

music in metamorphosis
evolution / involution / or transformation?

“The world we live in is not only changing, it is in the middle of a real metamorphosis. [...] Change means that some conditions vary whereas some others remain the same. [...] On the contrary a metamorphosis implies a much more radical transformation in which the old certainties of modern society fail in favour of something which is totally new. To embrace this metamorphosis of the world it is necessary to investigate the new beginnings, gaze at what is emerging from the old, try to glimpse in the present turmoil future structures and criteria.”

– Ulrich Beck, The Metamorphosis of the World

“While modal music had endured for ten centuries, tonal music resisted for three or four centuries, twelve-tone serial music lasted not more than sixty years, repetitive music roughly for a decade and aleatoric music for a few years, months or days. Yet one of these musics of the Twentieth Century must probably be considered as differently oriented in time: electronic music. The main invention of the century may have been the one which has kept composers abreast of its growth. There have been specialists [...] but all composers have been influenced by electronic music, many of them even before it was born, even those who apparently have never made it.”

– Olivier Messiaen in an interview for France 3, 1988

When I first read these two quotes from the great German sociologist and the French Master of the last century, I was initially quite honestly surprised. The second reading disturbed me, but the third really impressed me. Together with other inquiries and experiences, these two quotes prompted me to deepen my research into identifying “future structures and criteria” (U. Beck) for the imminent metamorphosis of the acoustic arts.

Evolution

Staying within the scope of change, Messiaen is somehow predicting the time amidst the two millennia, i.e. the specific legacies of linguistic crises that have brought out various

reactions in cultural producers and creators of the Twentieth Century. Skipping the many details that may be inappropriate here, three macro modes may define them:

1_the attempt to restore the best of the past, including what we still call contemporary music or, unable to find a minimally decent name, contemporary classical music, something of an oxymoron, since the classical is generally dead and the contemporary hopefully alive.

2_the excess of slang specializations or “linguistic islands shut in a specific idiom which, far from being used as shared knowledge, is used as a form of power” according to the art critic Gillo Dorfles referring to visual arts.

3_the art of quotation and that of copy-and-paste made simple by any technology since the advent of smartphones. So far we are still in an evolutionary context that we can more or less recognize and manage, nevertheless the metamorphosis mentioned by Beck is, at least from my point of view, potentially threatening.

Involution

The involution I fear does not deal with aesthetics or with the effects of new sounds or of musical instruments, audiovisuals and practice...: each music, gesture or idea that is able to create relations among human beings has, I hope for everyone, full legitimacy. The involution I feel as a threat at the beginning of this millennium is the absence of “the other” as an interlocutor. Authors write less and less to achieve a dialectical relationship and compose (actually delegating writing to an algorithm) more to enhance their own status and representation. As a paradox, these “musics” become a background unto themselves, serving their own solitude and trading dialectics for anesthesia. Much of this music I think can be called *temporary* music rather than *contemporary*. By *temporary* music I mean any music that does not leave a trace because it is useful only in its various functions as a product of consumption: from the refrains of TikTok to the output of an AI music generator, as so on. All of which feeds a market, but can the progress that the human being contemplates as a consumer really be called *progress*? Will we, as musicians,

instrumentalists, composers, etc., be able to flesh out the sense of that which at present we are *miming* in order to conceal ourselves?

Crisis or Crasis?

To my knowledge -I am not a musicologist so I could have missed something- we do not yet have a musicological account of the first part of the millennium from a musical standpoint. Musicology, at least in Italy, is still stuck in the Twentieth Century. And this is understandable because we find ourselves not so much facing *musical variations* but rather something that seems, and perhaps truly is, more of a paradigm shift.

To attempt a sort of micro-reflection on the turbulent musical metamorphoses that have gripped the first decades of the millennium I have no choice but to utilize a *classical* trope of the previous millennium: the metaphor.

To this end I am reminded of Bauman's famous metaphor of the liquid society which, in one way or another, might be familiar to most of us. But allow me to explain. The logic is that the *liquid* society, so as not to *evaporate*, inevitably needs a solid *foundation* on which to rest. And so, is it not that perhaps, on the surface of the rippling water this *temporary* music *floats*, and beneath the waves the Twentieth Century *flails*? In certain respects, I have the sense that this is so, even if I do not believe in a clean break between the "old" Twentieth Century and the "young" millennium, no matter how much this might be broadcasted as the battle cry of the battalion of the latest technologies.

Staying in metaphor, the Twentieth Century, compared with the digital/musical world, seems nevertheless to move, even if in apnea, like a frightened and curious relic. At the same time, there, *beneath the water*, all the contradictions and "certainties" consolidated by the great musical Institutions begin to move timidly, attempting to intersect, allying themselves and mixing with one another. Liberating themselves auspiciously from the conventions and convictions that everything we once called *music* can *only* be, above all, an acoustic process regulated by past centuries.

