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"DIALECTICAL" MUSIC EDUCATION: A MODEL FOR ANY SITUATION? REFLECTIONS ON A READING

I have read with much interest *Transforming Music Education* by Estelle R. Jorgensen (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003). Although the book is not very recent, it prompted some reflections, which I would like to share with readers. My interest in the book has to do with the fact that it contains points of view on which any individual, as having a specific identity (or maybe multiple, fluctuating identities, such as worker, parent, son, teacher or student, as someone who cultivates a particular taste, or owns a piece of material or immaterial heritage, as a member of smaller or larger communities, as having a certain idea of community, or possibly believing in, or practicing, one or more activities in their spare time, etc.) has the chance, indeed the right, to let her/his voice be heard.

What particularly struck me while reading was one page about what is referred to as "classical" music and its social roots: «I concur with Rose Rosengard Subotnik, who laments that classical music has lost its connectedness with its traditional and popular roots. Unless it recovers this connectedness, it will become increasingly meaningless and irrelevant to the experience of its public» (p. 34). Actually, in the long-gone 1980s, Subotnik was not talking about classical music in general, but about contemporary music in particular, or better the music that was "contemporary" at that time, and its difficult relationship with the public. Nevertheless, her diagnosis can be extended beyond that specific domain. It is a fact proven by overwhelming evidence that the interest in "classical" music is waning. And it is important that music education not simply acknowledge this fact, but also ask itself why this repertoire and its tradition are declining.

However, before getting down to the main issue, I would like to give a general outline of the book. In each chapter we find several opposing pairs. For instance, *cultural diversity* and *cultural imperialism*, *monochromatic culture* and *multicultural awareness*, *cultural transformation* and *cultural establishment*, *tradition* and *innovation*, *state of being* and *dynamic process*, *subversive* and *conservative*, *accommodative* and *revolutionary*, *open-mindedness* and *closed-mindedness*, *elitism* and *universalism*, *music of common people* and *music of an elite or few*. *Freedom*, *civility*, *justice*, *humanity*, *inclusivity* on the one hand, *tribalism*, *warfare*, *fear and mistrust of different others* on the other. *Banality*, *crudity*, *violence* on the one hand and *refinement*, *personal dignity*, *love of wisdom*, *care for others* on the other. *Dystopianism* and *utopianism*, *systemic* and *particular*, *individual* and *collective*, *national* and *global perspective*. Regarding

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education, we have *directive* and *liberative*, *didactic* and *dialogic*, *banking* and *liberating*, *subject-centered* and *student-centered*.

Next to these polarities, we also find several lists of models. For example, an extensive enumeration of types of transformation (as suggested by the title of the book itself, *Transforming Music Education*): *modification*, *accommodation*, *integration*, *assimilation*, *synthesis*, *transfiguration*, *conversion*, *renewal*. Among the factors involved in any educational action, we find *imagination*, *spirituality*, *particularity*, *embodiment*, *fallibility*, *dialogue*, *agency*, *expectations*. Among the modes of existence of music: *music as aesthetic object*, *music as symbol*, *music as practical activity*, *music as experience*, *music as agency*. And among the aspects involved in the transmission of musical culture: *instruction*, *osmosis*, *participation*, *example*, *observation*, *reflection*, *sensibility*.

Surrounded by such a plethora of alternatives and typologies, readers find themselves facing a highly complex picture. The problems associated with music education are framed within an extremely multi-faceted framework – the author, as is immediately clear, wants to avoid a one-way approach and tries to consider all the elements involved in the educational process. She makes the same effort in other publications, such as her *The Art of Teaching Music* (2008) and *Pictures of Music Education* (2011). Such a wide-open perspective is more than justified when it comes to a cultural object like music, which has so many nuances. Music is not one single thing – it is theory and practice, past and present, tradition and innovation, work and event, structure and emotion, immediacy and refinement, materiality and transcendence.

