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The Influence of Existential Thought Today

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(Translated from the Portuguese by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes)

Lecture 15 - On Music

Following from the analysis of the influences that determine us, and against which we must affirm ourselves, I go on to consider music, and I wish to first warn you that this analysis of mine shall have nothing to do with a critique of music in the common meaning of the term. The word “music” is Greek and was originally “*musiké techné*”, that is, the art of the Muses. It means approximately that which we understand today as “art”, despite, and this is important to note, the fact that the art within our meaning of the term is a modern phenomenon, and a consequence of science and technology. This original use of the word “music” proves that music in the current meaning of the term was held as the art “*par excellence*”, a kind of model of the arts. We know for example that for the Pythagoreans, and as a consequence for Plato, music was held, just like mathematics, as a method to reach knowledge (or salvation, in the Orphic meaning of the term). If we were to ask a Pythagorean what is the most powerful influence to which we are subjected, it is very probable that music would be the answer. It is true that we, today, tend to disagree with this answer, which maybe would not even occur to us. But by evoking the philosophy of Schopenhauer, however, proves that the Greek vision of music is not lost, and that we harbor it, perhaps unconsciously, within the innermost part of our mind. However, before I throw myself in deeper, and perhaps lose myself within the abysses of a philosophy of music, please allow me to present to you a few mundane considerations.

Our life has rhythm. It obeys certain cyclical rules imposed by the circumstance in which we find ourselves. It is the rhythm of going to sleep and waking up, of sowing and harvesting, of youth and old age, of birth and death. And it is our heart that beats the cadence of this rhythm. This rhythm sets the structure to all of our activities. Throughout history, the cyclical rhythm of our lives was experienced as festive, and the feasts marked its beat. These were the morning prayers that hailed the dawning sun, and the evening prayers as the opposite. The mysteries of death celebrated the burial of the seed in the maternal soil, and the mysteries of the resurrection celebrated the springtime sprouting of the plants. Effectively, throughout history, social and indi-

vidual life was marked by cyclical feasts that made the rhythm of nature sacred. These were the feasts which, in the last analysis, gave meaning and aim to life. A festive life is full of waiting (or suspense, to make it a little more modern). It is the wait for Christmas, for Easter, for the wedding, and for the child's christening. It is through the festive rhythm of life that man is in periodic contact with the mystery by which he is enveloped. Thus, music is the articulation of this rhythm. Music is the purest articulation of festivity. When we are exposed to music, the foundational and regulating rhythm of our lives envelops us. It is through music that we glimpse the structure of our lives. That is why music always reveals the sacred aspect of reality, and a sacred aura always accompanies a musical experience worthy of its name.

Well, what I have just said is no longer true today. The rhythm of our lives is no longer natural, or festive. It is no longer the bird's song that wakes us up in the morning, but the baker's motorcycle. The syncopated rhythms of machine levers, of motor pistons, and of typewriters' keys mark our life. We no longer wait for the feast of the new moon, but for the due date of the credit loan. Our rhythm is profane and tends to dilute itself. Night and day tend to be confused with each other; marriage, in the developed countries, tends to be a fortuitous happening; we no longer accept the natural division of ages and sexes, and the very difference between life and death tends to become blurred before the numbness of our lives. The mechanical movement, as well as, the cretinous and empty expression that we are able to observe in the music listeners at nightclubs exemplifies a new rhythm, and it is the dilution of our original rhythm that I am alluding to. There is something that is frankly infernal in this frenetic running of ours, alternated by moments of numbness, in this pace of our lives that the expression "time is money," articulates so wonderfully. And if I say "infernal", I mean to say that our rhythm still conserves the aroma of the sacred. The music that articulates this rhythm in these little hellholes continues to be the articulation of the sacred, albeit in a different climate. It is very difficult to see a festive element in these artificial caves in which musicians and listeners squat. They are, on the contrary, refuge holes against the boredom of a life without aim, that is, of a life that has lost the rhythm of the feast.

