

Finales

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This is a presentation about music—specifically, symphonic music. Firstly, I give it as an aficionado wishing to share some of his tastes. Secondly, I am motivated by the embarrassing silence surrounding the genre we know as classical music (I will deal with the definition of this term later on). I don't mean silence in the sense of the appreciations that may arise from a more or less successful interpretation, where the qualities of a performer may be compared and contrasted with those of others, nor do I mean silence in biographical or musicological data that could fill entire libraries. I mean the silence regarding the contents of music beyond the merely descriptive, which offers a powerful contrast to that of the field of visual arts, where the proliferation of texts is commonplace, and where it is possible, without intending to be ironic, to publish complete collections about art without a single image. The analysis of music is a sort of aphoristic and isolated exercise, and if it weren't for thinkers such as Saïd or Adorno we would face a wasteland when discussing the development of musical language in the past century, which has witnessed year by year, the increased withdrawal of so-called erudite music into the niche it occupies within cultural production.

To begin with, we could ask what distinguishes what we call classical music from the rest of the musical genres. I believe that the answer to this question is in the primacy of the musical text. Other traditions, such as the Indian musical tradition, for example, emphasize the figure of a singer or instrumentalist who is capable of developing extended improvisations from a series of strict parameters. Classical music places its focus on the composer, whose intentions are expressed in a sophisticated system of writing that establishes and restricts the terms of interpretation, leaving a minimum of space for improvisation. On the other hand, it moves music away from its function in social life—as accompaniment for celebrations, as part of a religious rite or a narrative vehicle—establishing the ritual of listening as a separate act submitted to its own conventions. The imposing concert hall, the solemn silence that takes over the audience, the nervous coughs, the strict etiquette of applause, the gala dress code, the tuning of the orchestra, the entrance of the director or the soloist, are all elements of a ritual refined during the nineteenth

century and the first half of the Twentieth, and whose cult object is the score laying upon the music stands.

You could ask how this tradition has managed—despite all its pedagogical, infrastructural, and organizational needs—to exert such a powerful attraction. Today orchestras, concert rooms and classical music programs are still part of the cultural agenda of almost any city of reasonable scale in our continent; not to mention the huge supply that you can find all over Europe, cradle of this tradition, and the proliferation of conservatoires, orchestras and prodigious performers in China, Japan or South Korea. How is it that a tradition that began in Courtesan Europe and developed throughout the turbulent processes of industrialization and creation of Nation States, a tradition that then took a look in the mirror of the years before World War I and reflected music that seemed not even to want to listen to itself, was capable of defining itself as such a high an achievement of civilization, indispensable for any nation? It could be argued that other European cultural institutions—such as the museum—were exported throughout the world as part of the colonization process, and today carry out their problematic function now aware of their own context. But none of these institutions remains in such a defiant state of suspended animation, with a repertoire resisting change or refusing to break with its own routine and conventions. Thus, even today, the moment of highest liberation for a symphony orchestra consists in playing its own version of mambo or a *danzón* that no one can dance to.

I could quote two reasons as adequate explanation to this: the first one, is the musical text itself, of which the writing establishes a language barrier at the same time as it overcomes many others, offering, as few other instances do, an illusion of universality. The second one is the institutionalism that music and its ritual incarnate, and which shelters a community in the armour of civilization. In fact, to find a similar level of codification you would have to be present at an act of government, at a religious ritual or at one of the more stale university ceremonies. This institutional function is one that music adopted gladly during the nineteenth century, coinciding with the foundation of professional orchestras and their distancing from the courtesan and ecclesiastic world that had sheltered musical production for 200 years.

This independence allowed for a growing autonomy of musical language, of which symphonies are one of the paradigmatic forms. This form derives from small instrumental interludes of two or three movements included in operas or oratorios, and which, by the end of the eighteenth century, began to be interpreted as works in their own right. The instrumental character and the collective interpretation of a symphony left aside the necessity of placing music at the service of one narration

or to write music for a singer or soloist to show off. Within a more or less conventional structure, symphonies opened a space for the free development of musical ideas and soon became the genre that gave legitimation and perspective to the ambitions and talents of a composer.

