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Inner structures and spirituality in Jonathan Harvey's music

ABSTRACT

Background

The paper aims to analyse the way in which Jonathan Harvey's compositional language and the use of new technologies interact with extra-musical motivations, essentially tied with a search for transcendence. The analysis will focus on some of Harvey's instrumental works with or without electronics (*Run Before Lightning*, *Tombeau de Messiaen*, *Quartet no. 4*, *Flight Elegy*), in which the interaction of musical structures with spiritual and oneiric implications realizes a sort of narrative.

Can music express something outside it or it is only made of sounds expressing no other thing than themselves? To this question Jonathan Harvey answers that music is both, it is only itself and also something else. Already in 1965 he was interested in exploring the external-internal sources of musical creation; indeed he wrote a doctoral dissertation on musical inspiration (*The composer's idea of his inspiration*, University of Glasgow, 1965), in which he described in this way a composer's inspiration when writing a piece:

The term inspiration, when applied to musical composition, commonly denotes that which has given a composer a musical idea, whether this be a single motive or a whole work. It must be an unknown and mysterious source in order to warrant the name inspiration.

The *unknown* source is the unconscious, the *mysterious* source is the projection of the unconscious onto mountains, sea, human situations and activity, art, other music or anything in the external world which rings a bell within the composer and mirrors his own deep feelings. This latter source is partially, because symbolically, known and understood, the former, however, is totally obscure. (Harvey 1965, p. 1)

Then, speaking of the 'stimuli to composition', Harvey states that 'external stimuli, phenomenal or noumenal, are parts of the internal psychic reality and are simple projections of the same.' (Harvey 1965, p. 34).

In the following years the psychoanalytic approach to inspiration was enriched by the influence of Rudolf Steiner's writings and eventually by eastern forms of spirituality.

In mature years vedic meditation and Buddhist thinking have brought Harvey to conceive music as a path to transcendence, music being at the same time a mirror of transcendence and a way to attain it, a revelation of the otherness.

The spiritual in music and the music as spiritual is so central in Harvey's thought that he entitled *In quest of Spirit. Thoughts on music* the volume containing his Ernst Bloch lectures (1999). In this volume he says the last word on what music is for him: it is a spiritual journey and something ethical in a very deep way.

But how does Harvey's music realize otherness? Through which technical features and compositional processes?

First of all it is necessary to go back to his idea of inspiration, as an idea governing the creation of a work of art. In the compositions dating from 1980s there is a certain number of recurring themes or stimuli; they can be defined as relating to dream, natural elements, upward movement (flight), purification processes (from conflict and division to serenity and unity), death. Titles often help us identify these inspirations: *Flight Elegy* (1983–89) for violin and piano 'is an elegy for the RAF pilot and violinist Peter Gibbs' who was a passionate air pilot and died in mysterious circumstances while flying over Western Scotland (programme note). The original idea of the piece would seem to be only an external circumstance, but we would not completely understand the work's meaning if we should not consider the fact that the imagination of flight is a constant in Harvey's works. Going upward is going in the direction of infinity and transcendence: the same Harvey has often referred to a dream of his in which he was able to fly, but when awake he couldn't convince anyone else of the truthfulness of his experience. The violin flies in the higher register, repeating brief motifs with microtonal inflections; then, at the centre of the piece, there is a progressive and dramatic falling down, in a mimetic way. But death being only a transition in Buddhism, not an end, after this anti-climax the piece presents a re-reading of the first section.

The fourth *String Quartet* is also pervaded by the idea of upward movement, taking inspiration from Gaston Bachelard's book *L'air et les songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (*Air and dreams. An essay on the imagination of movement*). The last of Harvey's string quartets presents a loss of weight, an ethereal quality of sounds that enables them to fly high. In this dreamy atmosphere the music tells (is) a story of successive reincarnations, of vital cycles in Buddhist terms: the sound comes out of silence, is progressively organized in a musical discourse and eventually dissolves in scattered particles and lastly again into silence. The live electronics and the spatialization process play a very important role in this narrative of successive reincarnations and progressive purification. Transforming the sound of the real quartet and making it fly around the hall at different speeds and in different directions, electronics form that 'aura' which allow the metaphysical experience to take place.

Run before lightning (2004) for flute and piano tells again a story of dreaming: 'the piece was prompted by the experience of exposure to close lightning, and running fast before it in wild exhilaration, aware that it could kill at any moment' (programme note). Lightning and storms have a long history in music and here Harvey doesn't avoid a mimetic representation of the natural elements in the piano and flute. The violent first

section, made of fast and rubato arpeggios in the lower register of the piano and strong blows of wind in the flute, comes back during the piece alternating with two imitative sections, but always reducing its size, until it metamorphoses losing its anchorage in the low register and fluctuating in a symmetric harmonic field in soft dynamics. Harvey considers the latter to have metaphysical and transcendental implications and makes a large use of symmetric pitch-structures in his compositions.

Tombeau de Messiaen (1994) for piano and tape is another example of a meditation on death. It was written as a homage to the composer who deeply influenced Harvey both in the musical processes and in the spiritual motivations of his creative output. If death is at the centre of the piece in its long silence immediately after the beginning and in the final katabasis, the piece is also a narrative of ambiguity. Ambiguity is a central concern for Harvey: in a spiritual sense ambiguity reveals the illusionary reality of things, events, and human lives; in art it is a way to explore the liminal state of phenomena and objects, the intermediate state between differentiation and unity. In *Tombeau de Messiaen* the piano is coupled with a tape composed of 12 electronic pianos, each tuned in the harmonic spectrum of one of the 12 pitch-classes; the real piano and its electronic alter-ego often share the same musical material, but in a continual fluctuation between pitch coincidence and spectral differentiation. Ambiguity becomes a path to transcendence.

The analysis of musical processes, and of the interaction between electronics and vocal/instrumental writing, together with an examination of his pre-compositional materials and his writings enable us to better understand his idea of music as a mystical experience.

Aims and repertoire studied

The paper aims to analyse the way in which Jonathan Harvey's compositional language and the use of new technologies interact with extra-musical motivations, essentially tied with a search for transcendence. To this purpose I examine the following works by Jonathan Harvey: *Run Before Lightning*, *Tombeau de Messiaen*, *Quartet no. 4*, *Flight Elegy*.

Methods

Structural analysis; analysis of harmonic fields; analysis of variation processes; spectral analysis.

Implications

The analysis of musical processes, and of the interaction between electronics and vocal/instrumental writing, together with an examination of Harvey's pre-compositional materials and of his writings enable us to better understand his idea of music as a mystical experience.

Keywords

Jonathan Harvey, contemporary music, musical meaning, spirituality, spectralism, electroacoustic music.

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