

Globokar, Or, The Effect to Write Materialist Music

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In what precise sense is Vinko Globokar's¹ music materialist? Music at its most elementary is an act of supplication: a call to a figure of the big Other (beloved Lady, King, God...) to respond, not as the symbolic big Other, but in the real of his or her being (breaking his own rules by showing mercy; conferring her contingent love on us...). Here we might say that music in this sense is an act that is the breaking in of the fantasized Other. Music is thus an attempt to provoke the "answer of the Real," to give rise in the Other to the "miracle" of which Lacan speaks apropos of love, the miracle of the Other stretching back his or her hand to me. The historical changes in the status of "big Other" (*grosso modo*, in what Hegel referred to as "objective Spirit") thus directly concern music – perhaps musical modernity designates the moment when music renounces the endeavor to provoke the answer of the Other. Modern music is thoroughly and really atheist, MATERIALIST, not in the sense of the ridiculously pathetic spectacle of the heroic defiance of God, but in the sense of the insight into the irrelevance of the divine, again, along the lines of Brecht's *Herr Keuner*.

Someone asked Herr Keuner if there is a God.

Herr Keuner said: I advise you to think about how your behavior would change

with regard to the answer to this question. If it would not change, then we can drop the question. If it would change, then I can help you at least insofar as I can tell you: You already decided: You need a God.²

Brecht is right here: we are never in a position to directly choose between theism and atheism, since the choice as such is located within the field of belief. "Atheism" (in the sense of deciding not to believe in God) is a miserable, pathetic stance of those who long for God but cannot find him (or who "rebel against God"). This is often expressed as a type of 'necessary loss' that becomes fundamentalist in expression. A true atheist does not choose atheism: for him, the question of whether to believe is in itself irrelevant. What this means is something much more radical than it may appear: there is no one to turn to, to address, to bear witness TO, no one to receive our plea or lament. This position is extremely difficult to sustain: especially in modern music. We can say that Webern was the first who was able to sustain this inexistence of the Other: even Schoenberg was still composing for a future ideal listener, while Webern accepted that there is NO *proper* listener — notably, a position Adorno theoretically and ideologically resisted. We can say that Globokar belongs to this Weberian line.

It seems that the development of all great artists proceeds in two main stages: first, the radicalization of the initial project; then, its dialectical reversal into its opposite. Recall, in cinema, the exemplary cases of Eisenstein (his passage from montage in the silent films to organic unity in soundfilms), or, more recently, Kieslowski. Kieslowski's starting point was the same as the one of all cineastes in Socialist countries: the conspicuous gap between the drab social reality and the optimistic, bright image which pervaded the heavily censored official media. The first reaction to the fact that, in Poland, social reality was "unrepresented," as Kieslowski put it, was, of course, the move towards a more adequate representation of real life in all its drabness and ambiguity – in short, an authentic documentary approach. Then, however, the obverse experience set in: towards the end of the documentary *First Love* (1974), in which the camera follows a young unmarried couple during the wife's pregnancy, through their wedding, and the delivery of the baby, the father is shown holding the newly born baby in his hands and crying – Kieslowski reacted to the obscenity of such unwarranted probing into the other's intimacy with the "fright of real tears." His decision to pass from documentaries to fiction films was thus, at its most radical, an ethical one:

Not everything can be described. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. /.../ If I'm making a film about love, I can't go

into a bedroom if real people are making love there. /.../ I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more objects which interested me shut themselves off. /.../ I'm frightened of real tears. In fact, I don't even know whether I've got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who's found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds. That's the main reason why I escaped from documentaries.³

In the same way, Globokar's development is marked by two stages:

First, Globokar started with the full assertion of the musical material in its autonomy – therein resides the point of Globokar's resuscitation of the unique practice of simultaneous breathing and playing (taking-in the air and blowing) the oboe, so that the sound can go on for over a minute. This technique is referred to as circular breathing, which has the function of thrusting the listener into the task of listening.

Wenn man nun einem Ton so lange zuhören muss, beginnt man plötzlich ungeahnte Sachen zu hören, man horcht sehr lange in ein einziges Element hinein.