Music is therefore, throughout history and in every culture, the articulation of the festivity of life, or, as it is in our case, the articulation of the lack of festivity. And at this point I must say a few words about the Judeo-Christian tradition of which we participate. This tradition, which is, with effect, a life project, dislocates the sacred from nature into a transcendent region. The rhythm of nature, that which festively marks the lives within all other cultures, is experienced as profane within ours, and with this profanation of nature, time no longer circulates cyclically. Because of the transference of interest from nature to the transcendent, our society lives within a linear time, that is, historic. However, this linear time, somehow borrows the rhythm of nature in

order to be festive. The feasts of our culture, although they celebrate that which transcends nature, obey its rhythm. The correspondence between Easter and the Rites of Spring is a theological and perhaps ontological problem that is not fitting to be discussed in the present context. But the result of this profanation of nature, and of the borrowing of the natural cycle by religion is the typically Western bifurcation of music into sacred and profane. However, these terms are biased. The profane music of the Middle Ages is also sacred, in the sense that it articulates the sacred rhythm of nature. Not only the Gregorian chant, but also the feast in the village and popular singing are also sacramental, however the latter smells of heresy. And there is a complex interrelation between the two types of music, which modern musicology studies.

With the advent of the Modern Age, a cultural phenomenon emerged, which seems to me to be at least as important as the emergence of science and technology: Pure music. Its impact on our situation has been, until now, smaller than the impact of science, however, for the future, pure music seems to me to be the most important of the two. Let us consider, therefore, for one instant, what pure music means, the *Toccata*, to use a term of the Renaissance. This is a phenomenon that is absent in other cultures, absent from our history, and effectively, pure music is the greatest contribution of the Modern West to humanity's treasure. Much greater, I believe, than science and technology.

On the occasion when I spoke of the emergence of science, I discussed man's newly assumed attitude in relation to his circumstance, an attitude as consequence of the loss of faith in unmasked religions. Man found himself thus as a thinking thing amidst something doubtful. Science is the attempt to adjust the thinking thing to a doubtful world. This adjustment tends towards mathematics because the structure of the thinking thing is equivalent to arithmetics, that is: it is the grammatical structure of language. Pure music is the very articulation of this structure. In music the thinking thing does not adjust itself to something doubtful. Music is the expression of itself. It is something completely independent from the doubtful world in which thought finds itself. In this sense, music is abstracted from the world. Pure music is, in this sense, an abstract art. But as the articulation of the thinking thing, it is the articulation of the indubitable. It is therefore, the articulation of that which is most concrete. Pure music is in this sense, a concrete art. The terms "concrete" and "abstract" depend on the point of view. They depend on that from which I am abstracting, and on that with which I am growing together. Music, for being the articulation of the very structure of the thinking thing, is the most concrete experience that we have. In it, our voice comes to us from the outside. We recognize ourselves in it. But it is at the same time, the most abstract experience that we have. In it we are freed from the illusion of representation, and of all figurativism. Music simply is, and represents nothing. In music we accept this fact willingly, but if we are going to extend it to our thinking, then we rebel. We do not want

to accept that our thought simply is, and represents nothing. We do not want to accept the musicality of our thought. It is the remains of a pagan imagination, the remains of figurativism, that which obstructs our comprehension of our thought. I shall demonstrate how these remainders of faith in doubtful things are on the way of disappearing, and how science is becoming abstract (or concrete), that is, how it is becoming musical.

