*Idea-Text-Performance
Can this triad still be
considered a valid
foundation for music?*

Fabrizio Della Seta

Abstract

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The question whether the triad of the title can still be conside-red a valid foundation of a discourse on music implies as broad a concept of music as possible, pertaining to musicology in the mo-st comprehensive sense of the term. I am not a scholar of ethnomu-sicology, of popular music, nor of music theory; my standpoint is bound to be that of a historian who studies European art music, using first and foremost the tools of philology, and hence within a written tradi-tion. I am aware that this heritage and these tools by no means cover the whole gamut of music; indeed they account for a minimal part, the tip of the iceberg or an island floating in the ocean, to use an image dear to the heart of my professor Nino Pirrotta, who devoted much of his time and energy to what he once called the "absent muse", unw-ritten music [Pirrotta 1992, 717-724]. I have devoted my own philologi-cal endeavours above all to opera, and this has heightened my aware-ness, for in combining the two supreme performing arts, music and dra-ma, which occur mainly as Event, the difficulties of conceptualising them in terms of Work and Text are made all the greater.

Having made this premise, my instinctive answer to the initial que-stion is to say: Yes, that triad can still be a valid foundation for music, as long as we spell out both what we mean by the three terms and also how they inter-relate. Before doing so, however, we should pau-

se for a moment on the expression "for music". If we mean "for the existence of music as a form of expression", the answer could be partially in the negative, whereas if we mean "for an approach to music", it is bound to be in the affirmative.

In the first place the triad Idea-Text-Performance (or ITP as I shall say from now on) requires a historical evaluation. The image it conjures up is that of a composer (Beethoven, Brahms, Schoenberg) who conceives a musical Idea (a motive, a *Grundgestalt*, a formal concept) and elaborates it in his mind, at the piano or on paper, until he is satisfied with a representation of it in a definitive Text, the score. The score then serves as a model on one hand for Performance and on the other for Analysis, which are two realizations of the Idea, but in different ways and for different ends.

However, not only is this conceptual framework clearly not valid for all the innumerable experiences which we label as "music", but it is not wholly valid even for the limited segment for which it has been posited, the classic and romantic repertoire. Maybe it does hold good for the symphony, sonata and quartet, but already less so for the solo concerto, even one by Mozart or Beethoven; it is valid for the Bach of *The Art of Fugue*, but less so for his works for keyboard; it is problematic for the activity of such composer-performers as Frescobaldi, Vivaldi, Paganini, Chopin and Liszt; and as I have already said, it is not valid for musical theatre.

I shall now examine the three terms of the triad separately.

Idea obviously evokes Schoenberg and his coupling of Idea and Presentation [Schoenberg 1995]. The Presentation is not the written Text but rather the setting out of the Idea in expanded structures regulated by the principles of form. We can perhaps view this relationship in the terms used by Schenker: the *Ursatz* could be conceived as the germinal Idea (not individual and unrepeatable, but universal and normative), which is made explicit, by means of the technique of counterpoint, in the different layers of presentation (and this is where individual creativity comes into play). Both schools of thought, while having substantial differences, refer to the tradition of organicism promoted by Goethe and the Romantic movement. And both start out from the experience of art music in the classical and romantic tradition.

But is it possible, and helpful, to maintain the notion of Idea in a completely different intellectual context? And above all, is it possible to apply it to musical experiences which do not correspond to the repertoire for which it was conceived? I believe it is, as long as it is not interpreted in a restrictive fashion, as the product of an intentional act of creation (if indeed such an act can be said to exist in absolute terms, which I very much doubt). By Idea I mean any model that serves in the production of a musical Event, whether it is individual and innovative or collective and traditional. Patterns of this kind are present in any sort of musical production and in any context, and their incidence can range from minimal to maximal.

Any form of musical production, even the most immediate and least "reflective", implies a common heritage of conventions, habits and strategies stored, in a more or less conscious manner, in the memory of the music maker (I deliberately avoid distinguishing between "composer" and "performer"). Even the "purest" form of improvisation, should this exist, implies certain behavioural norms or customs. The various forms of extemporary musical activity that involve realising patterns also imply norms, such as the Indian raga, the Arab *maqam*, the *aeri* in Renaissance music, the various traditions of variations on a ground, keyboard improvisation in the 17th and 18th centuries, and collective improvisation on the melodic and harmonic formulae in jazz. Leo Treitler maintained that the exclusively oral transmission of liturgical chant until the 9th century, both before neumes were introduced and also subsequently, relied not on the melodies being memorised in every detail but on a process of 'composition' which was renewed at each performance [Treitler 1993]. The singer had two fundamental resources to help him in this compositional technique: the intoning formulae that were specific to each modal type, and the strategies for elaborating variations on them. At the opposite extreme, the performances of the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza, created in 1964, were based, at least at a certain stage of its history, on the «adoption of patterns of behaviour to be used as preliminary in the compositional elaboration» [Tortora 1990, 141]. In these and many other cases I think we can speak of the ensuing musical Event as the realization of an Idea which can be described conventionally as "compositional", but which certainly cannot be seen as the outcome of the sort of

spontaneous, individual creation we generally associate with Mozart and Beethoven. In their music the semiconscious, collective and conventional components of music-making obviously play their part. While conversely, an aspect of subjective creativity seems to me implicit even in the most traditional musical cultures and experiences.

