MUSIC BEFORE WORDS, WORDS AFTER BABEL

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Abstract: The sensitive relationship between speech and music raised over the time significant speculative constructions, which generated nowadays lively discussions. The present essay is highlighting the role of music in the tradition of many cultures, as Antique China, India, Greece unil the Modern Europe, together with the essential role of the word in the definition of the musical discourse. We intent also to present a short overview on the subsequent cultural gestures as quest for objectivity, issues of disjointing and system of analogies

Keywords: Words, Music, Myths, Signification, Babel Tower

Music and Words. Music and speech appear as complementary expressions as well in the ancient myth as in the actual philosophic interpretations[1]. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that the [Ancient] Greeks could sing simultaneously with speaking, "while we must choose or sing or speech"[2]. This 18th century scholar (philosopher, writer and musician)was, actually, recalling an old conception about a Golden Age, "when words and sounds were one". In the Indian mythology spoken and musical languages are two parallel and complementary aspects of the sound language[3].The ideea of sound is related to the ideea of light[4] andthe visual forms of the language are corresponding with the fire[5].

If parsing the resemblances between the cosmogonic myths, we note that in many cultures, the beginning is given by the impulse of a word (Logos, Creator, blast, and, sometimes, together with a cosmic music).From this primordial word are emerging the things of the concrete reality[6]. According to one of the old Indian myths, the world is a display of vibrant energy acting in the space-time realm, namely the ether, which is hidden from our sense organs. We can just seize the vibrations on air: that is the realm of sound.

"The sound is the closest to the Creator and is the form of His thought. [...] The sound language is twofold: if we use just the numeric rapport analogous to the geometrical rapports of *yantra* we obtain the musical language. If we use the peculiarities of our vocal organ to interrupt and to differentiate we obtain the spoken language, which allows us to shape a large variety of distinct sound symbols to represent objects, notions, and forms of our thinking. Here is the *mantra* domain"[7].

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[1]**Alexandru Boboc,***Philosophy and Music; Prolegomena to a Phenomenology of Music in the Horizon of the Philosophy of Culture*, Editura Tribuna, Cluj, 2013, pp. 88-89, note 22
[2]**Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, *Essay on the Origin of Languages* [Romanian translation] Polirom, Iași, 1999, p. 65
[3]**Alain Daniélou**, "Mantra. The Principles of Language and Music according to Hindu Cosmology" in: *Cahiers d'Ethnomusicologie* no. 4, 1991, p. 74
[4]**Octavian Nemescu**, *The Semantic Capacities of Music*, Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1983, p. 133
[5]A. **Daniélou**, "Mantra..." p. 70
[6]*Ibidem*, p.130
[7] **A. Daniélou**, "Mantra..." pp. 71-72

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The musical tradition in Japan is based on a very strong link between word and sound. From the earliest stages of Japanese history, poetry and song have been very important and the distinction between the two is not clear. The word "*uta*" [歌] can mean either "song" or "poem." In this folklore, poetry is almost always imagined as being recited aloud. Any major prose-poem contains poetic and musical insertions and even instrumental accompaniment. Also the *Noh* Theater was built by complex forms of associated arts.

Music beyond words. An important number of magic rituals tried to restore the primordial mystic unity by finding the music beyond words.It seems strange to follow the old history of this requirement, keeping into account that the even oldest mythologies regarding music are assimilating it as the "paradisiacal language" precisely for its fluency and ambiguity, preceding the "split", imperfect verbal language[8]. According to several mythologies (Indian, Arabic, Chinese…), the division of the language in syllables was seen as sign of the loss of the heavenly unity. To recover the paradisiacal state, the mankind should restore the initial unity only by music[9]. Hence, this role of music was perpetuated during the century in the medical practice until the late Middle Age in Europe anduntil today, in some traditional oriental medicine's rituals.

