
Remembrance Melodies
Music and Utopia in Walter Benjamin,
Ernst Bloch and Luigi Pareyson

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A theoretical study of music can only begin with an attempt to provide an effective definition of its constituent element, the *sound*, an attempt that immediately turns out problematic. What is, philosophically speaking, a sound? According to Ernst Bloch, for instance, we should deal with it “no longer as a means, certainly no longer as astral shrine, but certainly as the highest aura of receptivity, as the ultimate material of the soul, of the kernel, of latency, of the self-symbol, to which music as such is applied; as the *highest phenomenal* of musical expression and ideogram, of the musical spirit realm”¹. Therefore, if for music sound is not a medium but a phenomenon, for philosophy it is a real fundament. As stated by the German philosopher, in fact, sound is the only material capable of conveying “a knowledge that takes place in the future across the border, a future not yet arrived”², a knowledge, that is, “close to the sound subject and the ontological substrate of the word”³, a knowledge that allows a complete dialectical synthesis with the All, the Kingdom, the Future.

Luigi Pareyson, in his essay *L'estetica musicale di Schelling* (*The Musical Aesthetics of Schelling*), in a similar way, claims that the sound represents, as substance of music, “one of the most primitive and elementary

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 119.

² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³ *Ibid.*

manifestations of nature”⁴. In fact, it expresses its “most brutal and rudimentary state, prior to the corporeality itself”, a stage in which “we have not yet left the first dimension [...] nor have we yet abandoned the inorganic world”⁵. The sound element, thereby, must be investigated in its primordial materiality. Pareyson, in fact, conceives the

form as an organism, living with its own life and endowed with an internal legality: a unique totality in its singularity, independent in its autonomy, exemplary in its value, concluded and open at the same time in its definiteness which contains an infinity, perfect in the harmony and unity of its law of coherence, entire in the reciprocal adaptation between the parts and the whole⁶.

As Bloch states, indeed, if the compositional meaning in music is understood and grasped at once, its deepest message lays low, because it communicates through “an approximate, fundamentally preliminary alphabet”⁷. Music, in fact, goes beyond words and logic and hides, behind the structures of language, its most intimate and precious content. As Pareyson states, “the same act by which it is specified installs it at the centre of the spiritual life: it makes it emerge from life in so far as, by exercising it in its own way, it foretells it and creates its expectation, and re-addresses it in life in so far as it penetrates it and constitutes its essential humanity”⁸. The sound, that is, and “the musical structures are charged with an expression not yet given, [...] something new, utopian is announced there, which, in the history of music up to our days, has not yet reached its representation”⁹. Both authors, after all, reject the positivistic consideration, still dominant, of sound as a mere physical-acoustic, arithmetic and empirically determinable event. Such a conception, in fact,

⁴ Luigi Pareyson, *L'estetica musicale di Schelling*, in: Id., *L'estetica dell'idealismo tedesco*, vol. 3, Milano, Mursia, “Opere complete, vol. 9”, 2003, p. 363.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, Milano, Bompiani, 2002, p. 7.

⁷ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁸ L. Pareyson, *L'estetica musicale di Schelling*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Marxismo e utopia*, Roma, Editori riuniti, 1984, p. 153.

could only preclude that existential dimension to which sound would naturally incline. In fact, “sound wants to turn toward a human being”¹⁰.

Within a such aesthetic and existential context, according to Pareyson, *rhythm* can be defined as that “periodisation in itself devoid of meaning in a meaningful succession” which “quantifies sound, dominates succession, takes possession of time”¹¹. As the Italian philosopher states, the power that rhythm employs over time reveals the intimate connection between sound and soul. “To the movement due to the pure temporal form is now added the attraction exerted by the concrete sound matter as it represents the beginning of a movement of the imagination. What attracts is the sense itself, and it attracts in the same way as a downhill road”¹². Music, in fact, would be nothing more than the external objectification of the inner rhythm of self-awareness; that is, the principle of the unification of multiplicity in the unity of consciousness. In fact, the philosopher continues, “the rhythm applied to sound makes the sound universe a quantitative universe [...] dominating it with arithmetic”¹³; it represents, thereby, the point of contact between music and soul:

the soul is rhythm and succession: self-awareness is in fact only the unification of the multiple of consciousness or the permanence of the unity of consciousness in the multiple, which means, precisely, succession, rhythm or, if you like, numbering. Well, music is nothing more than the rhythm of the soul made real, that is, embodied in a sensitive matter, in a sound reality, almost solidified and exteriorized¹⁴.