[When you listen to a note for so long, you suddenly begin to hear unexpected sounds, for a very long time you can listen to a single element.]⁴

What we get here is a kind of musical counterpart to anamorphosis in painting or to the extended cinematic shots in Tarkovsky. What pervades Tarkovsky's films is the heavy gravity of Earth, which seems to exert its pressure on time itself, generating an effect of temporal anamorphosis, extending the dragging of time well beyond what we perceive as justified by the requirements of narrative movement (one should confer here on the term "Earth" all the resonance it acquired in the late Heidegger). Perhaps, Tarkovsky is the clearest example of what Deleuze called the time-image replacing the movement-image. This protracted time is neither the symbolic time of the diegetic space nor the time of the reality of our (spectator's) viewing the film, but an intermediate domain whose visual equivalent are perhaps the protracted stains which *are* the yellow sky in late van Gogh or the water or grass in Munch: this uncanny *massiveness* pertains neither to the direct materiality of the colour stains nor to the materiality of the depicted objects. Rather, it dwells in a kind of intermediate spectral domain of what Schelling called *geistige Koerperlichkeit*, or "spiritual corporeality." We could say that the lingering drone produced by circular

breathing (when one is breathing and also unbreathing, which is a paradox rather than a contradiction) is also representative of Schelling's corporeality. The uncanniness produced by the force of the breath (that which cannot be wholly seen but only heard) is the materiality needed for music to be an object to be properly listened to.⁵

This dimension emerged for the first time in Romantic music, which occupied itself with "a sonority that is not only unrealizable but unimaginable."⁶ Rosen quotes a passage from "Abegg" variations, Schumann's *Opus 1*, in which the impossibility arises

because Schumann is thinking of the motto in terms of almost pure sound, in terms of release and attack as well as of pitch and rhythm /.../ : a note can be attacked twice, but a double release without a second attack is nonsense on the piano.⁷

The best-known case, however, is that of *Carnaval*: its 21 sections intertwine in multiple ways, each of them a kind of "variation" on the others, related to the others through melodic or rhythmic echoes, repetitions and contrasts. In classical variations, we first get the theme "as such," followed by the multitude of its variations: as one would expect in Schumann, the "theme" is simply lacking. However, in *Carnaval*, these "variations" do not all possess equal weight: the eighth section ("Replique") is followed by "Sphinxes," a section which is merely written and cannot be performed. What are these mysterious "sphinxes"? The subtitle of *Carnaval* is "miniature scenes on four notes /scenes mignonnes sur quatre notes/," and "Sphinxes" provides these four notes, the musical cipher of jouissance which condenses a series of mnemonic associations: the young pianist Ernestine von Fricken, Schumann's girlfriend at the time he composed *Carnaval*, came from the Bohemian town of Asch, a name whose four letters are identical with the only letters of the word "Schumann" which have note equivalents in German musical terminology (where "H" stands for B, and "B" for B flat). Furthermore, if we read "As" as A flat, we get another variant of the musical cipher, so that we obtain three brief series: SCHumAnn (E flat – C – B – A); ASCH (read as: A flat – C – B); ASCH (read as: A – E flat – C – B).

In his *Psychanalyser*,⁸ Serge Leclair reports on a psychoanalytic treatment which produced the cipher of enjoyment in his patient: the enigmatic term *poord'jeli*, a condensation of a multitude of mnemonic traces (the patient's love for a girl Lili, a reference to licorne, etc.). Do we not encounter something of the same order of enjoyment in Schumann's "Sphinxes"?

The entire piece thus turns around "Sphinxes" as its absent, impossible-real point of reference: a series of bare notes without any measure or harmony. To put it in Kantian terms, these "sphinxes" are not musically "schematized," and therefore cannot be effectively performed and thus not heard in a materialist way, perhaps lacking in moral purpose and whose function is only to incite enjoyment – not exactly the ideal launching pad for Kantian transcendence! "Sphinxes" is a formula of enjoyment, not unlike Freud's formula of trimethylamin, which appears at the end of the dream of Irma's injection. As such, the absence of "Sphinxes" is structural: if "Sphinxes" was to be effectively performed, the fragile consistency of the entire piece would fall apart.⁹

Second, from the mid-1970's, Globokar became aware of how this immersion into the autonomy of pure sound produces a deadlock, a kind of musical hard-core pornography - a transgressive 'impurity' of pure sound we might say – and thus the return to the socio-ideological context of music, which affects from within the process of composing itself:

Fuer mich ist Musik immer eine Konsequenz. Sie entsteht aufgrund einer Idee, einer Frage, einer Sorge, aufgrund eines Problems oder eines Geschehens, dies alles liegt anfaenglich ausserhalb der Musik. Die Ethik bestimmt die Aesthetik, zumindest am Anfang.

[For me music is always a consequence. It arises because of an idea, a question, a concern, a problem or an event, all of which lie initially outside of music. In the beginning at least, ethics determine aesthetics.]¹⁰

The term *consequence* is crucial here, and has to be given the whole weight to what Alain Badiou called fidelity (to a truth-event): the proper domain of the artist's work is that of the fidelity to an ethical encounter or decision.