In numerous mythologies music precedes speech and the incursions in the other realm are mediated by birds or celestial musicians[10]. The escape from the feeling of collapse caused by the inexorable flow of time has generated the musical forms and events. In a lot of mythologies we are told that singing preceded speaking, the language of the original paradise was sung and the initiatory forays into other realms were intermediated by birds.

In the Hindu mythology, the primordial vibration is given by the relation between the Almighty Creator of the world and the voice of Atman, creator of hymns. The creative language is embodied by the *AUM* sylable, carried by a bird-messenger,having the sound *A* on his right wing, the sound *U* on the left. The blast of Atman is *M*[11]. So, the magic rituals and the main incantation aim the recovery of the primordial music. This music is symbolized by the tenebrous eternal waters (the obscurity of the inconscient life) and the light of the first cosmic day (the clarty of intellectual representations). The human replica of the transcendental music is based on mimicry and symbolic shaping according to a cultural convention. The musical evolution comes from the recovery of an exemplary gesture until the semantic capacity of the human behaviours and sentiments[12]. René Guénon stated that "the primordial language had to be subtly related to music, because the omnipresence of music in all the sacred rituals, but also because the winged representations of the Divine messengers[13]".

The role of the birds in the myths of creation is spread all over the world. Thereby, the raven is the trigger for the Mexican sorcerer's transfiguration, the Magisterial Bird helps the Prince Charming in numerous Romanian fairy tales, in a Bornean creation myth the Ara and Irik birds created the sky and the earth from their eggs, a golden-winged eagle was said to have put the first Mongol Emperor on his throne etc. etc. We can add the Indian *kinnaras*, represented somtimes as half human half bird, or the anthropomorphic Angels in the Christian mithology,

[8]**René Guénon**, *Symbols of the Sacred Science* [Romanian translation] Humanitas, Bucharest, 1997, p. 31
[9]*Ibidem* p. 58
[10] See also the initiatory reports of Carlos Castañeda: *The Teachings of Don Juan; A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* (1972) etc.
[11]**O. Nemescu**, *The Semantic*... p. 133
[12]*Ibidem*, p. 146
[13]**R. Guénon**, Symbols… p. 59

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having wings and singing. Yet the essential quality of those winged creatures, which are playing the role of messenger between real and transcendental worlds is, in addition to fly, the singing.

Nevertheless, the cultural histories include also the opposite temptation: to clarify the musical message and to disclose the special word(s) able to contain at least a part of the magic nebula, aiming to make of it a tool for domestic purposes. In ancient times, such action was rather prohibited, and anyway, it was the attribute of a few chosen. Generally, the watchword was "no name". The nominalization (especially if unauthorized) entailed punishment, not just for a person, but for an entire community. The Almighty Yahweh had no name during the Kingdom of Israel (the finding of His names was the preoccupation of the kabalistic scholars only in the late Middle Age), the fairies in the Romanian mythology were called "them" or "Miraculous ladies" (Măiastrele) etc. One can find similar taboos concerning limitation of the words in almost all the cultures[14].

Languages in the Holy Scripture: Pentecost vs. Babel. The segregation of the primordial language's unityin words and music is followed in several mythologies by the separation of the languages. This is generally seen as a punishment; a deepening of the distance from the paradisiacal language. The Holy Scriptureis mentioning in two different ways the problem of multilinguism, more exactly the difficulties in the human's communication.

The first chapter of the Bible, the Genesis, ends with the chapter Babel Tower (11: 9) which explains the spreading of humans throughout the earth and the linguistic diversity. It certifies a last decay of the humankind that started with the original sin. The Babel tower was a huge tower meant to be the main achievement of the Babilu town (another name for Babylon), the first town built after the deluge. In that place, all the people spoke a same language. They have proposed to endow their city with a tower "that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves". Yahweh punished their presumption by confusing their languages; so the building remains unfinished and the people were scattered over the face of the whole earth. The text offers also a popular etymology linking the name Babel to the Hebrew verb for "to melt". "That is why it was called Babel —because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world". This myth can be found in other cultures too, but is the unique referring in the Hebrew culture to the loss of an initial unity, namely the linguistic diversity followed by dispersion, seen as a punishment for haughtiness.

