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The construction of musical form by the listener in Debussy's "La Terrasse des Audiences du Clair de Lune"

The ways of listening to music are infinitely variable, according to the listeners, to the music and even to the moment and circumstances. From this statement, it is often concluded that it's an impossible enterprise describing musical listening in its diversity. So, one has recourse to simplifying models. There chiefly are two : the ideal listener model, over all developed in the field of cognitive sciences or of reception theory, and what can be called the average listener model, which consists in measuring average responses, as is generally done in experimental psychology. These two modelisations lead to smoothing out differences.

On the contrary, one can try to account for differences without losing oneself in the infinite variation of singular cases. One verifies, in fact, that in a set of observations made on real reception behaviours, there are convergences which appear, identical strategies which can be observed in several persons. So all the vectors, in infinite number, of the geometrical space, can be considered as a combination of only three basic vectors, in the same way, the infinite variety of individual listening behaviours can be described, with quite few reductions, as a combination, alternation or conflict of a few characterised listening strategies that I'll call « listening-types ».

I have especially studied reception behaviours of electroacoustic musics, to isolate points of view for analysis, but here I shall base myself on a work which is not the latest one but is about a more familiar piece. It is a piano prelude by Debussy : « La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune » performed by Cécile Ousset (1).

A few words about the observation dispositive : only nine subjects , all musicians, having a professional activity linked to music, fond of Debussy (but not specialists, nor professional pianists).

- Each of them has been invited, individually, to listen to this prelude three times (in very good listening conditions).
- After each of the first two listenings, open interview of ten or fifteen minutes was held, introduced by a question of the type : « How did you listen , what did you hear ? »

A variation was introduced for the third hearing : the listener could stop the record and comment when it was in progress.

- Twenty-seven statements have been recorded, transcribed and analysed.

At once, one can see the particularities of such methodological choices.

- Competent listeners, capable of listening attentively and subtly.
- A small number of participants which prevents any statistical utilization of the results.
- Recourse to verbalization, which supposes a part of interpretation, but gives access to symbolisation inherent in listening.

The aim is not, in fact, to extrapolate, pointing out listening types which would have a certain generality, but only to show that :

- in a given set of statements, various listening types appear,
- and that, according to the chosen type of listening, the object is built, in perception, in a specific way.

Taxonomical listening

Three characteristic strategies appeared in our corpus of statements, that I shall describe successively, putting emphasis on the way the listener, in these three cases, sees the object.

A first strategy is a consequence of the listener's will to take a synoptic sight at the piece, and to remember it. For that, he tries to split it into successive parts big enough so that there are not too many, and for him to have probability of finding in this set an order, a coherence. The various macro-units are named, in verbal statements, using sometimes « label-metaphores » which are only an « aide-memoire » to point out a sequence.

This first listening-type, we shall call it, for ease, « taxonomical listening », because making an inventory of the constituent elements is characteristic.

Here, this behaviour, in front of this prelude, ends with a feeling of dissatisfaction, even of failure.

- At the beginning, you don't know where it's going.

I said to myself : I'll find out eventually. I don't know if I did or not.

- *For me this music is difficult to memorize, it is complex and very intricate.*

- *You are forced to follow word for word. You have hardly any idea of what's going to come .*

Listeners who are hearing so, complain that they do not succeed in getting a sight of the set, because the sequences they delimit are too small, and thus too numerous.

- *I hear juxtapositions of tiny sequences. You change subject all the time.*

- *It's rather moments which follow each other.*

It is very easy for us, now, to return to the record and score, and to explain why, if someone adopts this behaviour, music is perceived as "juxtapositions of tiny sequences".

If we consider the first two pages of the score, for instance, we can notice that they are constituted by 8 figures. It's nearly a didactical application of the laws of form. Each of them has a strong morphological coherence and is opposite to the preceding and the following ones because of maximum contrast.

(Example 1).

1 : The first figure is all chords,

2 : the second one, on the contrary, purely melodic.

3 : just as this figure is smooth and arhythmic, the following one (3) has a sawtooth shape and rhythm.

4 : Again a smooth, continued, purely melodic design,

5 : which is opposite to this vertical, all chords succession.

6 : After a strong harmonic break, here is a completely static and motionless figure. It is a natural resonance : the harmonics 1 to 4 appear first (in their natural disposition in the spectrum). The harmonics of higher rank intervene only afterwards and disappear first, according to an acoustical law of a resonance extinction.

7 : And after this motionless sound object, here is, in contrast, an animated sequence, an oscillation the amplitude of which is growing.

This is how this first minute of music can be split into 8 strongly contrasted figures.

Figurativization

Now, a change of point of view. We shall adopt another listening behaviour, that we shall call "figurativization". Why "figurativization" ? Because the listener, this time, has the tendency to make music figurative, to find in it the representation of a scene.

This listening-type shows itself, in our statements, in a definite metaphorical construction, which depends on an opposition through two terms: something inert and something living. And more precisely, something inert which can be seen by transparency through something moving.

But that is not all. For, at a second level of simbolization, the opposition through living and inert is assimilated to opposition through a theatrical character and a back cloth, and all elements are present for action to take place. So, in that logic, musical form is interpreted as an action.

A few citations :

Metaphor of the scene :

A space is outlined, like a box, and the important, living, organic thing goes on inside. The rest is vegetable or mineral .

A regulated architectural space, something stable (...) There have to be creatures at liberty in this sound space .

The theme of transparency, of the sight of inert through moving.

- Like an image seen through water, diffracted in layers

- I thought of "choches à travers les feuilles" (bells through the leaves) because of the foliage you pass through.