Despite such a huge variety of factors, Jorgensen's operative strategy for a music education fit for our age can be condensed in one single word. Apart from specific situations, in which making a choice is both necessary and obvious (nobody would declare that they are in favor of violence and oppression, unless they were Genghis Khan, who probably also had his brief moments of tenderness, and everybody wants to be St. George when it comes to defeating the «forces of systemic selfishness, arrogance, bigotry, exclusiveness, marginalization, repression, oppression, violence» (p. XIV), in any other case, when faced with a variety of models, the author's response is invariably: "dialectics". Jorgensen's approach requires that all positions, even the most irreconcilable, be "dialectically" integrated into one single educational agenda. We should not proceed by selecting between available alternatives, for each time we choose we exclude something, and therefore impoverish the educational process. The different factors (methods, didactic content, etc.) should rather be "combined" among them, and placed in a relationship of reciprocity – they should be all accepted within a multi-perspectival project. The formula that condenses the "dialectical" program is *this with that*. In a society marked by rapid and deep transformations, an open educational approach is the only one that can make sense of an ever-changing reality. The music education process should therefore be open-ended, and not tied to goals within a well-defined system.

However, given this general framework, problems arise as to the practicability of the method. The author knows well that, in a real educational setting, the idea of reciprocity and of the integration of all factors is difficult to implement, and that practical needs can require focusing on one objective rather than another. She then suggests ways to adapt her recipe of *this with that* to the needs of the moment. As in a drama, where not all actors are always in the foreground, but occupy center stage depending on the role they play, so in the educational setting, depending on the situation, certain possibilities may come to the fore, and others remain in the background, on the periphery yet not entirely excluded or forgotten. The choice may depend on various demands, including the pupil's interests. Anyway, no option should be excluded, and no goal should be ruled out from the very outset. Another image Jorgensen resorts to is that of the hypertext, in which any element allows users to link back to the overall network through its internal connections. Similarly, educators, for practical reasons, may choose a particular reference point, from which they can move towards a wider horizon.

Now it seems to me that there is an unresolved conflict between the formula for a "dialectical" music education and the adaptation strategies suggested for its practical application. The very possibility for such adaptations can be read in different ways. If the choice to privilege an element is continued and prolonged, I wonder whether the idea to create a hierarchy between that which must be placed at the center and the elements that must be left on the margins ceases to be merely a correction device and becomes something that does away with the model of *this with that* altogether. If, on the contrary, educators choose to focus on an aspect only temporarily, bringing the others, too, into play at different times, the outlook turns out to be just as problematic. What time frame should one adopt, at any given time, to alternate between different pictures, so as to remedy the problem of the simultaneous activation of all factors? Should it be on a daily basis? Or on a monthly basis? Every school term? How long do certain factors have to last, in order to warrant a hierarchical organization and special emphasis on, say, a given musical repertory, making it the focus of the didactic activity? Could these factors not be persistent needs that surface throughout the whole educational journey of a generation, steadily but with the adaptations required by each school level? And, were this the case, would that not be equivalent to the situation we described previously – in other words, would this not neutralize the combination of *this with that*?

To carry this further: if the choice to privilege one or more aspects is only temporary, Jorgensen's adaptation sounds very reasonable, yet it also seems to have a certain banality to it. If we give flexibility of approach pre-eminence over the "dialectical" formula, if we realize that not everything is possible at the same time, and that we must identify a set of priorities, while retaining an open and tolerant perspective that acknowledges differences, then are we not

saying something that any educator, of any position, would agree with, except for a few, improbable Genghis Khan of music pedagogy? Do we need to build a theory of dialectical complexity, and invoke a radical plan for transforming music education, in order to arrive at a proposition of common sense?

If, on the other hand, we let our practical concerns be superseded by the universalist openness of music education reformed, indeed transformed by the model outlined in the book, with its radical attitude towards plurality, then it is hard to be optimistic about the effectiveness of this formula. The truth is that the universalist program of *this with that* only makes sense in an open system. And Jorgensen is convinced that such should be the horizon of music education. But educators do not operate in a magical world, where anything is possible. They can welcome the idea of openness as a guiding light, an aspiration – as a "regulatory idea" or *focus imaginarius*, as referred to by Kant, who regarded as «advantageous and unavoidable» the choice to adopt a perspective which, however, remains «outside possible experience». But in real life educators have to come to terms with a closed system: limited school time, a finite amount of time for learning, curriculums, and national institutions. The issue of priority and choice stems from these real constraints, rather than from the cultural inadequacy of the involved subjects or the narrowness of their horizon – which can, however, play a part. In a closed system, sometimes a "yes" inevitably means "no". The fact that the options are alternative to each other has to do with practical circumstances rather than a clash of principles. Privileging one approach means giving up another. Leaving room for an item means giving less space to another. Focusing your interest on a specific repertory means not paying as much attention to another. However accurately school activities are organized, setting limits and excluding will be inevitable – not just temporarily, at a given moment, or while waiting to restore the "dialectical" equilibrium.

