
IEWS

Article received on 8th September 2009

Article accepted on 2nd October 2009

UDC 78.01:130.122] (049.3)

*Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman*¹

University of Arts in Belgrade

Faculty of Music – Department of Musicology

ON RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND MUSIC

Marcel Cobussen: *Thresholds...*²

In his latest book,³ which he rightly qualifies rather as a paratext than a metatext,⁴ Marcel Cobussen, professor of music philosophy and cultural theory at the University of Leiden (Netherlands), contemplates on a complex theme of the relationship between spirituality and music, which is largely covered by conventions, but is still challenging in some important aspects. The starting point of his analyses is the movement *New Spiritual Music*, constituted on the programme and aesthetic basis of the namesake festival, held in November 1999 in Amsterdam. The organizers and the critics considered *New Spiritual Music* as “the last big movement in the development of the music history of the 20th century that simultaneously marks the transition towards the 21st century”,⁵ and whose guidelines are sharply

¹ Author contact information: mvesel@eunet.rs.

² The research for this article was carried out as a part of the project *World Chronotopes of Serbian Music*, No. 147045D (2006-2010), supported by the Serbian Ministry of Science and Technological Development.

³ Marcel Cobussen: *Thresholds: Rethinking Spirituality Through Music*, Hampshire, Ashgate, 2008, 171, ISBN 978-0-7546-6482-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ Cited in: *ibid.*, 29.

opposed to modernism. Thinking, however, that spirituality and modernism do not exclude each other, but that “the one confirms and consolidates the other like two dance partners”,⁶ Cobussen regards the *New Spiritual Music* as the movement belonging to post-modern music. In that respect, he treats new spirituality as indelible part of modernism,⁷ where “the triangle music-spirituality-postmodernism (...) creates an alternative space, (...) a space where an identity can no longer be separated from difference and alterity (...)”.⁸

Therefore, within theoretical outlines defined by the views on spirituality of Michel de Certeau and Mark C. Taylor, and the philosophy, above all, of Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, Martin Heidegger, Jean-François Lyotard and Gianni Vattimo, Cobussen reaches out for the deconstruction of spiritual music and modernism as opposed categories, developing and supporting his thesis on spirituality as para-spirituality (“‘material spirituality’, or ‘ecological spirituality’”⁹), spirituality which does not unconditionally rely on the divine or cosmic universe any more.¹⁰ That is the spirituality emerging after the death of God,¹¹ spirituality which is both of the God, and of the Devil.¹² In other words, (new) spirituality does not guarantee absolute truth, but opens up a changeable, unstable thinking space: the space of constant movement, shifting, leaving and acceptance, relativization, transformation of the existing: ideas, classifications, models, conventions and relations. Spirituality is an open space, the space *between*, between and beyond dual oppositions, filled with ruminating, listening, listening to the *other*. This is the spirituality which is not just a simple givenness that is, unquestionably, mechanically and humbly accepted as fixed and inherited, as a bounding state of consciousness and the spirit, but that always *becomes* anew, in free variations of the relationship between a subject and an object. That is the spirituality which *happens* while overcoming opposition of identities. It is *somewhere in between* the human and the divine.

Spirituality as such – according to Cobussen – is a bridge, which can be treated both as something separate, and as something inseparable from the “shores” it connects, since its opposite parts stand on both shores. Therefore, it can not be determined to which of them it actually belongs. The only thing

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 33.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 157.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 94.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 149.

that can be ascertained beyond doubt is that it belongs to the *space between* them, more precisely, that it *is* the space between those shores: “[It belongs to the space between,] between here and there, between this world and that other world, between the known and the unknown. The bridge is a place of transition, but with its own dynamics, its own intensity, its own volume... The bridge is a threshold. It joins by separating and separates by joining.”¹³

This metaphor is, at the same time, the key to the methodology which Cobussen applies in his book, re-examining the age-old inheritance of the relationship between spirituality and music, to which he was prompted by a revision of immediate personal experiences, both with his religious environment and with music. Cobussen thinks that music makes us believe that it possesses some effable semantic secret, but that it can not be named, because writing about music does not mean entering into its meaning.¹⁴ This meaning, in fact, lies in “keeping-at-a-distance from writing, reading, interpreting...”¹⁵ In other words, our dealing with the theory of music and attempts to reveal and name its meanings, “messages”, and secrets, takes place in the *space between* us and the music, that is, on the bridge, or on the threshold/thresholds between us and it, in a middle space of a hierarchically neutral position.