We tend to consider the **Text** as something which, when it exists, is the basis for the musical Event itself. However no one will dispute the statement that, while very little music is actually based on a written Text, there is no musical Event which, in principle, cannot become a text following its performance, whether in writing or as a recording: this is after all exactly what ethnomusicologists do with traditional music making. In the field of art music, too, a particular performance is fixed by means of recording, and from that moment onwards it begins to exert its influence on the listening public and on other performers. Indeed we speak of a certain interpretation, Karajan's *Ring* for example, as being exemplary (in Italian we say that it "fa testo", literally "it makes text"). Scholarly editions of art music can even make a point (and indeed they increasingly tend to) of placing on record some of the specific realizations that the composer himself was responsible for at different moments in time. We can consider, for example, a famous piano piece as Chopin's Waltz in A-flat major (op. 69, n. 1, posthumous), in the most recent critical edition [Chopin 2006, 83-87]. What we have in front of us is certainly a Text, but one which seeks to capture not the composer's "Idea" but some of the many possible realizations of the Idea that can be attributed to him (indeed, these various realizations are themselves "Idea"). To give one other example, we can think of the practice of *coloratura* in 18th and 19th century opera. Performances differed significantly from one another, but this was not normally a mere matter of improvisation. The variations were usually prepared in advance and written down, whether by the composer himself, by the singer when he or she was capable of doing so, or by another musician who offered his services. This process involved writing, and in fact we find records of it in singers' notebooks and the performing scores; specific anthologies of these variants were produced, and nowadays these tend to be included in critical editions.

Text is commonly taken to mean something written out in conventional notation. According to this definition only a very small part of all the music that has been produced in the past, or is produced today, has a Text. And this remains the case even if we extend the notion to include material other than the written score, such as electromagnetic and electronic resources or sound recordings. Everyone (even the musicians and musicologists among us!) knows and repeats songs, arias and other types of music although we have never seen a written text: they are nonetheless impressed in our memory merely on account of hearing them. The original version of a song, in the form of sheet music or more often of recording, serves as the Text for an innumerable quantity of "cover versions".

But there is no reason why the concept of Text should be limited to the written form or to a material object. When we say that something has a Text we mean that it is fixed in a relatively stable form, and is recognisable and reproducible as such; it certainly does not mean that this form is to be seen as immobile or defined once and for all: on the contrary, the Text continues to be mobile even after it has been set down in writing. Let me go back to the example of liturgical chant. Leo Treitler's hypothesis, which we referred to above, was subsequently contested by Kenneth Levy, who proposed (on solid philological grounds) that at least in the phase immediately prior to the first codification in writing, in the 8th-9th century, before the split in the Holy Roman Empire, the core of the *proprium missae* had already been fixed in a form recognised as definitive, known as the Carolingian *recensio* [Levy 1998]. This hypothesis implies the existence, for a certain period, of an authentic Text that was not written down but fixed, individually and collectively, in the memory of the cantors. Thus their performances of it were in effect "interpretations", in the dual sense of the particular realization of a general *donné*, a Text, and the realization of the Idea that this embodied, in this case nothing less than a divine Idea. In the same way there was a shared Text of the Homeric poems, at least in the phase that immediately preceded the first written version, in the 6th century BC.

It is not necessary for a musical event to be turned into a text in order for it to exist, but it clearly is in order for it to be discussed. Speaking of «what might be called the underlying, root metaphor of Western

musical culture: that music is some kind of object», Nicholas Cook has this to say:

> Mozart and Beethoven, or rather Röchlitz and Schlösser, expressed this very clearly when they spoke of it as a painting or statue. But the metaphor of music as object goes much deeper than the myth-making process of nineteenth-century musical aesthetics: you simply can't get away from it, unless you are prepared to stop talking about music altogether. [...] And here is the basic paradox of music. We experience it in time but in order to manipulate it, even to understand it, we pull it out of time and in that sense falsify it. But it isn't a falsification we can do without; it is a basic part of what music is (and not just Western art music, I would claim, since all musical cultures are built on representation, whether notational, gestural, or otherwise [...]) [Cook 1998, 70-71].