The sound, says Gianluca Cuozzo, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, at the act of revealing its transcendent origin and expressing human spirituality, is a manifestation of the essence of the thing understood, as “the most intimate essence of the language itself”, is not originally a “means” (*Mittel*) through which man, as a spiritual being, expresses an

¹⁰ E. Bloch., *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹¹ L. Pareyson, *L'estetica musicale di Schelling*, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 367-368.

extrinsic knowledge about the thing; quite differently, it constitutes precisely its spiritual essence¹⁵.

After all, as the philosopher claims, “music needs no translation”¹⁶. In fact, if the allegory, even the musical one, is “a key to accessing the kingdom of a secret knowledge (*ein Schlüssel zum Bereiche verborgenen Wissens*)”¹⁷, music can only present itself as an “indissoluble unity of ‘physicality and transcendence’, corporeity and spirituality, thought and being that reflects on the creature’s plane the ancipital nature of the archetypal *logos*”¹⁸. Benjamin’s work on the *Trauerspiel*, for example, gives us a reflection on music deeply related to a Messianic-Jewish conception of nature, history and language. Here, linked to the concept of redemption, *musical temporality* is brought closer to messianic temporality. According to the philosopher, in fact, since the time of history is infinite in every direction and unfinished in every moment, the tragic [or musical] time is to the messianic one as the fulfilled time of the individual is to the fulfilled time of God. In this musical time, Bloch would still say, a deeper, more spiritual and inexhaustible life is acting, “as the immediate dream-image of essence at rest”¹⁹, within which develops that hermeneutic relationship between person and form theorized by Pareyson in his theory of formativity²⁰. The philosopher, in fact, was convinced that every interpretation involved both the process of formation and that of fruition

¹⁵ Gianluca Cuozzo, *L’Angelo della melancholia. Allegoria e utopia del residuale in Walter Benjamin*, Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 2009, p. 55.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Cambridge-London, Belknap Press, vol. 3, 2006, p. 250.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, “stw 931”, 1991, p. 359.

¹⁸ G. Cuozzo, *L’Angelo della melancholia*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹⁹ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

²⁰ Luigi Pareyson, in opposition to the Crocian aesthetics – still dominant in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century – formulates a theory of artistic experience as *formativity* and *interpretation*. He defined formativity “as a way of doing that – while doing – invents the way of doing it: a production that is, at the same time and indivisibly, an invention” (Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, *op. cit.*, p. 18).

of the work of art and that there was an indissoluble link between the spirituality of the artist and the formation of the work, “a bond so close and a correspondence so precise, that one of the two terms cannot be without the other, and to change one necessarily means to change the other”²¹.

Not by chance, what Bloch called “second music”, *utopian music* or “music of the future”, should have been accomplished precisely through the abandonment of the harmonic structure and the acquisition of the rhythmic structure as a compositional structure and guide of the whole development of the work. Electronic music, since its inception, has only embraced these programmatic lines and we owe to Karlheinz Stockhausen, one of its *auctoritates*, the theoretical definition, in 1972, of its four criteria: “the first criterion is the unified time structuring. The second is the splitting of the sound. The third, the multi-layered spatial composition. The fourth, the equality of sound and noise – or better, of tone and noise”²². Since this moment, the dominant idea that the sound of a piece of music can have (or should have) a central and specific theme is overturned by its division into a multitude of monades, references, fragments, quotations and reproductions. According to Stockhausen, “the composition or decomposition of a sound, or the passing of a sound through several time layers, may be the theme itself, granted that by theme we mean the behaviour or life of the sound. And we live through exactly the same transformation that the sound is going through”²³. In other words, as Bloch states, by working on the sound materials, “by pushing forward, escalating, something else emerges, the struggle, or the soul of the correlation being born out of itself”²⁴.

