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**Vladimir Jankélévitch: Music and the Ineffable**

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## THE “ETHICS” AND THE “METAPHYSICS” OF MUSIC

*Music acts upon human beings, on their nervous systems and their vital processes:* in 1849 Liszt wrote a song, “Die Macht der Musik” to a text by the Duchess Helène d’Orléans: music paying tribute to its own capacities. This power—which poems and colors possess occasionally and indirectly—is in the case of music particularly immediate, drastic, and indiscreet: “it penetrates to the center of the soul,” Plato says, “and gains possession of the soul in the most energetic fashion,” καταδύεται εἰς τὸ ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς ὃ τε ῥυθμὸς καὶ ἄρμονία, καὶ ἐρρωμενέστατα ἄπτεται αὐτῆς.<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer, on this point, echoes Plato. By means of massive irruptions, music takes up residence in our intimate self and seemingly elects to make its home there. The man inhabited and possessed by this intruder, the man robbed of a self, is no longer himself: he has become nothing more than a vibrating string, a sounding pipe. He trembles madly under the bow or the fingers of the instrumentalist; and just as Apollo fills the Pythia’s lungs, so the organ’s powerful voice and the harp’s gentle accents take possession of the listener. This process, at once irrational and shameful, takes place on the margins of truth, and thus borders more on magic than on empirical science.

Something that wants to persuade us with singing, rather than convince us with reason, implements an art of pleasing that addresses the passions, that is, one that subjugates in suggesting and that enslaves the listener through the fraudulent and charlatan power of melody, weakens him through harmonic glamour or the fascinations of rhythm. To accomplish this, the process does not tap the logistical or governing aspects of the mind but rather engages the mind's entire psychosomatic element. If mathematical discourse is thinking that wishes to make itself comprehensible to other thought by becoming transparent to it, a harmonic modulation is an *act* that expects to influence a *being*; and by "influence" one must also understand a clandestine causality, just as in astrology or sorcery: illegal maneuvers, black arts. Solon the lawmaker is a sage, but Orpheus the enchanter is a magician. A vocalization is not an excuse and a perfume is not an argument.

Thus, when a human being reaches the age of reason, he struggles against this unseemly and illegal seizure of his person, not wanting to give in to enchantment, that is, to go where the songs are leading. The magical induction becomes a seduction and thus trickery, and an adult refuses to be captivated, resisting the beliefs suggested to him by the auletic. A woman who persuades solely by means of her presence and its perfumes, that is, by the magical exhalations of her being, the night that envelops us, music, which secures our allegiance solely through the Charm engendered by a trill or an arpeggio, will therefore be the object of a deep suspicion. Being bewitched is not worthy of a rational person. Just as a masculine Will insists that its decisions are made on concrete grounds—and will never admit a preference founded in emotion—so masculine Reason will never admit itself prone to seduction. What is science for if not to sustain us against the intoxications of night and the temptations exercised by the enchantress appearance?

Music, the sonorous phantasm, is the most futile of mere

appearances, and appearance, which with neither the force to probe nor any intelligible determinism is nonetheless able to persuade the dazzled fool, is in some way the objectification of our weakness. A man who has sobered up, a demystified man, does not forgive himself for having once been the dupe of misleading powers; a man who is abstaining, having awakened from his nocturnal exhilaration, blushes for having given in to dark causality. Once morning has returned, he disowns the pleasurable arts themselves, along with his own skills of pleasing. Strong and serious minds, prosaic and positive minds: maybe their prejudice with regard to music comes from sobering up. In the presence of the scabrous power unleashed by music, a number of attitudes are possible. We can distinguish three: the right of use and enjoyment, passionate resentment, and refusal pure and simple.

#### ORPHEUS OR THE SIRENS?

Plato thinks that the power to drive onlookers mad should not be left to any random flutist; that the musician, like the orator, plays with dangerous forms of enchantment; and that the state should regulate the use of musical influences and contain them within a framework of sound medicine. That which is “musical,” however, is not the voice of the Sirens but rather Orpheus’s songs. The mermaid sirens, enemies of the Muses, have only one goal: to reroute, mislead, and delay Odysseus. In other words, they derail the dialectic, the law of the itinerary that leads our mind toward duty and truth.