This timid and curious evolution brings with it many extremely significant novelties like, for example, the trafficking on behalf of new generations of *creatives*, and not only, of the immense audiovisual library of YouTube with the purpose of reinventing and embracing new and original acoustic and visual forms. Paradoxically, thanks to the digital. To me, the invalidating and still fragile points of this period are not the “new” *forms* such as for example, the products, often audiovisual NFTs that are, after all, right in line with the old-school *Son et lumière* tradition, but rather the questions “why?” and “for whom?” do we produce this music and/or these audiovisual experiences. These two questions are the loading-bearing beam of what we call *art*, as in the other disciplines, the visual arts and so on. In past centuries they were the foundational questions that probed the relations between human beings. How and in what way can we safeguard and implement the humanistic aspect of this *new* millennium if not by means of the *synesthesia* of the arts finally possible thanks, paradoxically, to advancements in digital technology?

“The art, that begins to doubt its task and ceases to be ‘inséparable de l’utilité’ (inseparable from utility), must make the new its supreme value.”

– *Walter Benjamin, Angelus Novus*

Transdisciplinary

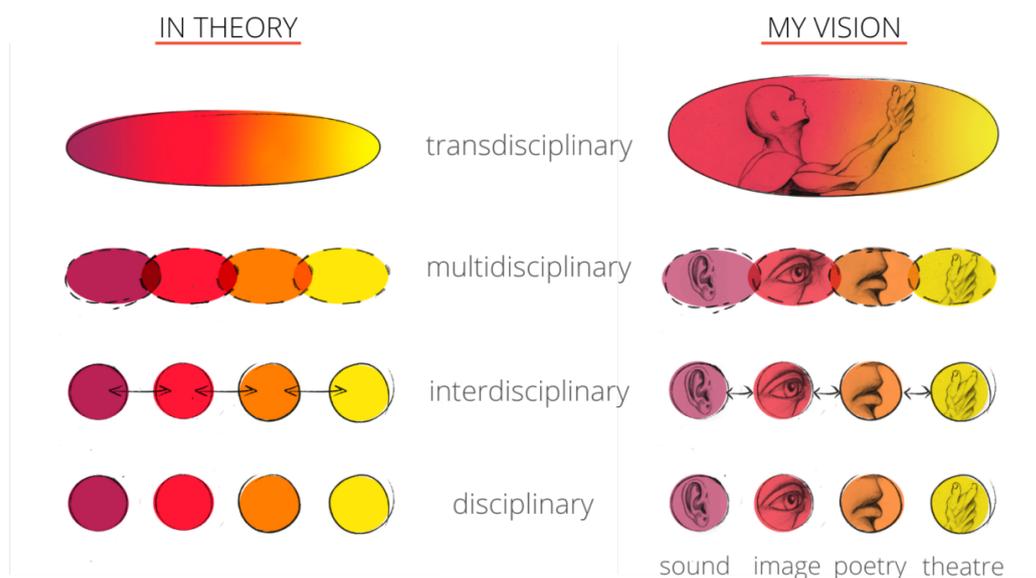
“Do not build on the good old days, but the bad new ones.”

– *Bertolt Brecht*

Synesthesia or no synesthesia is not, in any case, the question. The question, from my point of view, as a composer working alone or in collaboration, is to decide whether to use a given sound and/or video, installation... completely free from constraints, only seeking to attain clarity on these two points: why? and for whom? We are so invaded by *temporary* music and *saturated* images that if we do not structure our work in an artisanal and artistic way based on these two points then we will achieve, even if it is against our intentions, a merely *routine* effect. In short, if I have something sincere to say I will find the modality (style?) to say it. If I have nothing to say... no *style* will protect me.

With respect to this dominant and purely *market*-driven logic applied to the arts I have always felt inadequate. For this reason, as a composer, I have examined in depth the theater. The theater is a unique artistic discipline whose existence, beyond any distinction of genre, presupposes a *generous* act. The theater can exist only if there are at least two people who decide to engage one another. Only the theater now has managed to salvage its reputation better than music but, with respect to music, it has the requirement of the *other*. For this peculiarity and for its *transdisciplinary* characteristics, it is my belief that the theatrical arts can be an extraordinary tool for attempting to abandon the typical solipsism of our historical period, with its emphasis on *social* media despite not being very social. Artistic giants of the twentieth century, like Pina Bausch and Mauricio Kagel, have demonstrated this extraordinary possibility and function of the theater.

