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The Influence of Existential Thought Today

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(Translated from the Portuguese by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes)

Lecture 16 - On Modern Music

During the last lecture, I sought to evaluate music as the articulation of festivity, that is, of the periodic proximity in which man is to the powers of Revelation. And pure music, this utmost contribution of modern Western man to culture in general, I sought to evaluate as the articulation of the festivity of the intellect. I sought further still, to develop a thesis, according to which pure music is, in its abstraction of a doubtful nature, and in its mental concretion, the very nucleus of our sense of reality. I sought to demonstrate how our civilization has the tendency to musicalize all other disciplines, starting with the other arts, and culminating in the musicalization of pure science. And I suggested that this tendency of ours is already prefigured in the Pythagorean wisdom, in which music and mathematics are conceived as methods for the salvation of the soul. A total confluence of music and mathematics, into a rigorous and beautiful symbolism in order to realize thought would be, according to this thesis, the aim of the existential project of the West. In other words, it would be the realization of the logos in the full meaning of the term. My task today will be to try to exemplify this thesis within the current scenario.

Let us first do a, let us say, phenomenological attempt to appreciate the current musical scene. And for such, let us define “music”, as any set of sounds purposely composed by the human intellect. Firstly, we shall verify that our situation is bathed by sets of sounds composed by man, both purposefully and accidentally. If compared to all other past situations, ours is extremely sonorous, and the sounds that invade it are of human origin. What distinguishes our situation from previous ones has more of an acoustic character rather than a visual one, which means that we desire silence far more than darkness. Effectively, silence is the highest luxury that we can imagine, and it would be curious to attempt to interpret the Wittgensteinian silence from this perspective. The sea of sound waves in which we are thrown has a double effect on our mind: it numbs our acoustic sensibilities and provokes a defensive reaction. As an example, the infernal sound of a jet plane would have been interpreted, only a few decades ago, as a sign of the end of the world. Today we already accept it almost as mundane. The mechanically cretin and insistent

ringing of the telephone, and the advertising commercials that fill the largest part of radio and TV programs, pass almost at the limit of our consciousness and are almost unnoticed. And despite their potency in decibels, they influence us almost subliminally. Thus, it is in this environment that music, as a set of purposeful sounds, seeks to affirm itself. Music has therefore, two alternatives: to shout and overcome the ambient noise, or to seek refuge in hermetically sealed places. However, both these alternatives may be combined because they offer good criteria to distinguish between the two types of music of today. Let us consider first the music that shouts.

This music is omnipresent, but there are points within our circumstance that are dominated by it. Thousands of loudspeakers constantly spill, just like defective sewers, waves of musical mud over our ears, so that we are able to appreciate simultaneously Beethoven's 9th Symphony coming from the right and the Beatles coming from the left. It is obvious that Beethoven's choral, although sung by hundreds of voices, cannot compete with the shouting of the Beatles, because this is already adapted to our environment. Effectively, Beethoven starts to constitute background music for the Beatles. And with this term "background music" I believe to have characterized music that shouts. In the places where it predominates, in cinemas, nightclubs and restaurants, it consciously assumes this function to constitute background music. What does this mean? The implicit admission that our situation is groundless. Shouting music seeks to conceal the groundlessness of the situation in which we find ourselves. It seeks to avoid that we become aware of the lack of meaning of everything that happens to us. In cinema, this may be perfectly observed. Moments of pretended tension are preceded and accompanied by drum rolls (as by the way it is in the circus), and moments of pretended tenderness are accompanied by hundreds of violins playing the chromatic scale in diminuendo. Without these accompaniments the situations would not be perceived as significant. But if we direct our attention towards the background that is the music, we will verify that it is idiotically simple. The rhythm of the drums and the scale played by the violins lack any indication of intelligence and are in themselves, meaningless. They work only within the situation as a whole; they give the situation some coloring. Thus, we are in a vicious circle. The situation is meaningless without its background and the background is meaningless without its content. Only the whole experience generates the illusion of meaning. The same phenomenon, so obvious in cinema, is present at restaurants where the background music seeks to endow meaning to small talk, at nightclubs where the background music seeks to endow meaning to singles meetings, or in the general situation where background music seeks to endow meaning to an existence thrown towards death. Let us appreciate this curious phenomenon a little closer.