I said that the structure of our thought is arithmetic, and that mathematics (or any other logico-symbolic equivalent structure), is the way in which it expresses itself. This is also what music is made of; it articulates this structure. Effectively, music and mathematics are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. This formal discovery, that our generation is coming to, perhaps without being aware of what it is discovering, is, in a way, a return to the wisdom of the Pythagoreans. Mathematics and symbolic logic, articulate our thought through the abstraction of the figurative meaning of our thought. Music does the same. Mathematics is pure language and so is music. The same rules that order concepts within thought (the rules of grammar), and that order the algorithms (the rules of logic), also order the notes on a musical score. However, music is a different method than that of mathematics as an analysis of language. It reveals the beauty of thought, whilst mathematics and logic reveal the rigor of thought. Music liberates thought from aesthetic impurities, whilst logic and mathematics liberate us from the impurities of confused thought. That is why in music we are in contact with the beauty of what we are, and in logic with the rigor of what we are. But at bottom, both methods are paralleled and have the same aim. Within the great mathematical systems, the beauty of thought is resplendent, and these great systems, such as Maxwell's and Riemann's, are accepted for their beauty. Within the great musical compositions the rigor of thought is resplendent, and these great compositions, such as Bach's, delight us with their impeccable structure. In the end, it is not possible to distinguish between mathematics and music, and we feel, with emotion, that the confluence of these two methods of linguistic analysis is the aim of our culture.

In other words: the aim of our culture is the mathematization and the musicalization of language. This seems to be a profane aim, as it seems to profane music as the experience of beauty. But in reality, the confluence between mathematics and music, of which the first steps we witness, would be the rediscovery of the logos. Laden once again with its mathematical and musical content, the logos would provide once more a proximity to the powers of the Revelation. We shall have, in this musicalization of mathematics, of logic and science, and in this mathematization of music and of the arts, once again the immediate understanding of the phrase: In the beginning was the word. We would live, it is true, in an entirely abstract world should our reference point be figurativism. But we will live in full concretion should our point of reference be that which is given to us immediately: language.

Pure music, such as it emerged in the Renaissance, is the very nucleus of our sense of reality. But it is curious to observe how this nucleus was so late in order to explode and flood our thought. The history of music is as though an entirely isolated branch in Western history. To its right the other arts developed towards figurativism, and to its left, science and technology developed in their search for the domination of nature, therefore also figuratively. From the point of view of music, technology is nothing but a figurative art, which by the way, the term itself suggests. It is only during our generation that music starts to flood the other activities of our culture. The fine arts and literature start, consciously, to musicalize, suffice it to see the abstract and concrete arts. By the way, contemporary works of art, and the work of Joyce, may be perfectly considered as musical compositions but with other media. They articulate the structure of thought and do not represent anything. The same tendency can be verifiable in the sciences, although this is not yet so conscious. The sciences start to compose symbols that do not symbolize anything, and no longer provide models. The world of science becomes unimaginable. Effectively, systems such as Einstein's, may be perfectly conceived as a musical composition, but with another medium. Science starts to awaken to the fact that it is a purely linguistic discipline, that is, abstract art, and because of this, eminently concrete.

However, this development towards the musicalization of our reality, shocks itself against the vestiges of our figurativism. We insist on formulating questions of the type: What does this mean? It is true that in relation to music we have already learnt how silly these questions are. We no longer ask what does a quintet by Schubert mean. But some amongst us still persist in formulating this question in front of a painting by Mondrian, or in relation to a concrete poem. And all of us still formulate this question in relation to a scientific system – in relation to a theory. If and when we have learnt to stop asking: what is a proton? or what is a complex? we will have reached a new sense of reality, a sense given by musicality. There will emerge then, a new foundation to our Being, which will make possible new creative endeavors. For now, we may only intellectually glimpse this aim, but we are able to experience it only in music, and precariously in the other arts. For now, we are still victims of an overcome sense of reality, such as the reality of the stone or the Brazilian reality. However, we already feel the vacuity of the overcome reality, and that is why we no longer fully adhere to it. We are in between two realities, hence our feeling of abandonment.

I have said, in seeking to define music, that it is the articulation of the festive rhythm of life. Now, the development of my argument has ended-up in an apparently different definition: music as the articulation of thought. But the new definition is only apparently different from the first. At bottom, it is the rhythm of our life that is the rhythm of our thought, and if we have the sensation of having lost our appropriate rhythm, this means that in the end that our thought is out