This return to the social dimension is not external to the musical material, but inscribed into its very network of formal relations. In an interview with Armin Koehler¹¹ apropos *Masse, Macht und Individuum*¹², Globokar pointed out how the constellation of these three terms is directly reflected in the three groups of musicians that perform the piece: a group of 21 who communicate one with another in a non-organized way ([masse] *crowd*); the orchestra of 70 performing in a hierarchical order, under the control of a conductor ([macht] *power*); four solists who interact and are not simply isolated ([individuum] *individuals*), since their interaction forms the germ of a new collective. And, as Globokar asserts, there is a fourth element present, electronic organs whose sound stands in for the continuity of indestructible Life. Today, this

pure life has a precise political equivalent in the figure of *homo sacer*, those who are excluded from the political symbolic order and reduced to bare life.

In a recent debate about the fate of Guantanamo prisoners on NBC, one of the arguments for the ethico-legal acceptability of their status was that “they are those who were missed by the bombs”: since they were the target of the US bombing and accidentally survived it, and since this bombing was part of a legitimate military operation, one cannot condemn their fate when they were taken prisoners after the combat – whatever their situation, it is better, less severe, than being dead. This reasoning tells more than it intends to say: it puts the prisoner almost literally into the position of living dead, those who are in a way already dead (their right to live forfeited by being legitimate targets of murderous bombings), so that they are now cases of what Agamben calls *homo sacer*, the one who can be killed with impunity since, in the eyes of the law, his life no longer counts.¹³ If the Guantanamo prisoners are located in the space “between the two deaths,” occupying the position of *homo sacer*, legally dead (deprived of a determinate legal status) while biologically still alive, the US authorities which treat them in this way are also in a kind of in-between legal status which forms the counterpart to *homo sacer*. Acting as a legal power, their acts are no longer covered and constrained by the law – they operate in an empty space that is nonetheless still within the domain of the law.

What Globokar is proposing is thus not a new variation on the old boring opposition of the individual and the crowd, of the individuum who is oppressed by the crowd, etc., but the matrix of *four modalities of being-together, of sociality, which determine today's life*: the *disorganized multitude* (of, say, consumers or participants of a market-exchange); the *crowd controlled by a Leader*; the *concentration of individuals reduced to bare life*, to objects of social administration (exemplarily, in a concentration camp); and, finally, the *possibility of a new authentic collective*.

Consequently, if we are not to miss what Globokar is giving us, the first thing to do is to reject one of today's critical *topoi*, the allegedly proto-Fascist character of the mass choreography displaying disciplined movements of thousands of bodies (parades, mass performances in stadiums, etc.); if one finds it also in Socialism, one immediately draws the conclusion about a 'deeper solidarity' between the two totalitarianisms. Such a procedure, the very prototype of ideological liberalism, misses the point: not only are such mass performances not inherently Fascist; they are also not even neutral, waiting to be appropriated by either the Left or Right. Let us not forget that it was Nazism that stole and appropriated the socialist masses from the workers' movement, their original site of birth. None of the proto-Fascist elements is Fascist *per se*: rather, what makes a Fascist a fascist is only their specific articulation – or, to put it in Stephen Jay Gould's terms, all these elements are ex-

apted by Fascism.¹⁴ In other words, there is no Fascism *avant la lettre*, because *it is the letter itself (the nomination) which makes out of the bundle of elements Fascism proper*.

Along the same lines, one should radically reject the notion that discipline (from self-control to bodily training) is a “proto-Fascist” feature - the very predicate “proto-Fascist” should be abandoned: it is the exemplary case of a pseudo-concept whose function is to block conceptual analysis. When we say that the organized spectacle of thousands of bodies (or, say, the admiration of sports which demand high effort and self-control like mountain climbing, soccer and so on) is proto-Fascist, we say strictly nothing, we just express a vague association which masks our ignorance – perhaps an aestheticised liberalism? So when, four decades ago, Kung Fu films were popular (Bruce Lee, etc.), was it not obvious that we were dealing with a genuine working class ideology of youngsters whose only means of success was the disciplinary training of their only possession, their bodies? Spontaneity and the let-it-go attitude of indulging in excessive freedoms belong to those who have the means to afford it – those who have nothing have only their discipline. The bad bodily discipline, if there is one, is not the collective training, but, rather, jogging and body-building as part of the New Age myth of the realization of the Self’s inner potentials – no wonder that the obsession with one’s body is an almost obligatory part of the passage of ex-Leftist radicals into the “maturity” of pragmatic politics: from Jane Fonda to Joschka Fischer, the period of latency between the two phases was marked by the focus on one’s own body.