This brief introduction establishes the frame in which to begin discussing the subject of this presentation: the symphonic ending. In this exercise we will emulate a bad reader, one who is bored or anxious and looks at the final pages of his novel to know what has been the destiny of the characters that the writer has taken care of developing throughout hundreds and hundreds of pages. In fact, the comparison between symphony and novel is not random, and though it would probably require a student of culture more sharp and disciplined than I to offer the historical and theoretical fundamentals of that relationship, it's not hard to map the tribulations, conundrums, aspirations and throes of destiny that the novelistic art puts its characters through onto the thematic developments modulations, dramatic climaxes and tragic or triumphal resolutions of a symphony's musical motifs. The novel explores the mystery of individuality through time, and builds a narrative world alive in its own right and on its own terms. A symphony opens a new sonorous universe that, as the nineteenth century develops, becomes more ample and enveloping, more extensive in time, more extravagant in its ambitions and trusting in its autonomy. But unlike the novel, which must be grounded in historical and quotidian conflicts, the symphonic form seems to move towards rarefaction, involved on its own language and apparently alienated from the social and discursive spheres. Symphonies have become most complete expressions of this illusion that keeps classical music as a paradoxically mute object of veneration.

So, what could be the content of this music? Could we elucidate it from the 15 or 20 beats that close one piece? I look to the end because that is where the piece draws its relation with the silence that follows, and with the silence preceding the first measure. In the end, the composer must decide what to do with the sonorous world he has created, and which has reclaimed from the spectators not only their entire attention, but also their immobility and silence. The composer can choke it, lose it in the heights, punch it to death, take it to paroxysm or simply make it stop, as someone stops a locomotive or pulls down the sails in a ship. The orgasm, the fall, death and catastrophe are codified in these final notes, which are a good starting point to explain the cultural weight of these works and to understand the world of sonorous imagination that opens and closes their scores.

As a first example let's take a look at the most famous symphony of all, the only one whose notes have entered our every day lexicon. "Ta-ta-ta-ta," hums a

student facing a test, or the soccer fan before the decisive penalty. When an admirer made up that Beethoven referred to that moment as "destiny knocking at the door," he never imagined that a comedian (I don't know who, but I am sure that it was a comedian) would take it in such a literal way, and that it would end up being hummed before the most trivial decisions. But instead of revisiting that beginning, let us begin by this end:

Beethoven Video 5' 47"

If until recently symphonies ended with a rondo—a movement of quick pace and comparatively light musical material—that finished with more or less predictable, graceful and ingenious resolutions, this seems to delimit a territory, hermetically closing a sonorous frontier. Music literally accumulates all of the performers' energies in a cavalcade towards the end, which seems to postpone at every climax. In this end, the C major chord is repeated about twenty times. Using Edward Said's words, the composer seems to say "C major is mine, mine, mine," appropriating it in his own right after an exercise of heroic individualism. If you can frequently hear lighthearted talk of "musical architectures" to describe complex and ambitious compositions, here the simile is not entirely inaccurate, since chords play the role of columns, elements of structure which are at the same time their portal and their support. Thus, the idea of the classical acquires an unusual expression.

