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# **The Hidden Unity**

**An Experimental View  
on Aesthetics and Semiotics  
of Music in the Czech Milieu**

# Introduction: Art as a function of life

It is claimed that noise level in the European cities increases each year by 1 decibel (dB). This means that the ever present sound, which we cannot close our ears to, begins to reach levels which are a health hazard. It is also said that some orchestra conductors, Herbert von Karajan, for example, observed as early as 25 years ago that the concert goers were becoming less sensitive to the perception of dynamic nuances in music, particularly where it came to an active perception of low dynamics. This observation has been correlated with the continuously increasing noise level in our surroundings. There is not just the sound of noisy traffic, there is also the noise from speakers in our households, shops, galleries and other places in the urban environment. The dynamic capacities of these devices exceed by many times the acoustic capabilities of the spaces in which they are installed (see: Center and Periphery. 1992).

Street shop vans, like Family Frost, drive through the streets loudly proclaiming our chance to buy an ice cream or frozen haddock. While the initial presence of this announcement may be melodic, its pitch is disturbing and insistent. Waiting for public transport in larger centres, we may be treated, for example, to *Rondeau à la Turk* or, maybe, *Für Elise*. On our way through banks we are accompanied by “serious” classical music while in the shopping malls we are motivated by the sentimental sounds of music, especially of the kind that “leaves no eye dry”, to persuade us to stay there longer. When we stay longer, we buy stuff. If we are moved to self-pity, we buy more. In the arcades of Prague Old Town, heavy metal screams from a music shop. Further on, on the corner a blind man with a dog, straight out of a film by Fellini, plays old tunes on an accordion. At home, sitting at the computer, our children scream loudly over the primitive grunts of the martial arts computer games.

We are deafening ourselves; yet, at the same time, there is a desire for more noise. Sound is a drug; particularly loud noise. In some way, we

start to resemble tuna fish in the northern seas; despite the ban they are being hunted by the sound, ultrasound in this case. Unstable creatures are always more susceptible to manipulation by this great Demiurge - Sound. With their earphones on, young people distance themselves from the human environment. This may be intentional as this environment is irritating to them. Sometimes they do it because their peers do it or just because it is irritating to their parents' generation. They have their specific generation traits; their music players are means of communication, of initiating relationships. But discotheques with stroboscopic laser lights turn them into a mass. This mass then slashes railway seats, or even one another. The din of emptiness reverberates in every corner of our macro- or micro-environment; disabling us, yet, at the same time, making us long for such disablement. We have nothing else, it seems. Still, there is something worse: the quiet emptiness; the emptiness of solitude, the boredom, the lack of stimulation and opportunities, the dark void.

We, the rational creatures of the 21st century, are scared by the quiet and darkness. We are scared of solitude. But are we really so rational? Or is it just a fiction of the bewildered creatures, which may be building information highways and super-duper expressways but are already aware that they do not know what the result may be? Like Ladislav Tondl wrote (1992), technology has a Janus face.

After declaring a truce, the Irish went to the streets banging the pot lids as is their custom in summer of 1994. TV news showed children, adults and the elderly, all marching, without any explanation for banging the lids. But when we look at mythology, let's say, Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1969), for example or one of the volumes of J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1915), we can find an explanation there. The rite of exorcising demons, illnesses or sins comprises several elements: one, fasting, washing off and cleansing, and secondly, the symbolic extinguishing of light or a ritual fire. Three, exorcising the demons by the use of noise, shouts and banging; first, inside the dwellings, followed by a hullabaloo and uproar all over the village. Such exorcism may take the form of chasing away a ritual animal, a sacrificial scapegoat, and this is what one of the volumes of *The Golden Bough* is about. In the place of a scapegoat, however, there may be a human being through whom all the transgressions of a community may be exorcised. Ancient Jews and Babylonians used to

chase a sacrificial goat away into the desert. Such are the deep roots of certain community behaviours even at the end of 20th century. The exorcism of demons, illnesses or sins is an attempt to restore mythical time, the time “in illo tempore”, the time of Creation. This cyclic regeneration of time tends to cancel or dismiss the linear progression of history unconcerned with ‘rebirth’ (life cycle) but with the flow of reality. And this is where we come to the roots of, for example, the rites of spring and sacrifices connected with that. There is this constant interplay of ambivalence and polarity, fasting and carnival, sadness and joy, desperation and orgies. Brutality is undoubtedly connected with such rites but it is functional here; it is the brutality in the name of Life. The description of it may, still today, serve us as model of violence.

What is violence in terms of sound? Each of us can certainly imagine the sounds that are irritating, which hurt us, which gives us goose pimples. The sound of an old dentist’s drill, a siren, building noises, traffic, the neighbours’ teenage children’s cassette player, and so on. It may actually be a sound which under certain circumstances may even become excessive. There is an excellent detective story by Dorothy Sayers called *The Unnatural Death* where the murder weapon is the sound of a bell rung in close proximity to the victim. What is really important for a sound to be called violent is not just its excess, harshness, volume or power reaching the threshold of pain, it is its unexpectedness, its ability to surprise. The observation of this aspect of sound provided a basis of series of experiments, conducted by the semiotician and sociologist Vladimir Karbusický with his pupils at Hamburg University. The results were published in his *Kosmos-Mensch-Musik* (1990).