I have already said that music is the articulation of the festivity of life. It emerges as vital exuberance, as an escape valve for energies. But it has also a negative aspect. It seeks to negate the

absurd, or as it is commonly said: *Quem canta os males espanta* [Whoever sings, does his troubles away]. In this way it is also an escape valve, that is, escapism. And that is why certain currents of thought consider music as an opiate. Thus, the music that I have called “shouted”, the omnipresent background music, really is pure escapism. Take into consideration for example the fact that President L. B. Johnson has installed “piped in” music at the White House. He probably cannot bear to confront the vacuum that hides behind his apparently meaningful tasks, and prefers therefore to whistle in the forest. Imagine then the meetings of the War Council accompanied by the subtle sound of a tango – this is pure inauthenticity. But it is, at the same time, a confession of the sacramental power that is inherent in all of music. It is the inauthentic attempt to sacralize the profane. Music in this sense of the term is a surreptitious confession of the absurd reality in which we find ourselves. And it is therefore the very articulation of this absurdity. The cries, shouts and murmurs of all the varied songs that follow each other, and the frenetic contortions – although simultaneously exempt of enthusiasm – that they provoke in the listeners, are the realization of this sensation of absurdity. They are apparently a negation, although at their core they are a confession, of our groundlessness. This type of music characterizes our age as perfectly as the Gigue characterized the Baroque, or the Marseillaise the Romantic period. Therefore an existential analysis of the Beatles would reveal a whole facet of current times.

But it is obvious that this type of music is not limited to these examples. We must also take into consideration cases such as carnival songs and the *Carcará*, which has been sung on stage recently. These are pathetic vestiges of overcome festivities. In the carnival songs we are able to feel, clearly, how they are invaded by the absurd, and we only need to compare current ones with the ones of twenty years ago in order to verify the fact that its cynicism accentuates and its festivity diminishes. And as for the *Carcará*, we are able to feel the deliberate intention towards an engagement that takes away its spontaneity. It is a type of archaic music, which despite its Avant-garde airs and graces, we are able to verify if we are exposed to it when played back from recordings. Summing-up: the type of music that I have called “shouted”, is the articulation, *malgré elle*, of the sensation of the absurd, but which seeks, desperately and paradoxically, to give foundation to the situation in which we find ourselves. But we certainly do not find in it the tendency towards a new sense of reality, of which I spoke about during the last lecture. On the contrary, we will find in it only the shreds of a sense of lost reality. Nevertheless, all this shouting is still music, that is, it still is a type of sacredness, even if illegitimate.

Now take into consideration that which I called hermetic music at the beginning of this lecture. Recently there has been a revolution in this field, called “electronic music”, which I intend to discuss with you. This revolution consists of, at bottom, the attempt to geometricize music, that is, to endow it with all four dimensions of time and space. A random sound is recorded on

tape. The sound is almost indifferent. It may be the sound of a bell, or of a locomotive, or of the human voice reciting a verse from the Bible, for example. The tape is recorded and then cut-up, and its segments are then submitted to deliberate manipulation. They are amplified, twisted or condensed. The segments thus manipulated are then re-composed onto a new tape, in a deliberate order and structure, that is, vertically, horizontally, diagonally and in a sequence that is independent from the primitive tape. This is a composition in the strict meaning of the term. The tape is then played through an apparatus for sound reproduction, and we can then experience this music acoustically, that is, in its temporality. But we may also appreciate it equally as a geometric structure: visually. What is this that has happened?