It might seem strange why the Almighty choose such an indirect way to prevent the construction, instead of a direct interdiction, or by provoking a calamity able to demolish the tower. This deviance, pointing out that God acts through the human mind is revealing in a subtle manner the conception of the Ancient Hebrews regarding the man's potential to choose and to consciously act according to the freewill.

The New Testament presents an alternative interpretation of multi-linguistics in the Apostles Acts 2:11. Here the understanding of more languages is a miraculous gift, ascertained by the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the

[14] Rules even more severe are concerning the written word, and the Sacred Books. We treated the subject in more detail in our book: *Entchantment/Dischantment; An essay on the perception of music and magic in the social imaginary*, Ed. Libra, Bucharest, 2004

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Spirit enabled them. [...] We hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God".

The misunderstanding of the other's tongue is remedied through the Divine intervention too, but here the gift is limited to some few worthy men. So, not everyone is gifted with the ability to understand foreign languages, out of Divine blessing. A possible interpretation of the miracle of Pentecost is that what God separated, the humans could recover,assuming to follow a proper way. The Evangelical reconciliation through Christ covers symbolically the linguistic reunification, intermediated by the Holy Spirit.

Words beyond music.The problem of the relationship between the spoken and the musical discourse began in the 19th century, when the thinking about music was divided in two antagonist conceptions. The first was advocated by the musicologist Eduard Hanslick, who stated that music cannot be "translated" or "explained" by words and that the proper basis for an aesthetics of music are just "the sonically moving forms"[15]. The opposite conception, denying the autonomy of music from the poetic expression was much more widespread, involving rather men of letters, but also musicians, like Richard Wagner. A survey in 1918 addressed to an important number of musicians from France, Germany and Great Britain is illustrative for this dichotomy: half of them believed that music is better received if accompanied by an extra-musical message and for the other half "music is just music"[16]. Nicolai Hartmann identifies two levels: the external strata of music, containing structural and associative elements, which put the receiver in a state of objective (intellectual) contemplation and the internal, less differentiated, addressed to the man in his completeness[17]. This twofold conception was anticipated in the Greek Antiquity, byAristoxenus of Tarentum (375-335 BC) who opposed the existence in music (where music acts on human sensibility and intelect) to the existence outside the music(under the incidence of inexorable, physical and numerical laws, following Phytagoras' conception[18]).

Lately, the idea of the detachment of music from its (added) verbal support seems to gain ground, especially because of the neurosciences' recent evolution, which allows seizing important differences between the two languages at the level of the human brain'sphysiology. However, the musical discourse appears to be closely linked to a verbal support, which puts its seal on the average of the theoretical approaches; not to mention the incidence of the verbal metaphor for most of the circumstances dealing with communication. Actually, the metaphor remains the basic mean to transmit an emotion or an idea carried by music. We remember the outstanding passage of Romain Rolland's Jean Christophe, where a Beethoven symphony is described in two ways: by the (imaginary?) game of drops attributed to Hanslick and by the metaphorical overflow endorsed to Wagner. It proved to be undoubtedly that the slopes, rocks or eagles from Wagner's description were more suggestive for reconstituting the piece, even if none of these terms have anything to do with music. Indeed, a metaphor might not be useful for a precise understanding of a musical text, but appears to be hard to replace when it comes to comprehend a musical message.