The *Teatro del Suono* (Theater of Sound), that I founded in 1996 thanks to a propitious encounter with the poet and writer Edoardo Sanguineti (1930-2010), who had already supplied texts for Luciano Berio and Luca Ronconi (working in music and theater), adheres to many of these reflections. So, in short, when someone asks me: Do you do theater? I respond: No, I am a composer. And when someone asks me: Are you a composer? I respond: Yes, I do theater.



Theme of the Next Project

Pop_Detox

Essay for sounds, music, visions, alto, actress and words

Pop_Detox is a project that begins here at the Italian Academy but that originated toward the end of the lockdown in Venice last year. The island of Giudecca, where I live, is still a kind of *village*. By village I mean a place where people leave their homes, not just to get groceries and go to work, but to converse with others, to chat about everything, often for hours at a time, on any subject, from politics to food for their beloved dogs. Now I do not know why, perhaps because I enjoy listening more than speaking, many people come to me to tell their stories.

Suspended Youth

Immediately after the lockdown I had the pleasure of meeting, casually on the street, several mothers who told me about the challenges their children faced as a result of having their adolescence interrupted by Covid. These kids were locked up in front of a screen. At the end of this cloistering imposed on the prime of their youthful vitality it seems that two dominant yet opposed reactions emerge along with third that is more niche in nature:

1_a sort of syndrome that does not allow them to leave the house due to various fears among which include the fear of losing contact with their beloved screens.

2_a disavowal of every type of “digital” media except for the smartphone.

3_an intermediate segment who does their own soul-searching without drawing on any devices at all.

Obviously, this data is by no means scientific. First and foremost because I am not a sociologist and, moreover, because it is based on the accounts of fewer than ten people.

From my viewpoint these encounters provide a rich source from which to spin out, in a *transdisciplinary* way, a story that is timely and necessary, as far as I am concerned.

Pop_Detox is born of these stories and reflections and of the desire to construct a sort of *essay* turned on its head. Namely, by means of a multi-faceted writing style, incorporating sounds, music, visual arts, etc., in which the function of the word is utilized, not as a protagonist, but as the thread holding the narration together... in any case the project has only just begun.

Music in Metamorphosis

Radio italiana - Rai 3 / 2017

Excerpts from Radio Interviews

What follows is a series of micro-fragments transcribed from “Musica in Metamorfosi,” a radio program in 12 episodes that I created for the Rai/Radio 3 in 2017. They consist of conversations with some of the most important Italian composers.

Episode_01

Giacomo Manzoni, composer.

The grand *decon* of Italian music.

Andrea Liberovici: Good evening, my name is Andrea Liberovici and I am a composer and theater director. So, when someone asks me — do you do theater? — I respond — no, I am a composer — and when someone asks me — are you a composer? — I say — yes, I do theater. I generally use this slightly cryptic play on words to extract myself, ideally, from this proliferation of musical genres. Not to come off as eccentric at all costs, but just because I know that, if I don't have anything to say musically, no genre will save me. [...] In any case, the catalogue, to date, is this: 503... yes, 503 different musical genres. I have been counting them one by one, with a couple of friends of mine who are completely crazy, and the count continues, so this is not a definitive number. It is only the

beginning of a journey. [...] Are these five hundred plus musical genres a sign of a fertile and fully formed democracy, or the symbol of a metamorphosis in the making? I think that within this plurality of musical styles, genres and so on, deeper and more radical mutations are at work, a series of actual metamorphoses of the acoustic arts. [...] As we know when one speaks of a metamorphosis, one speaks not of a mere change of form, but of an actual transformation of the object in question that, allow me the expression, contemplates inevitably an attempted annihilation of its original identity in order to produce a new one. Let's take a well-known example, Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning to find he has turned into an enormous insect. He continues, nevertheless, to be Gregor Samsa, but with another body, and most of all with another voice. But before embarking on this rather dicey hypothesis, I think it is important to try to understand, as much as possible, and it is by no means easy, where we are musically speaking. [...]

Giacomo Manzoni: I don't think there is a development of cerebral capacities, either in terms of imagination or invention with respect to where we were a hundred or five hundred years ago. They appear in different guises, and so you have to understand which is the correct one, the most just, the one least tied to belief systems, to traditions that they have nourished, but on the basis of which you have to be able to transcend. But the capacity for invention I think remains what it always has been and thus it is also for this reason that I am rather optimistic, because so long as we do not stamp out these capacities for thought and imagination in humankind everything is going to be ok, despite everything.

Episode_07

Fabio Vacchi, composer.

A.L.: [...] The tally of musical genres last week stopped at 2,402 distinct genres including Folk Metal, Rockabilly, Celtic Metal, Christian Metal, Progressive Rock, Unblack Metal, Oriental Metal, Vedick Metal, Vicking Metal, Hard Rock, Gothic Metal, Avantgarde Rock, Symphonic Rock, Heart Metal, Progressive Italian Rock...