At bottom, it is the confluence of mathematics and music, of which I spoke about during the last lecture. It is the attempt to make geometry musically graspable, that is, to make pure geometry concrete. And it is inversely the attempt to geometricize music and make it independent from lived experiences, to transform it into pure structure. The tape composed by the composer is the immediate articulation of the intellect. It means nothing, but it expresses directly the structure of thought. In its total abstraction of the doubtful circumstance, this music represents the immediate concreteness of the indubitable. It is therefore the expression of a reality, effectively, of our reality.

It is not necessary to have a lot of fantasy in order to imagine that any and every pure expression of thought may be transferred onto this type of tapes. It is not difficult to imagine that for example the equations of the theory of Relativity may be transposed onto this type of tapes. By the way it surprises me that such attempts have not yet been done. At least I am ignorant of them. If done, we could then grasp musically Einstein's world, because we are already tired of knowing that we cannot imagine it. But maybe we are able to make it immediately concrete through electronic music? Thus Herman Hesse's "*The Glass Bead Game*" in which it is possible to translate into music any pure thought, may be coming into realization before the predicted time. Electronic music is the first step towards the musicalization, that is, concretization, of our reality. It is therefore of utmost importance in order to overcome the absurd situation in which we find ourselves.

However, as important as it may be, electronic music is still hermetic within the current situation. To observe the listeners during the rare occasions when it is performed proves it. And this is curious. After all we are already accustomed to pure music, that is, that which is exempt of exterior meaning. Why then do we have such difficulty in order to appreciate it? Why does it hurt our ears, almost physically? The difficulty is different from the one in appreciating abstract painting. It is a lot deeper. Electronic music appeals directly to our intellect, and traditional music still mobilizes our sensitivity, in order to attack our intellect through it. Apparently we are still not

ready to receive a pure intellect in sound form. We are still bathed by an archaic sense of reality, however empty. Once we have learnt to listen to electronic music, we will have learnt to grasp the beauty of pure thought. We will have learnt to grasp experientially the reality that our theoretical sciences reveal. We will have recaptured a new sense of reality, which is a new faculty, perhaps simultaneously epistemological, aesthetic and ethical. And in this electronic music is our master.

I will dedicate the rest of this lecture to the consideration of traditional music in our environment. It differs from electronic music because of a technical tendency, but in a different direction. Electronic music invades the realm of technology in order to adapt it to its structure. Traditional music is invaded by the realm of technology in order to be distorted by it. This is not the case only with recorded music, that is, tinned. In this type of music, the existential risk of the musician is eliminated, which makes it perfect, in the sense of being existentially meaningless. And the records are played within familiar environments, that is, exempt of festivity, which obviously alters its climate. However, this technical tendency happens even within the concert halls. The virtuosi are transformed into sound reproduction apparatus of increasing perfection, and they compete with each other in order to reach impeccability. It is obvious that in such a climate the original sensation of festivity of this type of music is lost.

Nevertheless, traditional music, as I have made the effort to demonstrate, is one of our windows towards a reality concealed by the mundane. It is curious to observe which type of music moves us. We are going in an inverse direction from the history of modern music. We are in search of times lost. Baroque music as the perfect articulation of pure music, is therefore, currently in all of our programs, and composers such as Vivaldi and Tartini are going through a rebirth. Not to mention Bach and Buxtehude, almost forgotten in the 19th century. But this is not enough. In our search for our roots, we turn to the music of the Renaissance. Monteverdi, Purcell and the madrigals envelop us once more, and concerts are executed with authentic instruments from the fifteen hundreds. Although this interest of ours for the origin of pure music may have aspects of a “fad”, and in the USA they really do acquire this aspect, we can verify in it an authentic search for a new meaning. We want to see and experience the climate in which music emerged, in order to be able to find from it a new project, a new opening.

It is obvious that this analysis of mine of our musical situation does not pretend to be exhaustive. It intends only to awaken in you a series of questions in relation to the role of music in our circumstance, and in relation to the role of music as an overcoming of the here and now. And that is why I have made this presentation purposefully short. I ask that the points that I have raised today and last Thursday be debated as I believe that this is a theme that can be better elucidated through discussion rather than a cold presentation. The invitation is now open to you.