of tune. The experience of pure music is one of the rarest given occasions in which we come into a vibration in tune with reality. If the human mind, integrated with nature, finds the expression of this festive fusion in the form of popular songs, or the songs of the wanderers, or the songs of spring, or the love songs that folklore preserves, and if the human mind, integrated with religiosity, finds the expression of festive fusion in the holy chants, then our mind finds the expression of its proximity to reality in pure music. Pure music is one of the rare festivities that we have left, and which preserve for us the flavor of being integrated with reality. That is why a visit to a concert is like a cathartic bath, in which we overcome the meaningless demands of the mundane and glimpse the branching of a new meaning. During these festive occasions, whose opportunities are happily growing in São Paulo, we may grasp the meaning of the over abused term: “alienated”. A retrograde and figurative realism, as was the bourgeois Realism of the 19th century – or as the *soit dissant* Socialist Realism of today is – wants to make us believe that an art alienates itself from reality when it distances itself from the mundane and profane. It wants to make us believe that the function of art within the fabric of culture, is to turn the profane problems conscious, so that we may better resolve them through our endeavors. It wants to make us believe that an art distances our interest from this profane level, is an opiate for the masses, which seeks to substitute the harsh reality for another, dreamt reality, so as to better subjugate its victims to the established order. But the experience of pure music disproves all of these statements as small talk.

It is in the festive communion with music that we heal. It is in this communion that we give blessing, for a few instants, to the madness of daily life. It is during these fleeting instants that we perceive the crazy idleness of our meaningless daily occupations and preoccupations. It is in this communion with music that we are allowed to grasp, how by contrast, this alienation is that which here is referred to as “reality”. All this running around, and the boredom that comes with it, dissolves like foam before the concrete reality that music reveals. Far from being an alienation, pure music is the very return to sanity. It is alienated only if we take for a reality the set that has been emptied of meaning, represented by machines and instruments. So much so that we will have a clear sensation of madness when music has been perverted in order to serve an endeavor that is alien to it. As an extreme example, I mention the morning gymnastics music that lead the movements of hundreds of millions of Chinese, or the “piped-in” music that regulate the rhythm of the production lines in car factories, and the hymn “Chairman Mao, oh Chairman Mao” that the Peking radio transmits.

With this observation I should start the analysis of the current music scene, as it envelops us in such a way and intensity without parallel in human history. However, I notice that the dimensions of this lecture have assumed such a large scale that I must reserve this theme for the following Thursday. I wish therefore to close today’s session with the following summary: In the origin

of our tradition, in the myths that are our foundations, music is conceived as the order of the world. It is the harmony of Pan's flute, the order of the strings of Orpheus' harp, and the song of the celestial spheres that govern the world. The world is enchanted. In the origin of Greek philosophy, this mythical wisdom finds its expression in Pythagoras and Plato, in which music and mathematics are the methods of salvation, because they lead thought towards eternal ideas. In the Biblical tradition, figurative imagination is forbidden, but the eternal manifests itself speaking, that is, musically, and it is by singing a new song of the Lord, that the psalmist praises Him. This buried knowledge rises to the surface today through the analysis of language, and through the musicalization of all the other activities of thought. In a situation where we have lost our faith in nature, and in that which transcends, it is through music that we come into contact with that which may become one day the new reality. The progress, of which we participate, and which points to a fusion between mathematics and music, and that will have as a result the overcoming of science through its transformation into abstract art, started, historically, with the Renaissance, in which non-representative music emerged. Amongst all of the happenings of our mentality, this is perhaps the gravest one and the most pregnant with consequences. I believe that a philosophy that is aware of itself must retake the thread of the argument that was left for us by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It is not by chance that in my view, the most important book of today, *Dr. Faustus* by T. Mann, has as the central figure a composer, Adrian Leverkühn, who has sold his soul to the Devil in order to compose and inverted oratorio to thus speculate on grace.

I propose, in order to avoid tedious repetitions in our discussion, that we concentrate on this aspect of music and that we leave the considerations of contemporary music for the following lecture. And I cannot avoid closing these considerations with a verse by Wackenroder:

*Entfernter noch, um mehr gesucht zu sein,
Verborg er in die Töne sich hinein;*

(Further distant, yet to be more sought,
He hid himself in the tunes;)

The sacred is, for us, hidden in pure music.