If we really wanted to integrate all possibilities and perspectives into a closed educational system, we would have to water everything down to an undifferentiated mixture. I would like to emphasize this idea of 'watering down', for in the hypothetical situation described above nothing would find enough space, nothing would reach a critical mass, and nothing would have potential for effectiveness. The space for dialectical integration is actually smaller than Jorgensen hopes, although she is aware of the limitations inherent in real educational settings. Her *this with that* runs the risk of turning into an *all in one*, despite the good intentions of the author, who is careful to mark the difference between her model and a mere combination of things, a *both … and …* The risk is to have a night in which all cows are black, as a great master of dialectics would put it.

Let us now come back to the issue we started with, the fact that "classical" music has lost «connectedness with its traditional and popular roots». In the past, this music was certainly more deeply rooted in society than today, but we

cannot hope to reinvigorate these roots unless we restore the conditions for its transmission. School as an institution is without doubt one of the main vehicles for intergenerational sharing. Indeed, as far as the music of our learned tradition is concerned, the role of school is decidedly bigger now than it used to be the past, given the declining influence of other factors (for instance, the family), which in the past provided students with opportunities to explore music outside school. In other words, today schools have a special responsibility in preserving the "classical" music heritage as an operative cultural asset. We need to include this as an essential educational goal, if we want it to have a future, and do not want it to be relegated to the private sphere, where it could become but one of countless leisure possibilities.

Of course not everybody will agree with this approach. One could legitimately maintain that music education should set itself other priorities. Or that the transmission of "classical" is one of several options, and as such can be negotiated or given up entirely. However it may be, we need two qualities: clarity and coherence.

Clarity – if we choose to give up something, we must say so explicitly. We should have the courage to admit that school as a social institution should not be burdened with the responsibility to promote knowledge of a repertory, and to spread the values connected to it. We should admit that keeping this tradition alive it is not a priority, and that it is not important to make students understand that the musical past means something for us today. And maybe we should also find the courage to motivate our choices, without alibis or hypocrisy – for instance the choice, not unheard of in Italy, to let students believe that certain types of music can even cause an identity shock – whereas trigonometry, *consecutio temporum* and redox reactions should be perceived by students as a part of their identity.

Coherence – we cannot saw off the branch on which we are sitting and then blame adverse, uncontrollable circumstances for falling. We cannot complain about the decline of a tradition when we have done nothing to keep it alive. We cannot complain about the fading interest in certain historical-aesthetic traditions if we have not promoted any active policy to revive them. A policy, I would add, that should not be based on an austere idea of heritage "preservation", and should not be described as "curatorial", either, to borrow another expression from Jorgensen, who considers it typical of old-style music teachers. It is not about heritage managing, it is about continuing to experience, in the present, some elements of historical repertories, linking back to a cultural phenomenon that originated around the mid-19th century, when a substantial part of performed music ceased to be selected among contemporary artifacts – which resulted in a process of deep interpenetration of the historical and aesthetic dimensions. This phenomenon does not involve any painful or distressing feelings. On the contrary, it is nourished by the positive factors, which

Jorgensen, in a rather sentimental passage of her preface, identifies as the root of any music education worthy of this name – «hope, faith, joy, and love» (p. XIV).

How does the "dialectical" model relate to these principles? Jorgensen is miles away from uncultivated opinions, which associate the current *Zeitgeist* with the immediacy of adolescent music experiences, and believe that interpreting the present means indulging the latest trends. She knows well that educating means taking students on a journey through their minds, and not to drive them around the block, that keeping updated and changing does not simply mean turning your back to the past. She knows well how the experience of settling down in an age that is not your own can help loosen our stubborn, persistent bond to the mundane, present world and its petty barriers of identity, and widen the horizon of meaning in our lives. But the dialectics of *this with that* is not the best or most functional answer to these needs. It is the dilutive property inherent in its polycentric, multi-factorial approach that is incompatible with any investment of energy directed primarily towards guaranteeing the persistence of the "classical" in music (or of the "classics", considering the variety of cultural areas). The dispersion caused by such an approach is the opposite of identifying a primary goal, and establishing an educational hierarchy that is not temporary.