In Mikhaíl Lermontov’s poem *The Demon*, perfidious Tamara’s songs captivate the voyager and lead him astray on the path that leads to death. To avoid seduction, what can one do besides make oneself deaf to all melody and to suppress, along with temptation, sensation itself? In fact, the musicians who permit the sirens of oblivion and the Rusalkas to sing—Debussy, for example, or Balakirev, or Rimsky-Korsakov—are

actually letting us hear the voice of Orpheus, because real music humanizes and civilizes. Music is not simply a captivating and fallacious ruse, subjugating without violence, capturing by captivating; it is also gentleness that makes gentle: in itself gentle, it makes those who hear it more gentle since music pacifies the monsters of instinct in all of us and tames passion's wild animals. Franz Liszt, in the preface to his symphonic poem *Orpheus*, shows us the "father of songs," ᾠοδᾶν πατήρ, as Pindar calls him, arresting the stones and charming ferocious beasts, making birds and waterfalls silent, bringing the supernatural benediction of art to nature itself: this, for Liszt, is the message of an Orphic civilization, as it was for the theosophist Fabre d'Olivet.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the dispatch rider in Plato's *Phaedo* tames a vicious warhorse to render it docile, εὐπειθής, so Orpheus harnesses lions to a plow that they might work the wasteland, and panthers to carriages that they might take families for their promenades; he channels wild torrents, and the torrents, becoming obedient, turn the wheels of the mills. All the creatures of creation assemble in a circle, attentive, around the orchestral conductor of lions; birds sound their arpeggios and waterfalls their murmurs. He who appeases the furious waves under the Argonauts' ship, who puts the redoubtable dragon of Colchide to sleep, who makes the animals and plants docile—even the inflexible Aides—he could well say, like Christ (who tamed another storm), πρᾶός εἰμι, I am gentle. Inspired, the cantor does not tame the Cimmerian monsters by the whip but persuades them with his lyre; his proper weapon is not the bludgeon but a musical instrument. Michelet would no doubt say that the work of Orpheus completes the labors of Hercules, and that they are, both of them, heroes of culture and the supernatural: because just as the athlete colonizes and reclaims the desert by means of strength, the magician humanizes the inhuman by means of art's harmonious and me-

lodious grace: the former exterminates evil, as much as the latter, architect-kitharist, coverts the evil into the human.

In his *Bible de l'humanité*, Michelet expounds in magnificent terms upon the battle of the lyre and the flute described in Aristotle's *Politics*: set against the Dionysian flute—the instrument chosen by the satyr Marsyas, the orgiastic flute of disgraceful intoxication—are Orpheus's phorminx and Apollo's kithara, arrayed in opposition. And just as the flute that tames rats and charms snakes is the suspect instrument, the languid, impudent instrument of the Thyrsonian bearers, Orpheus antibarbarian constitutes the civilization of the lyre incarnate. This is the truly Apollonian lyre: an opera by Albert Roussel tells of its birth; Stravinsky consecrated *Apollon Musagète* to the god of light, leader of the Muses; Fauré set a *Hymne à Apollon* to music in honor of the god who transfixed the fearful dragon. The effeminate kitharist whom Kierkegaard denigrates in *Fear and Trembling*, citing the *Banquet*, is not a true Orpheus. Orpheus died victim to the Thracian Bacchantes, the drunken Maenads, that is to say, of the fury of passion, which tore him into pieces; as the enemy of the Bacchic god and the flutist god, Orpheus salutes the dawn and venerates Helios, the chaste and sober god of light. *Cave carmen*: beware of the Charm. But not at all: refuse, in general, to be swayed by a charm.

That, however, implies that one cannot distinguish between incantation and enchantment: there is abusive music, which, like rhetoric, is simple charlatanism and flatters the listener to enslave him, for the odes of Marsyas “bewitch” us as the discourse of Gorgias indoctrinates us. Yet there is also *melos* that does not give the lie to *logos*, and, as in Federico Mompou's album *Charmes* (1925), this *melos* has curing, appeasing, and exalting our being as its business: “To penetrate the soul,” “To summon love,” “To put suffering to rest,” “To inspire joy” (so some of the titles). The music of the leader of the Muses exists

as a truth because it imposes the mathematical law of number—which is harmony—on the savage tumult of hunger, the law of measure—which is the beat—on the disorder of measureless chaos, and rhythmicized time, measured and stylized time, the time of corteges and ceremonies, on unequal time, time by turns languishing and convulsive, fastidious and precipitous: the time of our daily life. Alain, Stravinsky, Roland-Manuel: were they not agreed in recognizing that music is a kind of temporal metrics?