In fact, the immediate experience of the artistic event is one thing, while subjecting it to analysis is quite another, and cannot be done in the absence of a Text, in the sense of an abstract construct which in some way fixes the character of that experience, by definition instable. This is the fundamental objection which I have to the provocative proposal put forward by Carolyn Abbate: that we should abandon the "gnostic" experience of music, meaning analysis and historical interpretation, and give ourselves up to the "drastic" experience of the performance, seen as music's true expression.[2] If one were to fully embrace this thesis, one would simply have to stop writing academic books about music, and indeed lecturing about it: if we want to discuss performance, we cannot do so without a Text, just as we have to talk about a "work". The alternative is to experience music directly by making it.

Coming back to Cook's observation on the metaphor of music as a painting or a statue, and hence as «something which exists in a permanent fashion in time», I wish to make one thing clear. I am so completely in agreement with this observation that I would dare to go further: rather than saying that music is an object, I would claim that a picture

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[2] Cfr. the article by Carolyn Abbate [2004], as well as Karol Berger's reply [2005].

and a statue are *not*. Naturally I am referring not to the painted canvas or sculpted marble which stand apart from us in space (in the same way, indeed, as vibrating air molecules), but to the aesthetic experience which they arouse in us. This is an interior phenomenon (we could say "mental", if we are analytical, or "intentional", if we are continental!), and as such radically bound up with temporality. The statue or picture, as aesthetic objects, are constructed in the time in which we contemplate them, which is not continuous and homogeneous: it involves moments of concentration, distraction, renewed attention, reflection; and the aesthetic experience which they arouse is an accumulation of all the moments, which may be few and far between or many and prolonged, which we spend contemplating them during our lives. And we acquire our experience of a piece of music, or indeed a piece of poetry, in exactly the same way.

On the other hand, when we come to discuss or write about a work of art, whether literary, musical or figurative, or indeed to explain it as teachers, we are obliged to refer to a Text which we consider, at least provisionally and methodologically, outside the temporal dimension. The Text is in fact the image we have formed from our repeated experience of the Work itself, and probably drawing on the experience of others, which may indeed have been accumulated over many centuries. To build up this image we make use of words spoken and written, conventional notation, photographs and recordings, and reproductions (as in the case of the sculpture of Ancient Greece, for which with few exceptions we do not have the original but only one or more copies, on the basis of which we construct a Text). Text too is an intentional phenomenon,[3] but the experience we acquire from it differs from an aesthetic experience because it exists in space: we can "walk round" the object, run it backwards and forwards, go back

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[3] «Indeed, the concepts of archetype and original induce us to see in every written realization a more or less veiled reflection of a text whose consistency is purely mental. [...] the nature of the text is conditioned by the modes of its production and reproduction. [...] the text is not a physical reality at all but a concept-limit» [Segre 1988, 301]. Some pages later Segre adds: «the nature of text is not material: it exists before its writing (still untouched by the damage this will produce) and after its writing (if it is possible to eliminate ideally the damage itself). [...] The text is, therefore, only an image» [*ibid.*, 315].

and look again at what we have already seen, re-read and re-listen, even divide it up into sections and compare them to each other.

Indeed I would go further still. I maintain that this distinction (which is also a connection) between the Event, whose experience is radically temporal, and the Text which we are obliged to construct in order to talk about that experience, applies not only to artistic phenomena but to every aspect of human culture. This is particularly clear in the case of history: every historical event, such as the French Revolution, the student uprisings in 1968, the September 11 attacks has been, for those who experienced it, a radically temporal event in which what has just happened is as baffling as what is going to happen next. But the historian who studies that event must necessarily turn it into a Text (using eye-witness accounts, documents, etc.) in order to make an overall evaluation of its course, with the relevant premises and consequences, and this involves the methodological choice of igno-ring its temporal dimension (the difference is of course that, in the ca-se of the "score" constituted by a historical reconstruction, it will not be possible to play through the Event once again, except perhaps in a purely interior dimension).

From what I have said so far, it should be clear how I intend to approach the third term in the triad, **Performance**. There is appa-rently one important difference: while most music does not (yet) ha-ve a Text, most music has had a Performance. However, this is only a quantitative, not a conceptual, difference. Music can in fact exist wi-thout performance, although such music is a minority. I am not thinking of those unfortunate composers whose music remained unknown (and in any case both the Great and the Unfinished would still have existed even if they had not been rediscovered by Schumann and by Johann von Herbeck). Nor do I have in mind music allegedly compo-sed only for "the inner ear" (as used to be maintained for Bach's last compositions). Such music, if indeed it exists, is very rare, and in any case silent study of the score using the inner ear is surely a sort of performance, which does not differ conceptually from that produced by someone picking out a piece on the piano or guitar in the privacy of their own home, or humming a tune in a busy street. Rather I am thinking of some musical repertoires which, although no longer part