The unexpectedness of sound may take either its essential form (we are being surprised, startled by a sudden change) or the form of the chaotic disturbance of the sound’s structure. Karbusický relates these “evil interruptions”, or evil surprises, with the myth of Satan. During the evolution of music, defined as the art of sound, many symbolic devices were developed related to “thanatos”. In the history and theory of music, the tritone, the perfect fourth or the interval of five tempered semi-tones, a dissonant or, rather, incongruous, sound became known as the devil’s interval, the ‘diabolus in musica’. Motifs including tritone symbolize death; for example, the motif from Josef Suk’s symphonic poem *Raduz* and

Mahulena which the Czech radio used in 1937 to announce the death of T. G. Masaryk, or Juliette' motif from Martinů's opera of the same name with the libretto by Georges Neveux. These are poetic symbols of death in music, based on the cadenzas using tritone. The very etymology of the word 'diabolus' refers to someone introducing, i. e. throwing in, something strange or incongruous. Medieval music theory always had a good sense of the semantics of a word. (See: Karbusický, 1990).

Nonetheless, music is not just the production of aesthetic sound, it also uses sounds to communicate. It is an extension, another expression of the human voice. Music is able to evoke wide range of emotions where the 'evil surprise' plays an important role. Besides the inimical emotions, full hostility or antagonism, and situations connected with these types of emotions, there may be also ritualistic situations in which aggression arises directly from myth. There are artistic genres, or certain specific works of art, which could have had or, indeed, had a ritual function. The question is, though, whether some works of art exist simply to utilize violent means, including the harshness of sound, for whatever reason. A fascination with evil, a predilection for it, unquestionably forms an aspect of the works of art, be they high or low, consumerist or relating to advertising.

Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* (1917-1922), with the libretto by Büchner, and his later opera *Lulu* with Wedekind's libretto (1929-1935) may both be considered violent works reflecting their times and representing a significant breakthrough. Violent images are at the foundations of Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron* (1930-32, unfinished). Violent scenes may be found during periods of war in the works of many artists, from the oldest of civilizations until the present. This was the case during the First World War and afterwards, as may be seen in the works of the *Der Blaue Reiter* group to which Arnold Schönberg also belonged or in the works of Georg Grosz or the works of the Dadaists around the *Cabaret Voltaire*. This is where not only the Dadaists but also the "intonarumori", or the "noise intoners", come in.

The "intonarumori" were representatives of the Futurist manifesto on music. Brutalism was the term for this direction surviving until the second half of the 20th century. Vladimir Lébl comments on this movement in his *Electronic Music* (1966) in the chapter "Historical Background". In terms of music, the most important personality in this respect was the painter

and composer Luigi Russolo (1856-1947), a member of Marinetti's group and the author of the manifesto *The Art of Noise* as well as the inventor of the *intonarumori* used in the *Cabaret Voltaire* in Zurich. The bathos of searching for an endless variety in sounds as well, or noises, was expressed in this notable observation: "Noise accompanies every manifestation of our life. Noise is familiar to us. Noise has the power to bring us back to life". Russolo then continues: "the art of noises must not be limited to a mere imitative reproduction" and goes on to say that "the variety of noises is infinite...one day we will be able to distinguish among ten, twenty or thirty thousands different noises. We will not have to imitate these noises but rather to combine them according to our artistic fantasy."

This futurist ideal of music was introduced to the second half of the 20th century by Edgar Varèse (1885-1965) and, especially, by John Cage (1912-1992) in his manifesto from 1937 called *The Future of Music*. This was freely quoted and referred to by Lébl (1966): "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at 50 m.p.h. Static between the stations. Rain. [...] Every film studio has a library of "sound effects" recorded on film. With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of any one of these sounds and to give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach on anyone's imagination. Given four film phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heart beat and landslide. If this word, music, is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth- century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound!"

This futurist ideal was then carried on further by Murray Schaeffer with the main motto being "polluting sound with music" (i. e. that "music pollutes sound"). The avant-gardist's theory was that according to the available literary resources in the earlier civilizations the majority of sounds were the sounds of nature (75%) with the human voices making up 25% and the rest (5%) being the sounds of instruments (i. e. human-made noise or music). In the Middle Ages this ratio was 32:52:16, during the Industrial Revolution growing to 9:25:66, while at present the ratio is 6:26:68. Schaeffer stated further that while in the past the majority of sounds were discrete (i. e. separate and discontinuous), at "present" (meaning the last third of 20th century) sounds that are "stationary" in nature prevail (that

is, clustered and continuous) with the first source of this continuous sound being the combustion engine. He goes on to say that noise, in fact, is a kind of territorial expansion and that the Christendom came to an end when the sound of the police siren became louder than the sound of church bells.