Jorgensen is right in insisting on the need for a multi-perspectival music education, one that can take different points of view – and hence is not impeded by a one-dimensional vision of music culture. We are perfectly aware that culture has to be understood in the plural, and that throughout history music has manifested itself in multi-faceted forms of expression, genres, and repertoires that were sometimes very different from each other. We know that today the picture is at least just as varied and definitely does not allow us to talk about "music" in the singular; that our view only encompasses a fraction of the variety of musical objects in the past and present; that what is familiar to us is far from coinciding with a universal horizon of musicality. That the notion of 'exoticism' is reversible, i.e. it depends on the observer, not on the object observed, and therefore any cultural education can sound exotic to other people.

I believe, however, that a multi-perspectival look does not rule out from the outset the possibility to organize cultural objects hierarchically, or choose a specific point of reference. Multi-perspectival does not mean polycentric – also because, to be strictly logical, a specific domain cannot have multiple centres, although it can lack a fixed centre, as happens with mega-cities of recent growth. A multi-perspectival vision has to be adopted, or better built, formed, nourished, not because it "sounds good" or is politically correct, but because it improves our ability to understand the world. It not only enriches this quality, but protects us from cognitive distortion, making us realize that the content which we choose to focus on, however relevant it may be in our eyes, is part of a bigger picture, and is not a culturally exclusive object. As such, it can be *complementary* to the choice of *one* core, around which to build an educational

project. In our case, a multi-perspectival attitude allows to design a "strong" strategy for the transmission of the musical past ("our" past, the "classical" in music as a socially recognized, highly operative asset) without falling into the trap of suprematism. In other words, it can acquire a regulatory function in a Kantian sense, as mentioned above.

Educators really need extra courage. On the one hand, they need to know how to open themselves to multiplicity, to develop the awareness of latitude as part of the notion of 'civilization'. It is impossible to encourage this awareness in pupils unless you have built it yourself. On the other hand, educators need courage to defend the cultural identity of their community through its best achievements, selected in a constant process of testing and renewed appreciation (the value of cultural objects does not have to do with birth right, unlike what happens in the cultural establishment that Jorgensen rightly condemns). And maybe they also need to be able to promote it, i.e. to spread knowledge of it beyond the boundaries in which it grew, without forcing or proselytizing. This is what already happens with national or regional cuisine – and nobody is shocked or outraged. Opening the door to multiplicity means widening your horizons while refusing to give up the values and models of your social context, which have to remain at the core of any active policy of transmission.

Without this policy, which has education and school institutions as its main actors, many aspects of our identity would have been swept away: would Roman law, Galilean science, and the Western literary memory ever have reached us, had they not been carried by the educational vehicle? The idea of tolerance, the aversion to dogmatism, the ability to develop a critical approach, the very need to look at cultural phenomena and the expressions of civilization from multiple perspectives, would no be so deeply rooted in our intellectual world if the legacy of modern thought and Enlightenment had not been transmitted through teaching. And if today these principles are regarded as a heritage which we are unwilling to give up, we owe it to the tenacity of the educators who took care of them (not with a "curatorial" attitude, but with enthusiasm and idealistic inspiration), preserving and relaunching them in the course of time. And they continued to do this in the face of adverse forces, when their own pupils, seduced by other worldviews, such as totalitarian ideologies, were unprepared to accept them – and no consensus existed in the educational sphere. If this legacy had been regarded as negotiable, or even expendable, maybe today we would not have the cultural background from which Jorgensen's open and pluralistic vision originates. Why should we be so incoherent as to postulate a different fate for music civilization as separate from the rest of "our" history? Why should we accept, without regrets, the asymmetry whereby music would be headed towards decline, while other achievements of our culture should continue to be regarded as unexpendable in the educational horizon? Maybe because «music is an innocent luxury, unnecessary, indeed, to our existence»?