In some ways, therefore, electronic music can be considered as the only possible heir to classical music. In fact, it can aim to occupy the totality of the frequency spectrum and aspire to an all-encompassing and

²¹ L. Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²² Karlheinz Stockhausen, Four Criteria of Electronic Music, in: Id., *On Music. Lectures & Interviews*, compiled by Robin Maconie, London, Marion Boyars, 1989, p. 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁴ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

fully unfolded composition – something unthinkable for each of the sub-genres of popular music, which had considerably reduced the instrumental variety and consequently the frequency range. Obviously, such a potentiality is not always realized and even within electronic music, the same canonical distinction must be made between a high, cultured or artistic music and a mainstream, easy-to-listen-to one. Surely, however, an electronic music composer is much closer to a classical composer than a pop or rock musician. In popular music, in fact, the composition is mainly based on the arrangement and is usually made by several hands, while the emergence of software and the digital revolution have [re]established the figure of the independent composer who – being able to recall at any time any instrument (even Mozart had to wait to deliver their scores to an orchestra to be able to hear them really, as well as in his head, while today this can happen simultaneously) – personally takes care of the individual elements and the general structure, that is of each instruments and of the entire score. In this way he directs the totality of his instrumental parts, interpreting them at the same time. In addition, with electronic music, the singing part – dominant in the contemporary music – usually disappears, leaving its hegemony to the instrumental one. If the contrast between consonance and dissonance, together with the principle of tonality, represented the basis of Western harmonic theory, electronic music has completely upset this claim. It is interesting to recall in this context what Adorno wrote to Benjamin, during one of their frequent epistolary exchanges:

in my everyday musical experience, it is becoming more and more evident to me – that it is precisely the maximum coherence in obeying the technological law of autonomous art that transforms the latter by bringing it closer, rather than to tabuisation and fetishisation, to the state of freedom, to what can consciously be produced, to what is feasible²⁵.

Today, moreover, it is possible to approach music through a technique borrowed from the cinema, such as editing, which allows the mixing of existing sound material through a new *ars combinatoria*, towards

²⁵ T. W. Adorno, W. Benjamin, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 170.

unexpected destinations, that is, to give new life and new directions to the unrealized possibilities of the compositions of the past, gathering that “music’s mysterious, immoderate power of action”²⁶. This varied set of techniques (anything but mechanical or inhuman), in fact, can only enhance the ability of the music to cite retroactively what is no longer or not yet present, the always-already-been, “what was never written”²⁷, which is the “art of citing without quotations”²⁸. The techniques of editing and rearrangement, in fact – through a reminiscent act (*Eingedenken*) able to unleash a real dialectic of reminiscence, Benjamin would say –, give new life to the sound material as an original phenomenon (*Ur-Phänomen*), making the fragment live its own life, “thereby supporting the swirling movement of an origin descended in that historical time put in place by its same original impetus (*Ur-Sprung*)”²⁹. This is about “erecting [...] large constructions on the basis of tiny construction elements, cut with clarity and precision”³⁰, by means of the same artistic process that, in Pareyson, leads from the forming form to the formed form, from the starting point to the finished work. In the musician’s mind, for example, the work is born as a concrete combination of sounds, timbres, rhythms and not simply as a timeless essence. In Pareyson, on the other hand, the rhythm becomes a real temporal principle and foundation of the isomorphism between work and person and between human and divine.

After all, as Bergson understood, music seems to arouse a specific feeling of duration and produce a perceptive distortion of time. “Because they go deeper, sonic constructs do not simply possess youth as an attribute: they become younger precisely by becoming older, and resting on themselves, and attaining the new-old quality of what is concealed in this repose”³¹. Through its ability to breach the *continuum* of history, producing

²⁶ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, part 2 (1931-1934), ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Gary Smith, Howard Eiland, Cambridge-London, Belknap Press, 2005, p. 722.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge-London, Belknap Press, 1999, p. 458.