This is not the place to go into the origin and development of the electronic music. It is an art but our scope is wider. Nor shall we discuss the electronic instruments or the predecessors of such instruments. As an aside, though, the scandal that surrounded the performance in 1917 of Eric Satie's ballet *Parade* should be mentioned, with the artists such as Picasso, Cocteau and Diaghilev involved. Although sirens, typewriters, a revolver or aeroplane engine were not used, as Satie called for, the displeasure of the audience was such that the composer's fame was established overnight, later also contributing to the establishment of the groups of composers, such as the famous Parisian Six or *Le Nouveaux Jeunes*, involving artists such as Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc and Taillefer.

The leading composers, representing the most significant composition currents of the 20th century, assigned a much more important role to sound than ever before (see: Faltin, 1966 and Ross, 1968). First there was the 'Klangmusik' which evolved gradually through rejection of formal elements in favour of sonic components into the so-called 'New Music'. Instrumental interjections, screeching or scraping sounds, a full range of dissonant sounds and the full use of the acoustic space (further increased by the electronically produced sound), which was either extremely compacted or, in turn, completely empty. Regardless whether this was achieved through the use of instruments alone or by with electronically processed sound or purely electronic or concrete sounds, all these techniques were directed towards a single goal: the participation and involvement of an audience too comfortably rooted in tradition, indeed, in life itself. At this point it should be mentioned that this is also a historical question in the sense that many shocking novelties soon becomes quite normal: for example, the contemporary cartoons showing Hector Berlioz conducting cannons and guns.

RCA Victor issued a LP record called *Fortissimo* with the subtitle *The Loudest Classical Music of the World*. The record contains 16 tracks with the compositions or excerpts from classical music of the 19th and 20th centuries notable precisely for their loudness. We find included, for example, the finale from Puccini's *Turandot*, the dance of the Montagues

and Capulets from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, an excerpt from *Also sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss, parts of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries*, the triumphant ending of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* and selections from *The Nutcracker*. There are also pieces by Aaron Copland, Vaughan Williams, Carl Orff, Edward Elgar, as well as Gioacchino Rossini and his finale from the *William Tell Overture*. What we have here is, of course, aggression but not the aggression of rock music. In rock music, neither the sonic power nor the aggression has any justification or reason in and of itself and there is nothing to which we, as an audience, may adopt either an aesthetic or a moral attitude. The danger of rock music is in its commercialisation together with the transformation of the purposeful generic aggression; i. e. the aggression of the human spirit which is turned into a purposeless (apart from sales) commercial article. It is not music, it is just a sound turned into a commodity. Heavy metal, punk or rap is always related to lifestyle hence also connected to mass ideology, and is as dangerous as the easily accessible addictive drug.

These days there is also a music of silence, all kinds of types of musical therapies using meditative music, vibrations, what have you. There is another approach to the "processing" of music as used by various composers like, for example, John Cage, Giacinto Scelsi, and others.

So far we have been concerned mainly with the question of the possible violent effect of sound, or music, as an art form. Now, if we take a look around, it can be said that this art form which is being examined here, is but a part (albeit one of the most civilised) of the general culture. Nonetheless, there is also a wider context as represented by the entire living environment. So we might ask: are there an increasing number of aural disorders in the population as a whole? Are there an increasing number of children born with damaged hearing? Do the hearing disorders, either at birth or acquired, have a significant or only a marginal effect on the general population? Are these disorders causing other disorders, for example, nervous disorders?

The effect of sound on the population was the subject of study in Finland (*Acta Semiotica Fennica* I, 1992). It showed that music may be a vehical for liberation and self-assertive aggression as well as, at the same time, contributing to an increasing number of aural disorders among the



Finnish male population. In her study, Pirjo Kukkonen, a Finnish semiotician, points out the deep roots of the need for silence in the Finnish culture and in the nature of Finns and comments on the far-reaching changes caused by the loss of silence (*Acta Semiotica Fennica* II, 1993).

The Janus face of technology may be illustrated by the phonoscope, for example. It is a device used for identifying voices. Keeping a database of voice “imprints” then makes it possible to trace the criminals as the “imprint” of voice is as unique as fingerprints. We are at the beginning of an era when we are linked by the Internet and communication highways. The meta-art program, the avant-garde vision of Karl - Heinz Stockhausen from the 1970s, may become a reality thanks to the all-reaching communication systems. His Master’s Voice indeed manipulates the masses by removing personal individuality; precisely the same thing which is done by totalitarian regimes. In contrast to totalitarian regimes, this manipulating voice comes from within, not from without. But if we do not succeed in establishing a dialogue with this voice, if we let this manipulating voice from without lead a powerful, and eventually also an all-knowing, monologue, we will be in a deep trouble. Our “will to make sense” shall be adapted (Frankl, 1991). We shall become, more or less, trained dogs. So far, however, we still have a choice. We may choose to switch this voice off and defend ourselves against it, because this voice is that “din of emptiness”. It is the voice of fear, the fear of silence, of darkness, of solitude. It is certainly befitting that the question of a defence against the destruction of the meaning of life should be put to art.

“Art is a function of life” wrote Slovak composer and writer Roman Berger in his essay. Reflections of art strengthen and intensify the possibilities for humanity.

And this is also true for the interpersonal hypothesis of music.