If the symphonic orchestra manifests the existence of a wealthy and organized society, the power given to the composer by placing this device in his hands—and the expectations that this awakened—were the expression of a bourgeoisie ever more confident in its aspirations. The heroic ending is at the same time a closure of the musical construction and a guideline for the reappearance, so to speak, of the community gathered around the score in their ovation or rejection of the piece. But before long, antiheroes begin to appear on stage. The second example comes from Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*: a piece that pretends to musically narrate the tribulations of an artist in love, who, submerged in a narcotic dream, hallucinates having murdered his beloved, assists afterwards to his own execution and is then witness of a Witch's Sabbath around his grave, where he will be tormented by the spirit of his deceased beloved. Here, a quotation from *Dies Irae*, a hymn from the mass for the dead, mixes with a sort of diabolic dance in a frenetic and accelerated ending, which final chord seems, nonetheless, to leave the narration in an ellipse, stressing its unreality:

Berlioz Video 40"

In the symphonic tradition, works as deliberately narrative as this one are the exception more than the rule. However, Berlioz does nothing if not make explicit that which can be appreciated even in the pieces with a language that intends to distance itself from any program or philosophical statement: that things *happen* to music. That, beyond musical purity, themes cut into each other, intermingles, illuminate or darken in recognizable ways. That, the inflections of speech and the body's rhythms will always be contained in musical phrases. It is enough to listen to the last beats of the exemplary composer of Romanticism, Brahms's Fourth Symphony. Here, before exaltation there is precipitated fall. Violins seem almost to deny their role, and, more than drawing a limit, the ending seems like a tear:

Brahms 26"

Pieces such as Brahms', however, set the precedent for an increasing rarefaction of musical material. Symphonies gained in length, orchestras gained in size and writing gained in ambition, density and complexity. Symphonies such as Bruckner's are done without consideration for the listener's time, convinced of the composer's privilege and the necessity of carrying his ideas as far as possible, which in Brucknerian technique possibly means slower and higher. By the end of his Eighth Symphony, the horns, the trumpets and the violins articulate among each other the four movements' themes, with a parsimony that reminds us of a procession more than a cavalcade. Yet what peeks out in the articulation of these phrases is something more than the alpine heights or the slow transit of the clouds.

Bruckner Video 1:30

Is it too daring to find in this ending the heavy rhythm of a locomotive slowing down? After all, Bruckner has been criticized for his tendency towards the mechanical repetition of themes, which seem to get blocked and move towards the next step only to stop once again. It would be to risky to depict Bruckner as a predecessor of minimalism, but I think it attractive to speculate about the reflection of a mechanical attraction in his work, in which the author himself and his admirers want to see a movement towards the transcendental.

The essential author to give meaning to this exercise is Gustav Mahler. Mahler's music represents the symphonic genre's most reflexive look towards its

surroundings, and in it, it is possible to move from the cleanest heroic illusion to the literal disintegration of the orchestra's ensemble.

Mahler Fragment 1: 8"

Here, the inheritance of the Beethovenian ending isn't difficult to perceive, with the D Major chord repeated about ten times. We must go a little further, to the Third Symphony—which is still the longest composition in the symphonic repertoire—to encounter this anomaly. It happens in the middle of the first movement, where the music seems to get caught in a whirlwind and reinforced towards a premature ending. The fragments of the theme that opens the movement can be heard here and there, enunciated in a heroic or a comical way, leaving the listener with the feeling of having witnessed a true debacle.

Mahler Fragment 3A, 46"

This musical shipwreck is emblematic of all the later Mahlerian production, busy with the constant undermining of the musical material that is presented under a certain light, only to mutate after having its integrity and aspirations questioned by all kinds of antithetical resources. No wonder Mahler prefigures the final distancing of the classical tradition in dodecaphony. He doesn't do it by a mere technical procedure, however, but by a kind of historization of the material, which becomes the subject of a time that is no longer mere duration, but also degradation and atrophy. And yet, the Third Symphony arrives to a more familiar ending: a slow and extremely prolonged version of the previously shipwrecked theme. Something is expressed here that reminds us of an encounter with the ocean, as if musical breath didn't stop but no longer had a place to stand.