²⁹ G. Cuzzo, *L’Angelo della melancolia*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³⁰ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 461.

³¹ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

a real “messianic cessation”, music would be able, according to T. W. Adorno, to project the listener into an *alternative time*, completely different to the progressive one, which is “homogeneous” and “empty”³², as Benjamin taught. Music would be capable, that is, of dragging the listener and tearing him out of his spatial-temporal context, projecting him into *another time* and *another dimension*. As Bloch states, “the sound, hemmed in, takes revenge by damming itself up, by hypertrophy within its primitive, maenadic, chthonic, subliminous instead of superluminous and anamnestic warmth”³³. The music time, therefore, is not a unidirectional and progressive time, but characterized by jumps and digressions, silences and pauses. About that, Benjamin argued that the principle of epic theatre was the same as that of editing, that is, the interruption as a pedagogical function: “it brings the action to a halt, and hence compels the listener to take up an attitude toward the events on the stage and forces the actor to adopt a critical view of his role”³⁴.

Silences and pauses – which increase *pathos* and suspense in classical music and opera and which in the electronic music will become a real *leitmotiv* – therefore represent our primarily research interest, since “there are words or pauses pointing us to that invisible stranger – the future – which forgot them at our place”³⁵. To paraphrase Benjamin, in fact, “thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad”³⁶. It is in this sense, that of a reciprocal interpenetration of past, present and future – that of an “axial reversal of time and history”, would say Cuzzo –, that music allows to transcend time and space. Silence, therefore – far from being the denial of sound, but rather its necessary foundation –, is nothing but powerless.

³² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 262.

³³ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. II, part 2, *op. cit.*, p. 585.

³⁵ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. III, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

³⁶ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, *op. cit.*, p. 262-263.

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As Benjamin reminds us, “for Kafka Sirens are silent; they have ‘an even more terrible weapon than their song... their silence’”³⁸. In fact, according to Benjamin, since the relationship of what has been and what is now is dialectical, music is allowed to operate a retroactive reference of the present to the past – suggesting the path for a *regressive utopia* – and to reactivate, through a “tiger’s leap”, the unexpressed virtualities and the unrealized possibilities that still await to be fulfilled in its folds. “Kafka’s

³⁷ Viola Barovero, *Untitled*, 2012.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Sirens are silent. Perhaps because for Kafka music and singing are an expression or at least a token of escape, a token of hope which comes to us from that intermediate world – at once unfinished and commonplace, comforting and silly”³⁹.

Music, hence, maintains an intimate relationship with time, but also (or above all) with the absence of time, with the pure act not yet in power, with an eternal and hypostatized dimension from which, however, unexpressed virtualities can still arise. It seems to offer the utopian promise of a return “to a home where one has never been, which is nevertheless home”⁴⁰. This is, according to Pareyson, the “original possibility of music”, which can therefore be defined as “a reserve of unexploded images”⁴¹. As Benjamin said, in fact, “the shock with which a moment enters our consciousness as if already lived through tends to strike us in the form of a sound. It is a word, a rustling or knocking, that is endowed with the power to call us unexpectedly into the cool sepulchre of the past, from whose vault the present seems to resound only as an echo”⁴².

Bloch, analogously, believes that we can legitimately speak of an “extrahuman physics or metaphysics of sound”⁴³, in music in fact “there is a glowing and pounding within; there is an anonymous calling, waiting, knocking, entering, arriving, hesitating, an exuberant simultaneity here that otherwise appears on stage only during the most concise of all dramas”⁴⁴. Pareyson, on the other hand, believes that the music, frozen in the pages of the score, constantly asks to be updated in the interpretation. The performer, after all, seems to be involved in a process that transcends him, in feeling himself crossed by low and high notes, seems to come into contact with extratemporal and metaphysical dimension; carried by the feelings he himself spreads, but in a greater way than the listener, he seems to assume on himself the burden of the whole cosmic affair, the deepest suffering and the most cheerful joy, guilt and redemption, good and evil. After all, as Pareyson said, to perform a work means “to make it live out of

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁴¹ L. Pareyson, *L'estetica musicale di Schelling*, *op. cit.* p. 337.