Music is suspect, to be sure, but it cannot be disavowed pure and simple. Preoccupied above all with moral education and with frugality, Plato rails only against the “Carian muse,” the muse of those who weep and of effeminate sobs.<sup>3</sup> The third book of the *Republic* reserves all of its severity for the languid and pathetic modes, the Oriental modes, Ionian and Lydian, for their plaintive harmony, θρηνώδεις ἁρμονίαι.<sup>4</sup> Lamento and Appassionato: they are demoralizing. Indecent intoxication, μέθη, that alone, is capable of rendering the city’s guardians feeble. It appears that the more “musical” music is—in the modern sense of the word—the less approbation it finds in Plato’s thought. Musical, that is, in being melodic, in ascending and descending more freely through the scale. This is why the *Laws* condemns ἑτεροφωνία, heterophony, and the *Republic* πολυχорδία παναρμόνιος, polyharmonic multi-stringed instruments:<sup>5</sup> because instruments with many strings promote polyphonic complications and foster a taste for rhythmic variety and instrumental color. The flute’s swift witticisms, the prestidigitation of the virtuoso, trills, vocalises, roudades, the tenor’s fioratura, are, to be sure, related to an art of flattery that geometry slanders with the name Rhetoric. Plato reserves all his approbation for the least musical, least modulutory modes, the austere monody of the Dorian and the Phrygian, set in opposition to the honeyed Muse, γλυκεία μουσική, her indubitable spells and her bewitching recitatives, who is too suave and too flattering to be truthful and who is

therefore more Siren than Muse. Plato appreciates the austere modes for their moral value, as much irenic as polemical: in war, they exalt courage, in peace, they serve well for prayers and hymns to the gods, and for the moral edification of youth.

In effect, such “music” is more a moral than a musical phenomenon, more didactic than persuasive, and its function is in fact entirely objective. The beauty of custom, εὐηθεία (good character), conditions music’s rhythmic and harmonic Charm, εὐαρμοσύνη (its well-composed quality) and εὐρυθμία (its graceful movement and order). The purpose of the severe Muse, the serious Muse, is to induce virtue and not enchant us by singing.

#### BEARING A GRUDGE AGAINST MUSIC

We shall therefore be impelled to disavow the “Carian Muse” (as she is called in the seventh book of the *Laws* and by Clement of Alexandria) but not because of pedagogical concerns, rather, by antimusical passion and by resentment. There is no doubt that Nietzsche continued to love what he disavowed, very much so: he is still secretly in love with the flower maidens who bewitched him. Like all renegades, the man who disavowed Wagner’s romanticism, disavowed Schopenhauer’s pessimism, and blasphemed even Socrates’s moralism, nonetheless cannot bear to be parted from his own past and takes perverse pleasure in tormenting himself. Thus there is an aspect of passionate ambivalence, of amorous hatred and even masochism in Nietzsche’s grudge against the musical eternal-feminine. For just as immorality is often simply excessive rigor on the rebound, an alibi produced to disguise a secret and passionate moral temperament, so melomania explains in certain cases the furious energy of melophobia.

This, at root, was the case with Tolstoy. Paul Boyer tells us how he was a rebel against the bewildering power of Chopin’s fourth Ballade; Sergey Tolstoy confirms his father’s extraordi-



nary sensitivity to Romantic music. True, Tolstoy's grudge is that of a moralist, and Nietzsche's is that of an immoralist; in this, Tolstoy would be closer to Plato. Nonetheless, does Nietzsche not express himself as the sorely disappointed pedagogue, as the spokesman for a truly impossible virtue? The preface of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (borrowing Plato's language almost literally)<sup>6</sup> speaks to us of the vague, ambiguous desires melting the iron of virile souls. Nietzsche finds such dangers in Tristan's magic potion, in the maddening brews that have made him drunk, in Romanticism's poisonous mushrooms, which spring up in the quagmires where fever and languor are lurking.

Perhaps Nietzsche has defined the distance that separates the particular trouble attributable to music from Socratic aporia: melos is troubling but not fertile, constituting neither a stimulating excess nor a gnostic perplexity. Rather, music is a sterile malaise that enervates and smothers conscience: as lullaby, putting it to sleep, as elegy, making it soft. Better still: in music in general Nietzsche sees the means of expression of nondialectical consciences and of apolitical peoples.<sup>7</sup> The former, in love with twilight dreams, with inexplicable thoughts and reverie, sink gratefully into the swamp of solitude; the latter, reduced to inaction and boredom by autocracy, take refuge in the inoffensive compensations and the consolations of music. Music, the decadent art, is the bad conscience of an introverted populace, which finds a substitute for their need to take civic action in works that are merely instrumental or vocal.

By contrast, Athenian democracy, being naturally sociable, abandons lyric black magic for gymnastic games, the palestra's battles, and the agora's debates. Athleticism, at the very least, entails the action of muscles, the real effort needed to move the obstacle or lift the object, by an expenditure of energy directly proportional to the weight of that object. Nietzsche no doubt wanted to say the following: music is not proper to

dialogue, whose nature rests in exchange, the analysis of ideas, amicable collaboration that takes place mutually and equitably. Music does not allow the discursive, reciprocal communication of meaning but rather an immediate and ineffable communication; and this can only take place in the penumbra of melancholia, unilaterally, from hypnotist to the hypnotized.

It is hard to believe that Plato—the philosopher of the logos, of dialogue and dialectics—could avoid suspecting the trickery of tenor singing or the flutist's solo. This is also the essence of Tolstoy's prejudice. One day, when Goldenweiser had played Chopin for him, Lev Nikolayevich remarks: "wherever you want slaves, you need as much music as possible."<sup>8</sup> Lev Nikolayevich had confidence only in popular music. And as for Nietzsche, he famously saw in Bizet's music a means of detoxification, music able to restore joy, cleanliness, and virility to the mind. No longer with prosaic *gymnopédies* (as with Plato) but with acrobatic leaps and blinding light: that is how Nietzsche begins his purification cure, his sobering up, and his disillusionment. Without a doubt, Albeniz and Darius Milhaud would have trumpeted an even louder wake-up call and designed the most effective catharsis.

#### MUSIC AND ONTOLOGY

To grant music a moral function, however, it would seem necessary to amputate and discard all its pathos, everything heady and orgiastic in it, and, finally, to deprive oneself of poetic intoxication in any form. For music does not always convey the serenity of wise men: it fevers those who listen to it, drives them mad. Music is derationalizing and unhealthy. Thus in Tolstoy's famous moralizing novella (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, also not a little misogynistic) a musical work is accessory to an illicit passion. Proudhon himself, by inclination a serious, moral mind, accuses those who advocate the aesthetics of the game and "art for art's sake" of degeneracy. Alas, an

eagerness to resist temptation is no less suspect than temptation itself. The Puritan grudge against music, the persecution of pleasure, hatred of seduction and spells, the antihedonist obsession: in the end, all these are pathologies, just as misogyny is pathological.

Under such conditions, one is led to ask whether music might not have a metaphysical significance rather than an ethical function. Throughout history, those human beings who are fond of allegory have sought that which is signified by music *beyond* the sound phenomenon, ἄρμονιᾷ ἀφανῆς φανεροῦς κρείττων (the invisible harmony is more powerful than the visible).<sup>9</sup> For there is an invisible and inaudible harmony, suprasensible and supra-audible, and this is the true “key to song.” For Clement of Alexandria and Saint Augustine, for the English mystic Richard Rolle, any singing perceptible to the ears and the body is the exoteric envelope of a smooth, ineffable, and celestial melody. Plotinus says that music perceptible to the senses is created by music anterior to sensible perception. Music is of another realm. Harmony, if we believe Fabre d’Olivet, resides neither in the instrument nor in physical phenomena (it is worth recalling that Fabre d’Olivet was interested in Pythagorean arithmology, the Hebrew language, and a kind of “musicosophy,” a philosophical music that would transmute souls). Richard Rolle and Antoine de Rojas heard angel music: no doubt, our orchestral concerts are mere pale understudies to such celestial concerts.

For Rimsky-Korsakov, the invisible city, Celestial Kitezkh, reveals the esoteric sense of Lesser Kitezkh. And nonetheless, the carillons and jubilant canticles that resound in invisible Kitezkh vibrate materially as well, for terrestrial human beings. The city is invisible. But its sublime music is not inaudible, because Rimsky-Korsakov, after all, is a musician and not a Neoplatonic mystic.

It is the metaphysician, and not the musician, who disparages actual physical harmony for the sake of transcendent

paradigms and supernatural music. If Roland-Manuel (himself a musician) thinks that music “echoes of the order of the world,” he nonetheless believes in music’s autonomy. To decipher who-knows-what cryptic message as perceptible, to place a stethoscope on a canticle and hear something else in it and behind it, to perceive an allusion to something else in every song, to interpret that which is heard as the allegory of a secret, incredible meaning: these are the indelible traits of all hermeneutics, and are first and foremost applied in the interpretation of language. Anyone who reads between the lines or believes himself to have gotten the hint suggests that he is also penetrating hidden thoughts and hidden intentions. Comparing Socrates to a flutist producing the delirium of the Corybantes in his listeners—without benefit of flute or syrinx, ἄνευ ὀργάνων, ψιλοῖς λόγοις (without instruments, but with words only)—Alcibiades treats the great ironist like a Silene, that is, like a mask behind which divine figures are hidden.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, words in themselves already signify something: their natural associations and their traditions resist the arbitrary and limit our interpretive liberty. The language of a hermetic orator who speaks in veiled words also possesses a literal sense. But music? Directly, in itself, music signifies nothing, unless by convention or association. Music means nothing and yet means everything. One can make notes say what one will, grant them any power of analogy: they do not protest. In the very measure that one is inclined to attribute a metaphysical significance to musical discourse, music (which expresses no communicable sense) lends itself, complaisant and docile, to the most complex dialectical interpretations. In the very measure that one tends to confer upon music the dimension of depth, music is, perhaps, the most superficial form of appearance.

Music has broad shoulders. In the hermeneutics of music, everything is possible, the most fabulous ideologies and unfathomable imputed meanings. Who will ever give us the lie?

Music “created the world” says Alexander Blok, the famous Russian poet: it is the essence of the spiritual body, of the flow of thought. True, Blok is himself a *poet*, and we know that poets are licensed to say everything. Schopenhauer’s “metaphysics of music” has often been criticized, sometimes at the cost of overlooking its complex and original intuitions.

It is critical to point out, however, that all such *metamusic*, music thus romanticized, is at once arbitrary and metaphorical. It is arbitrary because one cannot see exactly what justifies taking the acoustic universe and privileging and promoting it to this degree above all others. Why should hearing, alone among all the senses, have the privilege of accessing the “thing in itself” for us, and thus destroy the limits of our finitude? What monopoly will enable certain perceptions, those we call auditory, those alone, to be uncapped into the realm of noumena? Will it be necessary (as was once the case) to draw a fine distinction between primary and secondary characteristics? And why (if you will) should our critical faculties, which pull our thinking back within the phenomenal world, be somehow suspended for the sake of pure sound sensations, sensations that are above all subject to the temporal? We would understand this favoritism toward sounds if time were the essence of being and the most real reality: this is what Bergson says, but not what Schopenhauer says, not at all. Besides, if this were the case, human beings—beings in the state of Becoming—would not need music to penetrate “in medias res.” The temporal being would swim among noumena like a fish in water. On the other hand, is it enough that musical perception be scheduled and regulated by high art for that order to acquire an ontological impact? In that case, however, one cannot understand why the metaphysics of poetry has not enjoyed the same privilege as the metaphysics of music, nor why the conceits of poet-metaphysicians would not be as justified as the reveries of metaphysicians writing on music and musicians. In short, what must be argued over is music’s

“realism”—in this instance, the privilege enjoyed by a kind of more-than-phenomenal music that is the immediate objectification of the Will, and whose developments recapitulate the sad avatars of the Will.

On the other hand, the metaphysics of music is not constructed without recourse to many analogies and metaphorical transpositions: the correspondences between musical discourse and our subjective lives, between the assumed structures of Being and musical discourse, and between the structures of Being and our subjective lives as mediated by musical discourse. A first example of such analogies: the polarity of major and minor corresponds to that of the two great “ethoi” of subjective mood, serenity and depression. Dissonance tends toward consonance through cadences and appoggiaturas, and consonance troubled anew by dissonance allegorizes human disquiet and a human desire that oscillates ceaselessly between wish and surfeit. By such means, the philosophy of music reduces itself in part to a metaphorical psychology of desire. Another analogy: the superimposition of singing above bass sonorities, of melody and harmony, corresponds to the cosmological gamut of beings, with consciousness at the peak and inorganic material at the base. By such means music becomes evolutionary psychology.

But, for all that, Schopenhauer himself does not fall into psychologism since (for him) music has become metaphysics just as metaphysics has become in some way musical. Ultimately, the psychological drama of the individual recapitulates the odyssey of a specific Will, unless the metaphysical odyssey itself constitutes the extension of a psychological drama, of a series of privileged states of the soul. When music is involved, the graphical and spatial transcription of sound successions greatly facilitates this extension of the psychological drama.<sup>11</sup> Melodic lines ascend and descend—on staff paper, but not in the world of sound, which has neither “up” nor “down.” The staff is a spatial projection of the distinction between high and

low sound, between bass and soprano; the simultaneous voices in polyphony appear “superior” or “inferior” according to the geologist’s model of superimposed strata, and hence also the “stratification” of consciousness. The realm of supersensible music itself, by means of a double illusion, ends by appearing to be situated “beyond” the most stratospheric high regions of audible music; the ultraphysics of the metamusical thus takes on a naively topographical sense. Bergson definitively refuted visual myths and metaphors that confer the three dimensions of the optical and kinesthetic universe on the temporal. The translation of duration in terms of volume makes speculations relating to musical transcendence so illusory. Space and time are not themselves more symmetrical than past and future are within time itself; the singular character of musical temporality makes a castle in Spain of all the architectonic philosophy that is built upon such temporality. The “metaphysics of music,” like magic or arithmatology, always loses sight of the function of metaphors and the symbolic relativity of symbols. A sonata *is like* a précis of the human adventure that is bordered by death and birth—but is not *itself* this adventure. The *Allegro maestoso* and the Adagio—Schopenhauer wants to write their metaphysics—are like a stylization of the two tempos of experienced time, but they are not themselves this time itself. The sonata, the symphony, and the string quartet, moreover, are like a thirty-minute recapitulation of the metaphysical and noumenal destiny of the Will but are by no means this destiny per se. Everything hangs upon the meaning of the verb *to be* and the adverb *like*, and just as sophisms and puns slip without warning from unilateral attribution to ontological identity—that is, make discontinuity disappear magically—so metaphysical-metaphorical analogies about music slip furtively from figural meaning to correct and literal meaning. Thus, anthropomorphic and anthroposophic generalizations are shameless in ignoring the restrictive clause on images and take comparisons

at face value. Being-in-itself ascends the five lines of the staff. It is the ontological evil of existing—and no longer just Chaikovsky's pessimism—that is expressed in the key of E minor. More generally, the musical microcosm reproduces, in miniature, the hierarchies of the cosmos. It will not seem sufficient to say that musical discourse “plays out” the vicissitudes of Will, if one's ambition is to attribute some magical value to such associations.

Everyday things sometimes impose visual metaphors upon us, and Bergson himself had no qualms about differentiating between the “superficial” self and the “deep” self. But *only* an awareness that a way of speaking is, simply, a way of speaking can keep us honest. A metaphysics of music that claims to transmit messages from the other world retraces the incantatory action of enchantment upon the enchanted in the form of an illicit relocation of the here-and-now to the Beyond. Sophism gets extended by means of a swindle. As a result, this metaphysics is clandestine twice over. I would conclude, therefore, that music is not above all laws and not exempt from the limitations and servitude inherent in the human condition. And, finally, that if “ethics” of music is a verbal mirage, “metaphysics” of music is closer to being a mere rhetorical figure.