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Musical Gesture as a Means of Composition in Recent Music: Some Observations

ABSTRACT

Background

In musical scholarship a movement towards a broader focus on the musical corporeality has been developed actively through recent decades (Lidov, 1987; Hatten, 1993; Hatten, 2004). Gesture in music can be studied by different approaches: phenomenological, functional, physiological, cognitive, style-historical, performance practice, social-critical etc. (Gritten and King, 2006). Musical gesture itself can be considered from the viewpoints of 1) communication; 2) control; 3) metaphor. Metaphor is involved when gestures work as concepts that project physical movement, sound, or other types of perception to cultural topics (Alexander Refsum Jensenius, Marcelo M. Wanderley, Rolf Inge Godøy, Marc Leman, 2010). Using metaphor theory, we can argue that musical thought of a composer as well as of a performer is grounded in a bodily experience and thus a new concept of musical gesture emerges to fix a specific shift in understanding of composition. Now it can be regarded in the perspective of its energetic basis. R. Hatten's definition is relevant: 'I define human gesture rather inclusively as any energetic shapings through time that may be interpreted as significant' (Hatten, 2006).

The understanding of bodily basis of reason and imagination (Johnson, 1987) poses a question: is there any foundation for interpreting contemporary composers' work in terms of "musical gesture" and what should be considered as "musical gesture" in recent composition? The idea to conduct research in this direction was triggered by numerous statements by such composers as Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, Morton Feldman, Alfred Schnittke, Brian Ferneyhough, as well as their music. Since each of these authors has developed his individual approach to composition, it seems appropriate to analyze the coordination between personal concepts of 'musical gesture' and personal means of composition.

Luciano Berio begins his article 'Du geste et de Piazza Carità' with a quotation from 'Ulysses' by J. Joyce about gesture as the most universal language and introduces thereafter the notion of "musical gesture" into the realm of musical composition. The article itself can be viewed as an extension of Berio's involvement with Bertholt Brecht's idea on Gestus forming the kernel of his theatre ideas. Brecht's Gestus is a complex concept expressing the essence of a dramatic character through a symbolic bodily movement. According to Berio, performer's bodily movement is loaded with an overall historical experience of composer's and performer's interaction, which is embodied in a musical composition; thus, musical gesture is a sort of musical figure capturing artistic energy, forming indissoluble link with an instrument and all the plurality of historical styles that express themselves through performer's gesture, as in *Sequenza XIII* for accordion (Gartmann, 2007). Berio's approach to gesture could

be qualified as '*motor action*' on the two-fold basis of instrumental thinking and historical content. In the score this 'motor action' takes the form of a short 'musical moment', which differs from conventional units of composition (such as 'motif' or 'theme') by its freedom of development.

Pierre Boulez began to discuss gestuality in his late theoretical works, namely in 'Leçons de musique' (2005), being apparently inspired by his own conducting experience and his contacts with Berio. His 'musical gesture' lacks historical perspective that was so important for Berio and concentrates on the objective quality of a holistic phenomenon: the beginning, the middle and the ending are the most notable features of his musical gesture in 'Sur incises' for three pianos, three harps and three percussionists (1996/1998/2003). We would qualify it as a '*motor action*' based on the characteristics of an abstract continual-discrete object.

Morton Feldman differs from his contemporaries, Berio and Boulez, by his deeply personal approach to instrumental attack. In his piano compositions, such as the 'Vertical thoughts', he pays exceptional attention to the very moment of attack, which has to be very soft, just enough to make the piano string vibrate. Feldman's concentration on attack makes it possible to interpret his gestuality as tactile, connected mostly with touch. But the 'parental structure' of such an attack obviously is rooted not only in his taking lessons from Alexander Skryabin's classmate Vera Maurina-Press but also in his obsession with the art of abstract expressionists (Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning and others) in which the stroke of paint brush can serve as a counterpart to instrumental attack. So, Feldman's gesture has *visual-tactile* basis.

Helmut Lachenmann's approach seems to be also of tactile nature. His concept of '*musique concrète instrumentale*' is based on unconventional playing techniques using various novel modes of attack and articulation and thus fixing the listener's attention on sound energy and sound material. In such works as his String Quartets, articulation is achieved its effect through plurality of the performers' gestures and their exceptional variety aiming at a new *hearing*. As if negating Berio's intention to load sound with historical connotations, Lachenmann aspires for unfamiliar sound in order to shock his listeners by its very quality and thus to acquire a special content through uncomfortable aspects of listening perception. The composer's own metaphor of music as 'Robinson Crusoe's adventure' helps to understand the roots of his intentions.

Alfred Schnittke was obviously inspired by Berio and his 'historical listening' when he turned to his 'polystylistic'. We will never know whether Schnittke knew Berio's ideas on gesture or not, but in his Second Violin Sonata (*Quasi una sonata*) one could clearly discern some topical gestures of the classical sonata, such as the opening gesture with its dialogue between instruments and quickly developing theatrical atmosphere of instrumental personification (almost an 'in-

strumental theatre'), the visual and kinetic nature of performance, the physicality of music-making. In this piece *artistic* gesture is prevalent.

The observations of musical gesture in recent and contemporary art music could be continued: such composers as Brian Ferneyhough and Olivier Messiaen, Kaija Saariaho and Harrison Birtwistle, Edison Denisov and Nikolai Sidelnikov represent different aspects of gestuality in their work.

Composers of different countries and background feel necessary to change their approach to composition from rather rational and abstract to more human, corporeal, bodily-based. Human body and its senses – tactility, hearing, vision, motor actions in their different aspects – form the basis of musical gestures. The nature of musical gesture in recent and contemporary composition seems to be that of quasi-spontaneous music-making which has become attractive for postmodern composers. And 'if the amorphous 'new spirit' of contemporary music has any coherence at all, it lies in its spontaneity, immediacy, its fondness for subconscious decision-making. This is all a far cry from the rigorous intellectual control and pompous strictures of the 1950s' (Osborne, 1984).

Aims and repertoire studied

Study of musical gesture in the art music compositions of the second half of the XXth century:

Luciano Berio *Sequenzas*

Pierre Boulez *Sur Incises*

Morton Feldman *Vertical Thoughts*

Helmut Lachenmann *String Quartets*

Alfred Schnittke *Second Violin Sonata*

Methods

Comparative method, hermeneutic, semiological analysis

Implications

Musical gesture as a means of composition becomes a basic constituent of contemporary music analysis

Keywords

corporeality, musical gesture as metaphor, recent and contemporary composition, human senses

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