⁴² W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. III, *op. cit.*, p. 389-390.

⁴³ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

his life, [...] to implement it in its full audible and visible reality”⁴⁵ realizing it as the work itself claims to be realized.

Thanks to its capacity to breach the *continuum* of history and recall that “secret agreement between past generations and the present one”⁴⁶, through the temporal suspension it produces and through its spiritual power, music can become both *utopian* and messianic, as a daydream, a dream of the future, “as the ‘waking dream’ of some demystification, some nameless, uniquely right fulfilment”⁴⁷. Music, as Benjamin would say, with its action of disenchantment, could arouse the awakened consciousness, offering us a chance for the oppressed past. In Benjamin, in fact, in the link with the concept of redemption, musical temporality is brought closer to messianic temporality. Since “it is the present that polarizes the event into fore- and after-history”⁴⁸, music, thanks to its extratemporal essence, has the ability to reopen, with a single gesture, any concluded history, as in the case of the *reprise*, in which the apparently exhausted performance breaks in and reaffirms all its strength. It is not a matter of a mere non-contemporaneity of the music, nor of a banal *revenant*, but of the potential, inscribed in the music, to illuminate, starting from the present, elements of the past, projecting them towards possible futures. In it, it is possible to grasp, “in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event”⁴⁹. Benjamin’s *Eingedenken* could represent a possibility to access that “brief minute of full possession of forms” – as borrowed from Focillon’s definition of the classical style –, that moment of “hesitant immobility” in which the needle of the balance only swings faintly⁵⁰. The “power of the keys” that such a moment possesses over a well-defined room of the past, until then closed, is the same that Giordano Bruno assigned to his *Clavis Magna*, that is, that of accessing the “rooms of memory” scattered in the Temple of Mnemosyne.

In other words, to summarize, musical contemplation, which lies on a meta-historical and metalinguistic level, allows the listener to transcend the

⁴⁵ L. Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

⁴⁶ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁴⁷ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁴⁸ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁵⁰ See W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*

finite and access a moment of hesitant immobility, full of utopian tensions. The musical experience, in fact, can undermine the continuum of history by producing a stop of the event, a dialectical reversal during which the awakened consciousness emerges from its dreamlike depths and enters the *now*, generating a new and particular perception of duration. He projects us into an alternative time, the “Time of Simonides” which Giordano Bruno referred to, where “what is forgotten is clear and what has been truncated again germinated”⁵¹, where, as Cuozzo would say, “death can be converted into life, terror into hope, *dama melancolia* into the saving angel of redemption”⁵². In this sense, music, as a “‘sound combination’ (*tönendes Verhältnis*) generated by the game of celestial spheres”⁵³, has the ability to quote what it was – “the flame once lit” and referring to the *Totally Other* of which Rudolph Otto and Max Horkheimer were talking about.

Pareyson, on the other hand – establishing a double analogy between music and soul and between music and cosmos –, thought of music as a figuration of unity in multiplicity: it – like any artistic form – reveals the inseparability of matter and spirit thanks to its particular figuration of infinity by means of the finite, “in other words, to try to find the right words for music’s power of action: here the sound truly draws, growing in flight, while the word just falls”⁵⁴. If, according to Pareyson, “music is the harmony of visible nature, the rhythm of things in progress, the movement of celestial bodies, made accessible to the hearing and transcribed into elements of human sound”, then “the forms of music are the forms of being and life of the celestial bodies as such: music is nothing more than the perceived rhythm and harmony of the visible universe”⁵⁵. After all, if sound is “the incarnation of the infinite in the finite”, we could consider it as “the word of God”⁵⁶.

⁵¹ Giordano Bruno, *Il sigillo dei sigilli. I diagrammi ermetici. Giordano Bruno filosofo e pittore*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 1995, p. 12.

⁵² G. Cuozzo, *L’Angelo della melancolia, op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵⁵ L. Pareyson, *L’estetica musicale in Schelling, op. cit.*, p. 368.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 369.