematicamente racchiusa nello stesso universo semantico del vocabolo νόμοι. ... La modernità ha creato una frattura epistemologicamente profonda tra il diritto e le arti, tale da presentare questi ambiti come culturalmente autonomi, caratterizzati da una propria razionalità, rispondenti ad una diversa logica ed orientati a fini differenti. Tale dicotomia non è certo immune da critiche e sono ormai molte le riflessioni, a partire da quelle di impianto ermeneutico, tese al suo superamento» [Every time we set out to bridge this gap, by stressing the political-normative aspects of the arts, and the esthetic qualities of law, we inevitably meet with resistance and perplexity. In order to dispel these doubts, it would be almost useless to recall the long history of the intersections

semantic connotations, is related to the idea of *togetherness*, the expression that Francesco Remotti used in his opening lecture at the International Musicological Society conference in 2012:⁷ the togetherness of things that are different, but also alike. The notion of diversity in similarity also appears in the main definition given by the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* for the entry 'comporre': «Mettere insieme, congiungere; dare forma a un tutto unico, omogeneo, unendo, adattando, mischiando insieme cose affini; formare, foggiare; costruire, creare (e sempre implica una coscienza operosa e ordinata)» [To put together, to join; to give shape to a single, homogeneous whole, by combining, adapting, blending similar things; to form, fashion; to build, create (always implies an industrious, organized conscience)].⁸

To compose, therefore, means to put together diverse elements that may have a common root, arrange them, give them a form, a structure, within a time-bound process, at the end of which a new identity emerges – different from the original identities of the single elements, which are accordingly termed 'compound'. In this perspective, musical composition can be regarded as a guiding metaphor in trying to find possible solutions to an urgent problem of today's world: how to hold together people from a wide range of cultures, how to combine different identities into a new, common identity. While in music this process only makes sense if there is a recognizable and recognized principle, whereon to build the sound project, so the strategy to build a harmonically multicultural society cannot do away with reference models for education, with that «coscienza operosa e ordinata» [industrious, organized conscience] (to use the above definition from the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*). 'To form' essentially means to build a shape; to give an outline to what is being created, thereby making construction and image coincide – an idea that is aptly expressed by the German word *Bildung*. Beyond all alternative models of social, economic and political development, what emerges is an absolutely central pedagogical issue, which comes before all other questions: which ethical

between music and law, a history made of common institutional practices, deep cultural contiguity, converging symbolical functions – emblematically condensed in the same semantic universe as the word. ... Modernity has caused a deep epistemological rift between law and the arts, to such an extent that they appear as culturally autonomous entities, endowed with a rationality of their own, governed by a different logic, and pursuing different ends. Such a dichotomy is certainly not immune from criticism, and today there are many reflections (first and foremost those that draw from hermeneutics) aimed at overcoming this division] (p. 437 f.).

⁷ IMS Rome 2012, *Inaugural Lecture 1*. The lecture is published under the title *Identity Barriers and Resemblance Networks*, in «Acta musicologica», LXXXIV, no. 2, 2012, pp. 137-146.

⁸ *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, ed. by S. Battaglia and G. Bàrberi Squarotti, vol. III, Turin, Utet, 1964, s.v.

and esthetic values should we turn to as reference points in the education of the younger generations? Arts education, in a general sense, has the task to provide a direct answer to this question, also by drawing from a cultural heritage built throughout centuries of history.⁹ Among the disciplines involved in this mission, music has a primary responsibility (as Plato already understood), because of the combinatory nature of its epistemological status and, on the phenomenological level, the powerful fascination it exercises. Delicately poised between Apollo and Dionysus, musical composition by its very nature teaches how to govern relationships – among sound impulses that are ontologically different or contrasting; between traditional elements and innovative aggregations; between the performer's individuality and the communality of the ensemble. As such, it can be regarded as having an essentially pedagogical nature, and a markedly political relevance.

(Translation by Elisabetta Zoni)

⁹ Today, the internationally widespread notion of *cultural heritage* is referred to in various research programs of the European Union, and of other non-European countries (see, for instance, Brazil, with the activities of the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, documented in the website www.iphan.gov.br). For a discussion of specifically musical aspects see G. LA FACE BIANCONI, *La Musica d'arte: patrimonio d'Europa e strumento d'inclusione*, in *Musica e bene comune*, Proceedings of the international Rome conference (April 10-11 2012), ed. by L. Malknecht, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2013 (currently in print). The same contribution deals with the difference between material and immaterial musical heritage. On this topic, albeit with reference to the traditions of Eastern Asia, see also the volume edited by Keith Howard: *Music as Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012.