Mahler Fragment 3B, 1'

Let us continue with Gustav Mahler. His Sixth Symphony is like the distorted image of the first, and the glimpses of heroism are once and again abated by sardonic trills and degrading mutations. The ending is twice stopped in its development by what the composer describes as the "bangs of a hammer" that must be played by a kind of hybrid between a drum and a sarcophagus. After the two hammer bangs, and the music literally agonizing, there's one last coup de grâce that never stops surprising even the most experienced listener.

Mahler Fragment 6, 0:30

In *The Song of the Earth*—a work which is not properly a symphony but that, considering the entire oeuvre of this composer can only be considered as part of his symphonic production—Mahler abandons the references to military bands and peasant dances and lowers the tone of his exalted melodies. In their place, he decides to put into music a series of Chinese poems translated to German, with an orchestra of considerable dimensions, yet which is rarely listened to in its entirety. Instead the orchestration turns to small groups that form and dissolve in a few beats, giving the entire work an intimate and fleeting feeling. It is remarkable that amongst all of Mahler's opuses, it is in this weird Chinese universe where the irony seems more remote, as if the mask of otherness gave the composer permission to develop the musical material without looking to where he could trip it up. The last song of the cycle, *The Farewell*, lasts as long as the preceding five, but unlike them, its integrity seems to be at play, about to lose cohesion, even some of its passages are marked to be played "without paying attention to time." The end of this song is a long disappearance of the orchestra, which breathes in before the absolute silence only to wane once more, while the voice sings the word *ewig* (eternally) over and over. If we understand the symphonic ending as the place where music is articulated with the world's noise that inevitably follows, the end of *The Song of the Earth* is a sort of gradual surrender.

Video Mahler Lied 1:13

There are multiple ramifications to Mahler's work. On the one hand, we have the Viennese school of Schönberg, Webern and Berg. On the other, composers such as Dimitri Shostakovich, who sought to continue the symphonic tradition, modernizing it without giving into dodecaphonic radicalism. Shostakovich's case is offered as an interesting reflection of Mahler's work as seen from the other side of the mirror of World War I and with the catastrophes of totalitarianism right at its doorstep. In his Fourth Symphony, Shostakovich offers an ending followed by what we could call a very long epilogue. The orchestra is turned into a forced machinery, incapable of moving forward, pushed to a crescendo without resolution that makes it seem as if musicians were reading the sheets upside down.

Shostakovich Fragment 4A: 45"

The passage following this collapse is long and desolate, barely illuminated by the final notes of the celesta, that can't but remind us of the last beats from *The Song of the Earth*. But unlike that one, this one is submerged in a threatening calm.

Shostakovich Fragment 4B 1:59

The conflictive relationship Shostakovich had with Stalin's regime also left its imprint in the history of this piece. Fearful of the party's reaction, accustomed to more optimistic machinal fables, Shostakovich took it out of the program shortly before its premiere, instead spending his time writing a Fifth Symphony so conventional and falsely triumphalist that the NKVD should have noticed it. Here is the ending:

Shostakovich Fragment 5 0:48

If for Adorno, what he called "the new music", meaning dodecaphony, did nothing but push to its last consequences the successive alienation of the musical discourse from the society that surrounded it, then Anton Webern's symphony, a kind of dwarf star, resulted from the collapse of a form once expansive and heroic. The intricate palindromic structure of this extremely brief piece even turns its beginning and its ending on upside-down. The holes opened by Mahler in *The Song of the Earth*'s orchestration here become almost insurmountable spaces between sounds, holding each other in a fragile balance of canons, inversions and series, which are now the only possible structure sustaining musical discourse.

Webern Fragment

We could however end with a slightly more comforting harmony. These are the final chords of the Seventh Symphony by Jan Sibelius, an author frequently disqualified for his conservatism. This opus, written entirely in C major—the most used tonality of all—develops into a continuous movement whose most noticeable characteristic is the near absence of melodic material. The final chord, built slowly, note by note through several beats accumulates the sonority of different instrumental groups in a strangely uneven crescendo. Notes as rays extend beyond its climax: invading the silence that follows.

Sibelius Fragment