In thesis 14 of his *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*, Alain Badiou wrote that

[s]ince it is sure of its ability to control the entire domain of the visible and the audible via the laws governing commercial circulation and democratic communication, Empire no longer censures anything. All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become pitiless censors of ourselves.

And, effectively, today, we seem to be at the opposite point of the ideology of 1960s: the mottos of spontaneity, creative self-expression, etc., are taken over by the System, i.e., the old logic of the system reproducing itself through repressing and rigidly channeling the subject’s spontaneous impetuses is left behind. Non-alienated spontaneity, self-expression, self-realization: they all directly serve the system, which is why pitiless self-censorship is a *sine qua non* of emancipatory politics. Especially in the domain of poetic art, this means that one should totally reject any attitude of self-expression, of displaying one’s innermost emotional turmoil, desires, dreams.

True art has NOTHING WHATSOEVER to do with such disgusting emotional exhibitionism – insofar as the standard notion of “poetic spirit” is the ability to display one’s intimate turmoil, what Mayakovski said about himself with regard to his turn from personal poetry to political propaganda in verses (“I had to step on the throat of my Muse”) is the constitutive gesture of a true poet. If there is a thing that provokes disgust in a true poet, it is the scene of when a close friend opens up his heart, spilling out all the dirt of his inner life. Consequently, one should totally reject the standard opposition of “objective” science focused on reality and “subjective” art focused on emotional reaction to it and self-expression: if anything, true art is MORE non-subjective than science. In science, I remain a person with my pathological feature, I just assert objectivity OUTSIDE it, while in true art, the artist has to undergo a radical SELF-objectivization, he has to die IN AND FOR HIMSELF, turn into a kind of living dead.

Furthermore, one should bear in mind that Globokar is deploying these ethico-political dimensions not as a theoretical exercise, but as a project directly embodied in the organization of musical material. How, then, are we to detect traces of the social in the musical material? Perhaps, the privileged way is through the structural ABSENCES in the vocal texture. In Schumann’s “Humoresque,” we have, in the written score, the famous inner voice */innere Stimme/*, a third line between the two piano lines, higher and lower. This absent line is to be reconstructed on the basis of the fact that the first and third levels (the right- and the left-hand piano lines) do not relate to each other directly, i.e. their relationship is not that of an immediate mirroring: in order to account for their interconnection, one is thus compelled to (re)construct a third, “virtual” intermediate level (melodic line) which, for structural reasons, cannot be played. Schumann brings this procedure of absent melody to an apparently absurd self-reference when, later in the same fragment of “Humoresque,” he repeats the same two effectively played melodic lines, yet this time the score contains no third absent melodic line, no inner voice - what is absent here is the absent melody, i.e. absence itself.

How are we to play these notes when, at the level of what is effectively to be played, they exactly repeat the previous notes? The effectively played notes are deprived only of what is not there, of their constitutive lack, or, to refer to the Bible, they lose even that which they never had.¹⁵ A true pianist should thus have the *savoir-faire* to play the existing, positive notes in such a way that one would be able to discern the echo of the accompanying, non-played “silent” virtual notes or their absence... and is this not how ideology works? The explicit ideological text (or practice) is sustained by the “unplayed” series of obscene, superegotistic supplements.

In Really Existing Socialism, the explicit ideology of socialist democracy was sustained by a set of implicit (unspoken) obscene injunctions and prohibitions, teaching the subject how not to take some explicit norms seriously and how to implement a set of publicly unacknowledged prohibitions. One of the strategies of dissidence in the last years of Socialism was therefore precisely to take the ruling ideology more seriously/literally than it took itself by way of ignoring its virtual, unwritten shadow: "You want us to practice socialist democracy? OK, here you have it!" And when one got back from the Party apparatchiks desperate hints of how this is not the way things function, one simply had to ignore these hints. This is what "acheronta movebo" as a practice of the critique of ideology means: not directly changing the explicit text of the Law, but, rather, intervening into its obscene virtual supplement. For example, the relationship towards homosexuality in a soldiers' community operates at two distinct levels: explicit homosexuality is brutally attacked, those identified as gays are ostracized, beaten up every night, etc.; however, this explicit homophobia is accompanied by an excessive set of implicit webs of homosexual innuendos, inner jokes, obscene practices, etc. The truly radical intervention into military homophobia should therefore not focus primarily on the explicit repression of homosexuality; it should rather "move the underground," disturb the implicit homosexual practices which SUSTAIN the explicit homophobia.