of current musical practice, continued over a long period to exert an influence on composers in later generations. This was the case of the Northern Europe composers (Ockeghem, Obrecht, Josquin, Gombert) who served as models and as matter for reflection in the age of Palestrina, Monteverdi, Scarlatti *père* and *fils*, and Bach (just as each of these fulfilled the same function for their successors). For the more ancient composers, from Leoninus to Machaut and Dufay, this process was broken off on account of radical changes in notation, which made it impossible to understand their music or perform it. Nonetheless they were able to "make a comeback" much later on when their music became available once again in modern editions, thanks to such composers as the youthful Boulez. In these cases it was the existence of texts, rather than firsthand experience of performances (exceedingly rare in those years), that aroused new interest in this music, and specifically in their underlying "Idea", as can clearly be seen in Boulez's investigation of isorhythm in his research into rhythmic structures. And it was in turn an interest in the Idea which induced performers to seek to bring this music back to life.

I have devoted most of this paper to considerations on the Text, sacrificing to some extent the two other terms in the triad. This is undoubtedly largely due to my own specialisation, which I declared at the beginning. And it is also the logical consequence of my thesis if, as I have argued, the Text, not in itself a substantial element for the existence of music, is nonetheless an indispensable condition for any discussion and considerations concerning it. But there is another reason: in contemporary discussions of music it is undoubtedly the concept of Text which is most readily called into question (together with that of Work, which I cannot deal with here, but which is often found to coincide with the former: much of the rhetoric which has traditionally been ascribed to the Work depends on its being fixed in a Text). Thus I felt it was necessary to do something to "rehabilitate" the concept of Text, and show that it does not coincide with the limited sense which musicology traditionally attributes to it.
I would suggest that the infamous triad ITP should indeed still underpin our discussions of music, but also that it does not necessarily follow the conventional order we have discussed so far. A number

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of different configurations are possible, each of which can be histori-
cally exemplified.

1. I → T → P: the standard situation, and our starting point; as we said, it is typical of a classical composer;

2. T → I → P: this is the situation of the performer (conductor, instrumentalist, singer) who forms an Idea of the Work from a reading of the score and transforms this into the Event or Performance;

3. T → P → I: the situation of the listener who forms an Idea of the musical Work from the experience of one or more Performances (based on a Text);

4. I → P → T: the situation of the ethnomusicologist who transcribes or records a musical Event (based on models), but also, for example, of the musicologist who establishes the so-called 'listening score' of a composition (in this case the process is strictly I → P → T1 [recording] → T2 [score]);

5. P → T → I : the situation of ethnomusicologists, or musicologists, who analyse a Text they have recorded in order to explain its dynamic, derive theoretical models, etcetera;

6. P → I → T : this is perhaps the most difficult situation to visualise. We might think of Mozart in the well-known anecdote, writing down Allegri's *Miserere* after hearing it in the Sixtine Chapel; or again of the spies planted in an opera house by a publisher to come up with a "bootleg" score based on what they have heard, duly published before the legitimate score comes out (this is not an imaginary example: Philip Gossett has shown that this really happened with Rossini's *Semiramide* in 1823 [Gossett 2003], and I have been able to establish a similar case concerning Bellini's *I puritani* [Della Seta 2010]). We can note that this situation does not replicate that of version 4, I → P → T, inasmuch as those responsible for the text are not able to repeat the listening experience (by rewinding the tape, asking their source to repeat the performance, or whatever); what is transcribed is inevitably the Idea that they have formed of the Event as it was experienced.

These examples are simply the first that sprang to mind, and I am sure one could find others. I was chiefly interested in setting the principle, while of course the combinations are bound to be the six I have

illustrated, corresponding to the possible permutations of three terms. We could add the cases in which the terms are reduced to two, also giving rise to six combinations:

$$P \rightarrow T \quad T \rightarrow P \quad P \rightarrow I \quad I \rightarrow P \quad T \rightarrow I \quad I \rightarrow T$$

Nonetheless it should be clear that the difference is only notional, for the missing term is either implied or potentially present. For example the combination $T \rightarrow I$ might be typical of those engaged in analysis of a music score, but this always presumes a performance guided by the inner ear, unless the ensuing analysis is to be mere "number crunching". The combination $P \rightarrow I$ is typical of the listener who cannot read music but who nonetheless creates a mental "text" (how else could such people know they are listening to the Fifth and not the Ninth, or compare Kleiber's Fifth with Abbado's, which in reality they are often able to do with remarkable competence?). And so we could go on.

It is more significant that such triads or dyads are rarely found in isolation in the reality of music making. Usually each is the starting or finishing point, or an intermediate link in a chain, or perhaps better a network, in which what has been the Event is condensed into a Text that serves as the model for a new Event. This process is what we call Tradition.

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