The quest for objectivity – a desired *terra firma* in the ambiguity of the musical flow – is long-lasting and built noticeable philosophical systems, which started from music; the most linking it with astrology, theology or medicine. Thus the aspiration for unity (met mainly in the

[15]**Eduard Hanslick'** influential work *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*On the Beautiful in Music*) 1854 is considered to be the beginning of the modern musical criticism

[16]**Robert Francès**, *La perception de la musique* (*Perception of Music*), Vrin, Paris, 1958, p. 253

[17]**Nicolai Hartmann**, *Aesthetics*, Ed. Univers Bucharest, 1974, p. 226

[18] **Gheorghe Firca**: *Structures and functions in the Modal Harmony* Ed. Muzicală, Bucharest, 1988, pp. 29-30.

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practical side of rituals) was doubled by theoreticians' endeavour to find attributes for objectivity in any particle the music could be splinted, in order to frame these in a coherent system of correspondences. This particular aspiration for objectivity appears to be aroused by any music, from everywhere, beyond the peculiar cultural structures that separate Asia from Europe and Antiquity from Modern times.The attempts to think music in linguistic terms give just partial results. Likewise, the splitting of the sound discourse might explain, without recovering the musical unity. The paradox of music is that even if we have to resort to division, on analytical and pedagogical purposes, and also even if we have to resort to words, on communicational purpose, music cannot be reduced at any of these procedures. Lately, high technology studies do no more than repeating in more sophisticated manner the old mechanisms of reduction. The question is whether someone who masters a number of the old or the new adjuvant fields, meaning Semiology, Cognitive technologies, Psychology, Studies of forms etc. is able to better understand music, or someone who have the intuition of the musical development could easier acquire in a creative manner the above-mentioned disciplines.

Deconstruction of music. Inaccuracies and exaggerations begin when we forget that the semantic translation of music remains just a cultural construction, even if this psychological mechanism is deeply rooted in the human mind. If comparing music with a building, the details as:bricks, chemical formula of the cement or weight of the lumber etc. could never represent by themselvesa whole construction, or those subsequent elements, which are pending on temporality. Likewise, remaining in the field of analogies, a sentence is always more than the totality of letters used for.

The musical cultures of the mankind, reaching a degree of complexity had a peculiarity that unifies them beyond historical or geographical distance, namely the temptation to decompose music in subcomponents and to find specific signification for. This binds and closes the Chinese Antique civilization to the Greek's or even to the European Modernity. Numerous theoretical approaches, no matter the cultural sphere they are coming from, have the tendency to disjoint elements from the musical flow, trying to create meaning unities in relation with a superior sphere. From the oldest times, different musical cultures developed quantifiable pillars: taxonomies, symbols, or numbers not just for an objective framework, but more to establish rules concerning a "proper use"; keeping into account that the musical achievement was assessed according to associated correspondences. The imperative for a rigorous correspondence was more influential for music than for any other art. The thinking about music has always been enticed by concern for objectivity, rigour and for a direct connection to a category considered to be superior (be it religion, mathematics, and, more recently, poetics, neurology, psychology etc.). "The universality of music is not an empty abstraction; sounds as well as numbers or geometrical figures are not 'abstract', but always determined and intuitively accessible[19]".

The Antique civilizations conferred to music special power and have built athorough system of significations. The most of the reports about music from old times tell us very little about intrinsic musical rules; instead we find a lot of testimonies, recommendations etc. referring to frames, significations and timing. Even the use of instruments or the choice of tunes was supposed to be related to a mystical reason. The decomposition of music did not consider the musical compounds, but their analogical projection, which reached, in the case of the Antique Chine, until the mere sound. The Chinese used a complex and sophisticated system to build analogies between sounds and states, moods, animals, human activity – all these being, in turn,

[19] **J.-J. Rousseau**, *Essay on the Origin*... p. 67

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symbols of a mythical sphere. The signification's system for the Indians takes into conisderation not sounds but the rapports between them. The Arabs give signification to musical scales, *maquam* (system of melodic modes). At the first epoch of Islam, music was prohibited, being seen as a frivole activity. Only later the scale combinations could give evidence of the seriousness of the domain, and the *maquams* were finaly admited[20]. Finally, the Western [Europeans] are relating music to the natural resonance. The signification is no more magic but emotional and engendered in combinations and sounds relations. The link to the sound's natural resonance might explain the fact that a lot of foreign cultures, in spite of their traditional different way to make music, have had an unexpected permeability to the European music.

