The value of music and the value of silence

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“Music is the silence between the notes”
Claude Debussy

At the time of the Camerata Fiorentina and the beginning of Opera, in my opinion, music had the same value as silence does today. In a quieter society back then, experiencing music was as special as experiencing silence in our loud world today. For many human beings around the planet nowadays, being surrounded by quietness is almost impossible.

How does this value exchange affect in the minds of composers today?

In a hectic world, I see different ones today for me as an artist: how to give silence the value music used to have or work with silence as pure material, how to write for our inner voice, how to write a minute of silence, how to write for a string quartet without strings or how to stimulate with it our fantasy (in my opinion, the most valuable gift that nature has given us).

The first works I would like to present is the graphic suite “Still-Leben mit Stille” (Still life with silence, 2008-2018).

“Still-Leben mit Stille” (Still life with silence), is intended to contemplation focusing on the graphic value of the silence in music. At the same time, it is an opportunity for me to develop my passion for storytelling using our universal language.

In order to understand in a general way these works (20 up to date), I should explain the following aesthetics ideas about them:

-Composing with values, treating the rests as notes.

Composing with this exchange of values in mind, treating for example the rests as notes, has open a path for me trying to answer a number of questions involving music
and silence. Rests are organized in the works in the same way that the notes have traditionally been. In some cases, I have imitated polyphonic processes, which in this case. Since “Poly-Phony” means many sounds, I like to call it “Polysiopy”.

-Physical voice and the inner voice
Eventually “Polysiopy” could also be described as inner-voice polyphony. “Still life with silence” focuses on voices and sounds in one’s own mind. It reflects the growing global interest in meditation and in the self as a reaction to a world getting louder and louder.

-The inner fantasy
With these previous ideas and through the graphical elements of music, I continuously try to stimulate the fantasy of my viewers with these works, trying to remember them that fantasy is probably the most human treasure we have inherited from nature; the difference between human beings and the rest of the animals.

-Portraits
Every work of “Still Life with Silence” tells a unique graphic story using elements linked to the dedicatees. Like this, I try to create different portraits of them.

Having an instrumentation of a string quartet without strings, the bow will have a more important role in the work. In fact, it is an essay about the meaning of the bow in music in different aspects. Silence and bow are two main elements of Kyūdō (Japanese Archery), which is practiced by the dedicatee (with whom I shared interesting hours of counterpoint during my composition studies). The rests use strict polyphonic rules, but the word *polyphony* means “many sounds”. This might be problematic in a time of history where silence is so valuable. We should perhaps describe it as *inner voice polyphony* or *polysiopy* (meaning “many silences”). This work also gives me possibility to represent the freedom that artists enjoy today and the wider borders of it through the inner words (or my thoughts?): “*Wohin geht die Musik? Die Musik ist schon da!*” (Where is music going? Music is already here!).
The dedicatee is the biographer of the Danish composer Gunnar Berg (1909–1989). The instrumentation is similar to Berg’s work *Filandres* for clarinet, guitar ad violin with the exception of the harp. In a graphic dimension, it confronts the piano and the harp as objects. The inside of the piano is very similar to a harp but placed horizontally and inside a resonance box. This *being in a box and being free* is also expressed with lines and textures imitating those of the drawings of Gunnar Berg himself.
This work is a minute of silence for the dedicatee, one of the musicians I have most admired and to whom I am very thankful for his work. With an instrumentation linked to his life and quotation by Henry Purcell (*Music for the Funeral of the Queen Mary*), it evokes the “Music of the Spheres” and a mystical entrance to heaven of the best conductor I can think of for such music.
“The Rest is Silence” (2013).

The second work is the opera “The Rest is Silence” (with own libretto). Written after Shakespeare’s quotation from “Hamlet”, the musical rest is obviously silence. This opera is very similar to those created by the time of the Florentine Camerata (mythological theme, instrumentation, etc.), only adapted to the new values of our society. At the same time silence is used as a protest for the damage our civilization is doing to our planet. I wanted to raise my voice about the environmental problems we are suffering at this moment of history.

It was written as a try to create an opera, which could be perceived in the same way by people who can hear and people cannot. I can only imagine the story of the opera using silence as musical material for the whole play.

The four elements are ill for a long time. They all have the same disease and no one can find the right cure for them. Finally, they call Hermes (the messenger) to find an answer to their disease. They send Hermes on a journey. He first visits Apollo and Artemisa. Unfortunately, they cannot help. However, Apollo, the god of Prophecy, recommends going into the Underworld. They know no cure for the Elements. Phobos and Deimos send Hermes to Hades (the god of Wealth). He is the only one who has the answer: "People no longer listen to us," he states. Their greed for goods and money has gone so big that they no longer listen to the voice of nature. Hades explains that every spoken or sung words they produced, cannot be heard by humans anymore “No matter if you speak, if you whisper or if you shout. They cannot hear us anymore. We do not exist for them any more. Scream as loud as you can. We will not be heard. They can only hear the sound of the gold!”

Zeus, Hades´ brother, will send Pandora, the first woman, to the Elements. She has a box where hope can still be found. She will bring it to the Elements. More cannot be done.

Hermes returns to the Elements, who are agonizing. The opera ends with the last words of Hermes waiting for Pandora: „Hope. The rest is silence“.
All the singers sing "silent lines" (this silent opera is the first of its kind), which follow the traditional rules of notation including dynamics, expression or “pitch” (in order to help the singers use the muscles in the same way as when they normally sing. The mute effect makes it much more intense for the audience, which can follow the libretto projected on the stage.

It is essential that the whole opera is conducted. Instead of instrumentalists, the instruments appear symbolically on their chairs. In the score, the notes are replaced by rests (exchanging the values), but there are detailed instructions on expression and dynamics. The mythological history, structure, and both the symbolic instrumentation (the orchestra looks like those at the time of the birth of opera in Florence) are very close to the earliest operatic compositions.

The Government of the Region of Salzburg awarded me with the 2013 *Jahresstipendium für Musik* for “The Rest is Silence.

Whatever the beginning of the universe might have been, it was the start of a huge composition we are all part of, with all our voices and all their echoes. This is the reason why I believe that silence is nothing but an illusion.

“You have opened a new door in music”

Cristóbal Halffter
10th Scene: Hope. And the rest is silence.

Apollo arrives. Everyone stays still. Apollo moves through the stage looking at the scene. He takes his lyre.

Largo

1

\[ \begin{align*} & p \\
& \text{Pan-dora is on her way. She will bring us hope.} \end{align*} \]

9

\[ \begin{align*} & p \\
& \text{Music is more than sounds. Music is silence.} \end{align*} \]

16

\[ \begin{align*} & f f \\
& \text{Music can move you even without a single sound.} \end{align*} \]

25

\[ \begin{align*} & p p \\
& \text{Hope. Hope.} \end{align*} \]

33

\[ \begin{align*} & p p p \\
& \text{Hope. And the rest is silence.} \end{align*} \]
Bibliography:
