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THE END OF INTUITION

“Complexity can be reduced only by complexity”

Marko Nikodijević: *music box/selbstportrait mit Ligeti und Strawinsky (und Messiaen ist auch dabei)*

In the score of the composition **music box/selbstportrait mit Ligeti und Strawinsky (und Messiaen ist auch dabei)** or “music box/a self-portrait with Ligeti and Strawinsky (and Messiaen is also there)”, right in its corner, somewhat hidden, there is an explanation: *N.B. music box was designed and composed using digital technology; computer has been used as a tool in testing potential compositional scenarios; the work’s structure is based on fractal geometry; ALL structural levels are of the same degree of unstructuredness.*

The composer’s note seems to be fulfilling the paradoxical promise of Niklas Luhmann’s theory of systems: “Complexity can be reduced only by complexity.” For reviewing a work such as **Music Box** the apparatus of formalistic or (post)structuralist musicological analysis and interpretation is simply not sufficient, or rather, not adequate. But then again, following the composer’s explanation is the same as being seduced by the “blind spot” of the standpoint from which the author departed in producing the work as a system. If we define system from the viewpoint of the theory of second-order systems, through the duplicity of internal organization and open structure, it then follows that a system is, firstly, self-referential on the operation level. Hence the composer establishes the principles of composing, leaving no remnants of opaque intuition, that is, esthetics of spontaneous selection and taste. Secondly, a structure is not predetermined, but rather appears and emerges from its interaction with the environment (in this case, the environment is the music material whose initial “substance” is subjected to the system’s operation). A structure is open not in the poetic sense of a work’s incompleteness, but because at first glance it manifests itself as immeasurable in its complexity.

An attempt to subsume all “musical situations” under one formal-structural model, provided we so term, for the time being, all the changes recorded with a total of 35 score signs, takes me back to two incomparable and inadequate sources of information. One is a survey of the “dramaturgy” of the work as an “event” on the stage of listening and it is guided by listening as a cognitive process of recognizing the expected, confirmed or betrayed effects of musical description and expression. The closest analogy in that respect would be one with a music box, suggested in the title: first you wind up the mechanism (score signs 1-4, running time 0’50”) so that the composition “unwinds” into several “coils” (score signs 5-13, 14-19, 19-20, 21-26, 0’51”-5’07”) before it suddenly leaps into mediant major triads that cut short the mechanics of the process like the “rests” in decomposition of techno-music (“instrumental” or song), in score signs 27-28, 5’08”-5’45”. After that, the music begins to “leak” as the music box progressively dissipates its kinetic

energy, seeing as the mechanism will ultimately unwind itself unless it is once again stimulated into motion from outside (score signs 29-31 and 32-35, 5'46"-9'20"). This description of what is seemingly the traditional ascending-descending, albeit asymmetric arch, does not seem to explain anything. Therefore, we need another perspective, one that is opposite to the description of a flow that leads the listener to expect a closed form, structure and narrative or a system of harmony, direction and balance. This other perspective would have to "look into" each and every part of altogether 13 instruments (piccolo, clarinet, bass clarinet, percussives, piano, harpsichord, celesta, accordion, violin and string quartet) in order to ascertain a regular irregularity of the repetition and deconstruction of the smallest units. Even if intervals of the minor second and of the minor and major third seem at first to carry the thematic register of the composition, they soon begin to lose that seemingly thematic function by duplicating themselves in the inversions and transpositions of the tones of these intervals into an endless series of pitches. A similar thing happens with the metro-rhythmic component which simulates the thematics by inconsistent repetitiveness, that is, by the kind of repetition in which the still unconfirmed "candidate" for the metro-rhythmic motive dissolves, or is duplicated through variants, and so "mutates". These "mutations" are too complicated because the organization of each part seems to follow its own system according to the logic instrument=system, with no priorities in terms of coordinating either the macrostructure or the vertical structure of the composition. The exceptions are "cut-breaks" in bar 5, score sign 7; in bar 3, sign 9, sign 14; in bar 5, sign 16, signs 17, 18; in two bars before b. 19, signs 21, 22, 24, 26, 27 and during rests with pause. The "cut-breaks" mostly correspond to orchestral changes – to the exposition of a single instrument which, still using the analogy with a music box, "turns on" and starts moving as a new element ("screw") of the mechanism, which indicates that orchestration is not executed by system operations. This may well be the only parameter in which the author allowed himself to make decisions, albeit arbitrary, that is, decisions motivated by taste and skill, which occasionally echo with the mimesis of the music box, with the representation of the sound of its music and its mechanism.

What is meant by the equation instrument=system? Each part emerges from an endless complex loop, generated out of basic data (such as the mentioned intervals of the minor second, minor and major third and numerous metro-rhythmic patterns, where it would be hard to establish which ones are basic). Data is processed along with the so-called positive feedback, which is perceived as a vicious circle: A follows from B insofar as B follows from A. In other words, there is no division into original, i.e. primary "utterances" and secondary, derived "materials". All material is second-order derived, or rather, generated by the so-called system autopoiesis. Autopoietic systems do not demonstrate their operations in such a way that these are reflected and identified in the methods of organizing material. Methods of serialism, for example, are not autopoietic because their usage reads as the application of the morphogenetic principle on the music material whose basis is the series. (See examples 1 and 2)

There is no structural hierarchy in Nikodijević's compositional procedure. Computer is used as a tool in generating systems using digital analysis programs. "Potential compositional scenarios" correspond to algorithms as series of instructions used to process the database. When I asked the composer how he naturalizes fractal geometry to this procedure, he replied: "Fractals are unstable systems in which the

relationship between the entire (unmeasurable) area and the details of internal structure is that of specific quantity of unstructuredness, as in the case of the automatically transmitted genetic error (the possibility of mutation) which is indispensable for the survival of the entire system.” Unstructuredness is a synonym for high complexity that results in chaos or *random*. There are two algorithms running parallel: the *loop* of an endless series of pitches and the *loop* by which metric patterns, rhythmic units and the arrangement of registers are grouped.