Cobussen presents this *a-topos* in his book through thirteen thresholds – chapters¹⁶ – in which he opens up many interspaces between music and spirituality. In these chapters, on these thresholds, he overcomes the existing conventions and modes of representation, understanding and interpreting music and spirituality, spirituality in music, spiritual music, music spirituality... In fact, Cobussen rethinks the spirituality through music and music through spirituality, observing that both of them – (spiritual) music and spirituality – are both earthly and divine, emerging *somewhere in between*, through transcending opposite categories of binary logocentrism. Music alone, therefore, includes all those interspaces which are “neither here nor there”, which are basically inaccessible to language, although, paradoxically, as such – as spirituality and as music – can only be presented through it.

¹³ Ibid., 157.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “The Desert in the Desert”, “A Short Prelude to Music and Spirituality”, “Stories”, “New Spiritual Music”, “Between Heaven and Earth”, “Sirens”, “Language, Spirituality, Music”, “Wanderings”, “The Abyss”, “Silence”, “Listening to Music”, “Para-Spirituality”, “The Bridge and the Laugh”. The main text includes eight sheet music examples and one tabular analysis and also, as appendices, rich bibliography in several languages and the register of names and terms.

Therefore Cobussen concentrates exactly on those interspaces within a musical work, that is, on its unstable points, or situations which slide out of the corresponding system, which break out of the known, and in which – according to the autonomy of the individual composer/performer's choice – one can take most diversified paths and directions. From this perspective, spirituality is not something situated in the music itself and fixed by it. On the contrary, "(...) how spirituality sounds (...)"¹⁷ depends on the shifting relation of the subject (composer, performer, listener...) towards certain music, on his surrendering to those moments in the musical work which open the way to paraspiritual experience.

As examples of such moments, Cobussen mentions and interprets the mythical music of the sirens, analyzes the *Songs for Wandering Souls* (and within, also the play *Fünf Stücke im Volkston*, op. 102 by Robert Schumann) from the repertoire of the ensemble *The Tiny Bell Trio*, the music by John Coltrane – *Interstellar Space*/"Jupiter", Arvo Pärt – *Modus/Sarah Was Ninety Years Old*, the song "I don't know how to love him" from the rock opera by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar*; the number "The bridge" from the album of Rabih Abou-Khalil, and Joachim Kühn – *Journey to the Center of an Egg*.

By this extremely thoughtful and functional choice of examples, and their brilliant contextual analyses, Cobussen offers convincing argumentation for music constellations of different genres – including "serious" music, jazz, pop and "world" music – constellations which represent those slips from the usual, those surpassings of conventional classifications, as well as explications, which open up the spaces of paraspirituality and *alterity*.

The situations Cobussen analyzes are those which enable the undermining of self-consciousness and jeopardizing identities; these are the places of music nomadism, of getting out of the system and returning to it, as viewed from a different perspective, of indecisiveness within a certain music structure and music flow, music silence, laughter, of endeavouring to know something that defies knowledge. These are, therefore, all those places in a musical work open to uncentring, where (music) thought (may) wander and re-examine, where emotion changes, and experience can be verified and disputed. Those are the places of listening to, and affirming the *alterity*, that is, the deconstruction of the subject-object relationship through listening. In that sense I would like – as being very typical – to point out Cobussen's interpretation of the song "I don't know how to love him", which in the opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, is associated with the character of Mary Magdalene, as well as a psychologically remarkably polished interpretation of her character, which is...

¹⁷ Marcel Cobussen, op. cit., 9

... (n)either here (n)or there, somewhere in between, at the crossing, on the bridge, on the threshold... where Cobussen himself, through music as the starting point and the main source of argumentation by deconstruction, moulds his book as a (musicological-philosophical) interspace which, at the thresholds of the crossings, he had established between music and spirituality, and demonstrated all the aspects of his own theses. In other words, not only has Cobussen carried out his theoretical examinations based on the deep foundations and rich layers of his professional knowledge and general education, with delicate yet extremely effective educative interventions, but had also done it in a very creative way. Thus he has created an exemplary text of the "intermedia" genre,¹⁸ a text which, in all its aspects, identifies itself with its object, and at the same time has remarkable literary qualities. They are obvious in the dissection of language, type of sentence rhythm, mobility of associations, witty turns and the dynamics of formal shape.

Confronting us, in an unconventional but very thoughtful and considerate way, with the divine illusion as the absolute truth, Cobussen achieved a brave enterprise. His achievement is all the braver being made today, at a time of the disturbing rise of fanatical religiousness in many parts of the world, at a time when spirituality – in some cases with broad social approval – is often abused by mechanisms of retrograde ideological, political and artistic tendencies.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

¹⁸ I rely on genre classification of musicological text, which I put forward in: Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, 'Musicology vs. Musicology from the Perspective of Interdisciplinary Logic', in: Nico Schüler (ed), *On Methods of Music Theory and (Ethno-)Musicology – From Interdisciplinary Research to Teaching*, Frankfurt am Main, etc., Peter Lang Verlag, 2005, 9–38.