To conclude, this insight into the obscenity of the voice enables us to grasp how the two steps in Globokar's development (the assertion of the autonomy of the voice; the move towards the ethico-political dimension) are deeply co-dependent: the ultimate medium of social control and discipline is the pure voice itself. It is sufficient to cast a cursory glance at the history of music – it reads as a kind of counter-history to the usual story of Western metaphysics as the domination of voice over writing. What we encounter in it again and again is a voice that threatens the established Order and that, for that reason, has to be brought under control, subordinated to the rational articulation of the spoken and written word, fixed into writing. In order to designate the danger that lurks here, Lacan coined the neologism *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-meaning - the moment at which the singing voice cuts loose from its anchoring in meaning and accelerates into a consuming self-enjoyment. The oldest musical text in all human history, an edict of a Chinese emperor, warns against singing which does not follow rules. In his *Republic*, Plato claims that, once non-regulated singing is allowed, the entire social structure will disintegrate and man will return to beast. In medieval times, Popes warned against free singing which is not subordinated to words as the devil's temptation. The French Revolution rejected the effeminated castrato coloraturas. Stalin prohibited Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* because of the wild obscene display of sounds. In the

1960s, both Soviet Communists and the US conservatives perceived Elvis Presley as a threat to our civilization...

The problem is thus always the same: how are we to prevent the voice from sliding into a consuming self-enjoyment that "effeminates" the reliable masculine Word? The voice functions here as a supplement in the Derridean sense: one endeavors to restrain it, to regulate it, to subordinate it to the articulated Word, yet one cannot dispense with it altogether, since a proper dosage is vital for the exercise of power (suffice it to recall the role of patriotic-military songs in the building-up of a totalitarian community). However, this brief description gives rise to the wrong impression that we are dealing with a simple opposition between the repressive articulated Word and the transgressive consuming voice: on the one hand, the articulated Word that disciplines and regulates the voice as a means of asserting social discipline and authority; on the other hand, the self-enjoying Voice which acts as the medium of liberation, of tearing apart the disciplinary chains of law and order... Here we can think about the US Marine Corps' mesmeric marching chants – are their debilitating rhythm and sadistically sexualized nonsensical content not an exemplary case of the consuming self-enjoyment in the service of Power? The excess of the voice is thus radically undecidable – and it is in this terrain that a composer has to fight his ethical struggle, as Globokar does it in an exemplary way.

Notes

¹ Vinko Globokar (1934-) French-Slovenian composer and trombonist. For an interview with him, see: <http://www.bruceduffie.com/globokar.html>.

² Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, trans. Martin Chalmers, City Lights, San Francisco, 2001. *On Theoretical Foundations Theses on Brecht*, p. 14

³ I have referred to this in Parallax, p. 31. The original reference was taken from Stok (1993). *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 86.

⁴ Personal communication with Globokar. English translation by Cindy Zeiher.

⁵ I owe this point to Cindy Zeiher – personal communication.

⁶ Rosen, Charles, (1995). *The Romantic Generation*. Harvard University Press.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 1968, Paris: Editions du Seuil.

⁹ It is important to note that in some recordings, "Sphinxes" is effectively performed: less than half a minute of a dozen protracted tones. The effect is properly uncanny, as if we had stepped "through the looking-glass" and entered some forbidden domain, beyond (or, rather, beneath) the fantasmatic frame - or, more properly, as if we had caught sight of some entity outside of its proper element, like seeing a dead squid on a table, no longer alive and graciously moving in water. For this reason, the uncanny mystery of these notes can all of a sudden change into vulgarity, obscenity even - it is no

wonder that the most outstanding proponent of performing "Sphinxes" was none other than Rachmaninov, one of the exemplary kitsch authors of serious music.

¹⁰ Personal communication with Globokar. English translation by Cindy Zeiher.

¹¹ *Ensemble Modern* Interview, Berlin, Germany, 2014

¹² First performed in 2004. It is interesting to note that this composition is still developing with new arrangements being performed in 2014 with the addition of accordion.

¹³ Here we can say that there is a vague similarity between their situation and the – legally problematic – premise of the movie *Double Jeopardy*: if you were condemned for killing A and you later, after serving your term and being released, discover that A is still alive, you can now kill him with impunity since you cannot be condemned two times for the same act. In psychoanalytic terms, this killing would clearly display the temporal structure of masochist perversion: the succession is inverted, you are first punished and thus gain the right to commit the crime. So here we can ask, what counts as life in-existence? So much so that it can only be expunged by the bomb executed by none other than the law? Does being taken prisoner of war mean that one's life is unbearable for the other and counts 'too much' to be killed with impunity?

¹⁴ Gould, Stephen (1982). *Exapation – a Missing Term in the Science of Form*, *Paleobiology*. 8 (1): 4–15.

¹⁵ Hebrews 6:4-6