How is it that allusions to Ligeti, Stravinsky and Messiaen arise in a *random* synthesis of the two processes? They are unmistakably identified in score sign 11 (Ligeti), 14-19 (*Posvećenje /Consecration/*, as Stravinsky’s trademark, along with other references), 19-21, primarily in the piano part (Messiaen’s trademark chromatic colouring) (See example 3). The composer calls them “hologram illusions”, essentially referring to the juxtaposition of two algorithms or their *random* catching up with one another in a *random* process (where the allusiveness of the references is, strangely enough, “intensified” by orchestral situations). Truly unusual! The fact that Ligeti, Stravinsky and Messiaen are looking at him like “fathers over their shoulders” is not something that Nikodijević takes for granted or as a contingency of his “blind spot”. He does not cite them in the usual manner, but simulates their idiosyncrasies, or rather the aspect of the mechanic which he isolates from the compositional writing of Ligeti, Stravinsky, Messiaen as well as from techno-music, thereby reducing other people’s compositional systems to a set of algorithmically performable instructions.

All systems are constituted with the necessary “blind spot” that only *other* systems observing them are able to see, while the process of system reproduction depends on various observing systems that “unwind” the constitutive paradox in the “observing of observing”. If the process of system reproduction is termed operation, observing is then an act of distinction which produces information. The allusions to Ligeti, Stravinsky and Messiaen are reminiscent of Luhmann’s moral: each instance of observing takes place from one point of view, which could be theoretically different. The “blind spot” is that contingency (a condition that is not obligatory) of the observer (in this case, Nikodijević), whose latency is not discovered until it is approached from other points of view, by observing other systems. This explains why Nikodijević has not “ornamented” his **music box** by paying homage to his role model composers. He has manifested the viewpoint of his own system by confronting it with the gaze of the “fathers”. Nikodijević observes Ligeti, Stravinsky and Messiaen “observing” him. System self-referentiality is never transparent – the author knows that his self-portrait, if indeed it aspires to self-determination, must manifest how his subject interdiscursively interrelates with other subjects.

Naturally, my musicological perspective also departs from a contingent standpoint – in this case from the decision to review the composition by “naturalizing” (adopting, interpreting and adapting) to it certain aspects of Luhmann’s theory of social systems with the aim of demonstrating the complexity of the untotalling autopoietic system in Nikodijević’s compositional procedure. The untotalling character of systemic thinking in Nikodijević’s work could prove to be an entirely different interpretative perspective. **Music box** can attract the listener as not only a mechanism (think of Gustav Mahler and the barrel organ nostalgia in the central-European milieu of *Jugendstil*), but also a box in which affects of the rhetoric of

musical gestures are “packed” (“neurotic stutter” used to postpone the commencement in score sign 1-5, “cathartic denouement” in the mediant in 27, “eerie-fantastic” sonoristic orchestrations from 29 to 32, “sentimental” melodies in the accordion, flute and clarinets in 33). But even if I wanted to underscore the primariness of the effects of music representation, I cannot but conclude that they are third-order side effects. Ultimately, the construction’s complexity cannot be sidestepped by pragmatics of pleasure in the process of triggering the listener’s receptive habits. There is no room for the regressive legacy of the 19th-century composer-genius from which contemporary music is still suffering, and that is the policy of Nikodijević’s esthetics: expression will not take refuge in the lethargy of intuition anymore.

REFERENCE LITERATURE

Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, (trans.) Dirk Baecker, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1995.

Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (trans.) Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London-New York, 2004.

Cary Wolfe, *Critical Environments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the “Outside”*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac

Example 1
Piccolo part in score sign 4-5



Example 2
Piano part in bars 3-4 in score sign 20

A piano score for two staves (treble and bass clef) in 2/4 time. The music features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes. There are dynamic markings 'p' and 'f' and a triplet of eighth notes in the bass staff. A dashed line with '8va' indicates an octave shift. There are also asterisks and a 'Ped' marking at the bottom.

Example 3
Whole score in bars 4-8 in score sign 12

The image displays a page of a musical score, specifically Example 3, covering bars 4 through 8 of score sign 12. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with the following staves from top to bottom:

- Flute 1 (Fl. 1)
- Flute 2 (Fl. 2)
- Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. B)
- Bassoon (Fag.)
- Piano (pno.)
- Harp (hpd.)
- Cello (vcl.)
- Double Bass (vcl. b.)
- Violin I (vln. I)
- Violin II (vln. II)
- Viola (vln. III)
- Double Bass (vcl. b.)

Key musical features and markings include:

- Flute 1:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* (ritardando) marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Flute 2:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Clarinet in B-flat:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Bassoon:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Piano:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Harp:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Cello:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Double Bass:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Violin I:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Violin II:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Viola:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.
- Double Bass:** Features a melodic line with a *rit.* marking at the beginning of bar 4.

The score is written in a single system with a common time signature and a key signature of one flat. The tempo is marked *rit.* (ritardando). The score is enclosed in a rectangular border.