The musical morphemes (smallest sense unities) are a matter of cultural code. They are more ambiguous, more fluent, interchangeable and much more recent in the mankind history than the literal conventions that gave birth to words. Thus, no wonder that the analogies between tunes and verbal phrases are rarely self-evident in absence of a professional guidance. Even when a long-lasting social practice ended to tie in same semantic sphere music and speech, the possible analogies cannot be found at lower levels too. According to Nicolai Hartmann's first level of reality, namely the law of recurrence: "Lower categories recur in the higher levels as a sub-aspect of higher categories, but never vice versa" we note that the sounds can be seen as part of a superior level, but this later cannot be reconstructed just from the sum of sounds. Morphemes can be divided into phonemes but the process is not reversible.

The implicit discourse.In spite of these incongruities, even the most abstract musical system, specifically the Western European, has had, throughout its history, the temptation for a direct relation with the speech. It bears witness the numerous rhetorical formulas, coming from the depths of the Middle Ages, which assigned a precise meaning to some melodic embodiments, intervallic relations, directions of movement, solving of tensions, consonant-dissonant ratio etc. The musicians of the Baroque (~1600-1750) struggled hard to confer to the musical discourse the clarity of the speech. They encountered a number of obstacles, coming from the difference between the rules for drawing up a phrase, or because the instability of the musical signification system. Another major difference that singularizes music is given by the unity between musical act and musical object; a difference hardly comparable with the interdependency between language and speeking, highlighted by the first semioticians[21]. The tendency to increase the role of the words, to name and to explain occurred in the Modern times, together with the first thrill of thought regarding the autonomy of various cultures[22].In Antique China, the writings referring to music (*Yo-Ki*) are stating that „If you want to be educated, you have to earnestly learn music. The capital argument was: Music expressed the union between heaven and earth. With the musical rituals, nothing is too difficult in the Empire"[23]. In the *Yo-Ki* Book, seemingly written in the 2nd century BC, all the social, political and psychological aspects of the society got a musical correspondence at the level of sub-compounds, namely instruments, sounds, melodies, verses etc.Healingpractices or rituals for changing fate, embedded in black or white magic are still containing the remainders of a worldless cultural time, wherein sounds, postures or gestures replaced the words.

[20]**Octavian Nemescu**, *The Semantic …* , p. 171
[21]**Al. Boboc**, *Philosophy and Music*…, p. 49
[22]**Tudor Vianu,** *Philosophy and Poetry*, quoted in **Al. Boboc**, *Ibidem*, p. 26
[23]**Alain Daniélou**: *Traité de musicology comparée*, (*Treaty of comparative musicology*) Hermann, Paris 1959, p. 71

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Music ispar excellence a moderator between the layers of the mankind memory. It opens communication gates that unify the remotest forms of spiritual display, even when one cannot perceive a concrete relation with image or word. For instance, music can induce a religious feeling without containing specific words, quotes or already consecrated motives.

The analysis of a non-linguistic discourse has a superior degree of relevancy if we can avoid the confusion betwenn the analysed phenomenon and the associated discourse about it, no matter how intersting might appear the susbsequent imaginary or structural canavas.We can perceive the old energetic layer – the force which generated forms – between the interstices of the spoken language, or beneath the forms, which are defining the civilizations from a visual standpoint. This layer linked to the primordial energetic and emotional tension might recover its place in the symbolic conscience of the humans.

As for the relationship between music and word, even if it is a matter of cultural convention, which might disfavour the perception of the real phenomena, it succeedded to raise, over the centuries a splendid poetical realm, that we are not yet willing to leave.

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