Fabio Vacchi: The market is certainly a big problem, an immense market, omnivorous, a market truly in crisis, because for some time now the CD, which seemed like the great

discovery of the last century, in the music industry, has been in a serious crisis. [...] This is an enormous problem. Then take the proliferation of genres, trends and fashions, because often they are fads that at times are drawn up by a marketing committee, born of market research. On the other hand, then you have the solipsism, the self-referentiality of many artists. I remember that in some years it was as if every piece had to coin a language, forge it, then wipe it out, because the next piece had to be in another language. As a result you negated the meaning of the term language that presupposes a transmission of information, because if a language does not belong to a group it can't be considered a language.

Episode_04

Mauro Lanza, composer.

A.L.: Among these two-thousand-plus musical genres, who are the *saturists*, what do they want, what do the *saturists* have to teach us?

Mauro Lanza: There exist a whole series of eco-systems, but it is not that they are directly tied to aesthetic experiences, that is, someone played on the fact of creating a brand from what they were doing, like the example you just noted of saturation. That is the will manifested by three people who got together and made a brand out of what they were doing. In a way, the fact of branding certain tendencies was not merely a commercial gesture, it was a formalization of this thing, that is, the *saturists*, created that kind of aesthetic, or they borrowed it from another world, because in the world of writing that type of aesthetic was unknown, meanwhile in the world of improvisation yes. [...] We are crossing over into an epoch of great rationalization, that is, everything is going to be pigeonholed in some very precise pigeonholes. If you ask me, it is also a purely technical fact and this is the superpower of the idea of keywords, that you see everywhere. You write an essay and have to attach a few keywords. You post on Facebook and you have to add your hashtags that act as keywords. It is a purely technical fact because it is easy for a machine to search keywords. This has amounted to a nearly anthropological change. What could seem an ossification, in some way, a pigeonholing in so many pigeonholes, since the pigeonholes are endlessly multiplying, the phenomenon is no longer like that. [...]

Probably in a world that is headed toward high fidelity, artists are all going toward low fidelity, because low fidelity is more interesting.

Episode_11

Nuria Schoenberg Nono and Serena Nono

A.L.: As we listen to Arnold Schönberg's *The Hand of Fate* (*Die glückliche hand*), I will read another brief excerpt from the Breslau conference on the opera, which I think should further clarify similar possibilities for profound relationships between diverse materials, as Schönberg called them. Sound, light, color always present simultaneously within the action in the scene.

For some time I have envisioned a form that I maintained was really was the only one with which a musician can express himself in the theater. I delineated it as "making music with the means of the stage." The sounds, to observe them with clarity and impartiality, are nothing more than a particular type of vibrations of the air and as such they strike the interested sensorial organ, namely the ear. Linking them together however in a particular way, they evoke certain artistic and, if I may, even spiritual sensations. Now, since this capacity is not at all innate to individual sounds in and of themselves, we should also be able, under some conditions, to provoke such effects with some other material. You would have to treat this material like sounds, succeed, by negating their meaning as material, in melding them into forms and figurations, regardless of any meaning, after measuring them as one might with sounds according to duration, height, breadth, intensity and many other parameters.

Serena Nono: It is in this letter to Kandinskij that he compares, precisely, their work for the theater: *The Yellow Sound* (*Der gelbe Klang*) and *The Hand of Fate*.

But as I said, Der gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound) pleases me extraordinarily. It is exactly the same as what I have striven for in my Glückliche Hand (The Hand of Fate), only you go still further than I in the renunciation of any conscious thought, any conventional plot. That is naturally a great advantage. We must become conscious that there are puzzles around

us. And we must find the courage to look these puzzles in the eye without timidly asking about 'the solution.' It is important that our creation of such puzzles mirror the puzzles with which we are surrounded, so that our soul may endeavor — not to solve them — but to decipher them. What we gain thereby should not be the solution, but a new method of coding or decoding. The material, worthless in itself, serves in the creation of new puzzles. For the puzzles are an image of the ungraspable. And imperfect, that is, a human image.¹

[...]

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: Another aspect that intrigues me immensely is the figure of Alma Mahler, whom I knew very well and who died after I had already married, so I still heard from her in the 1950s. I am convinced that she was a loyal friend who only wanted to do good by my father, and it is of little consequence to me if this then caused a rift between my father and Kandinskij. Neither of them suffered from loneliness. When they were young, it was a very useful skill for both of them, both spiritually and conceptually, to think in similar ways, about certain things and about creating things the way they wanted them. Later they didn't need each other.

Andrea Lliberovici

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¹ Arnold Schönberg and Vasilij Kandinskij, *Letters, Pictures and Documents*, ed. Jelena Hahl-Koch, translated by John C. Crawford, Boston: Faber & Faber, 1984, p. 54.