At last, form is described like a forward tracking of a camera followed by a backward tracking.

You approach a point in the image, when there are crescendos, and the painting, instead of being blurred, becomes very clear (...) and then you step further away again.

You enter bit by bit into the crux of the subject (like a film camera advancing through successive rows of trees up to a charming palace in the films of Walt Disney) : and the end is a gradual distancing .

Our turn, now, to explain these metaphorical responses, that's to say, very simply, to find what the subjects may describe with these metaphores.

Explanation of transparency, and more precisely of the inert seen by transparency through the moving, is based on the analysis of "planes of presence".

A first example, almost at the beginning.

(ex 2)

Here, the same chord can be heard five times, put on the beat, regularly. We may reasonably suppose that it represents the stable element. It is played pianissimo, in the medium range, and masked by a set of foreground designs, which move easily from the bottom to the top tones

A little further, an inert element, again, seen by transparency through a living element.

(ex 3)

The same F, on the middle staff, is repeated eleven times and constitutes a kind of fixed axis, which passes across five bars, surrounded with moving and animated oscillations. One can fix one's attention on this F which passes across the whole section, even when it is in the background. When listened to from this point of view this sequence appears continuous, even though the same sequence, heard from a taxonomic point of view, could be analysed as a succession of two opposite figures, the one static, the other very dynamic.

But let us go on analyzing transparency, planes of presence, and let us try to explain the tracking forward metaphor : « like a film-camera advancing through successive rows of trees up to a charming palace in the films of Walt Disney », thus, the inert element which is first in the background and progressively comes in the foreground. This happens a little further (precisely bar nineteen).

(ex 4)

The inert element is in the distance. It is a pedal chord (you can see), repeated six times but in a second plane, like a background before which is developed a very clear melodic design, until this repeated C diesis becomes the melody, becomes animated, that's to say the background becomes the figure, more and more precise and charged.

You can see how these apparently very far-fetched metaphors show, in reality, a close listening to planes of presence, and how the Walt Disney like scenario describes a certain formal construction.

Empathic listening

Let us see a third listening type which supposes another attitude, which is going to select other features, thus makes apparent other configurations and finally gives the same piece another form.

I shall call this third hearing « empathic listening », because the subjects who are listening in this way are attentive to sensations that they say they feel, and it is about their sensations they speak, as if they physically indulged in the music, in order to feel better, as by empathy, an effect of musical patterns.

Here, it's about heaviness. But listeners who are hearing in that way do not say that music is heavy. They tell, for instance :

- I continually see myself in a situation where I'm going to escape from a certain heaviness, but I'm brought back to it.

- The work of composition consists in expressing this feeling of heaviness .There is really a physical feeling of fluidity and downward movement.

And when they describe metaphorically the form, it is not in terms of visual pictures but of sensations and experienced effort.

- This theme didn't seem to me, at the previous hearing, to suggest such a tiring walk - something physical, experienced physically - towards a peak which is a relief.

It 'not very difficult to see what they are speaking about.

The feeling of heaviness is not only coming from the fact that, during the first minute of the piece all the melodic lines are going down.

It's a little more complex. We note two kinds of pattern which can be interpreted as a down attraction and both have as a base what can be called an « attracting pole » which is simply a repeated tone.

The first pattern can be called « the fall.» It's a melodic line which is coming to fall on an attracting pole, that's to say a repeated tone.

(ex 5)

There are many falls in the first two pages

(ex 6)

The second pattern is like this

(ex 7)

- an attracting pole is first confirmed by repetition
- the melodic line then moves up by a related melodic movement.
- to finally return down

I call that a « lengthening », as if one pulls a string which finally returns to its static position.

Until bar twelve, we can notice three occurrences of this « lengthening », the last of them is the most developed.

(ex 8)

Listening again to the same passage in this new prospect is an interesting experience. There is no longer division into two planes of presence (a figure opposite to a background), but a single line, an attracting pole along which you are moved up and irresistibly pulled down to it.

One can notice that at the end of the passage, a change appears. At the set of going down motives a going up motive follows ; an attracting pole (that's to say a repeated tone) is confirmed at the top which will be used to articulate « lengthenings », but this time reversed, pulling upwards.

(ex 9)

Polarity is passed to the top, and this until the end, where one can find the opposite of a fall that's to say upward lines which are coming to die on a high attracting pole.

(ex 10)

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from these observations.

The first one is that, according to the type of listening behaviour one adopts, one doesn't select the same features, thus one doesn't make apparent the same configurations and finally one doesn't build the same form.

The same passage, according to the listener's attitude, can be divided into two contrasted sequences, or into two planes of presence, a figure and a background, or to be seen as a single oscillating line, continually recalled downwards.

(ex 11)

The perception of the global form, is not the same either.

He who practices a taxonomic listening only sees a succession of little figures after each other.

For he who practises the figurativization, the piece is a great forward then backward tracking. A remarkable inversion point can be noticed (bar 19), where the background passes into the foreground.

And finally, for empathic listening, one first feels a heaviness which pulls you down, then a climbing, but always heavy and at last a relief, a kind of weightlessness, which has its definite equivalent in the writing and the sound realization. Here again can be noticed the presence of an inversion point (bar 12), where attraction which was downward becomes upward, but of course it is not the same one as for the preceding listening.

So, each point of view determines a form.

One would also be tempted to draw conclusions about psychological reality of listening types. On this matter, what can be concluded, what cannot be concluded ?

It is of course impossible to conclude that there are three ways of listening to this Debussy's prelude and still less that there are three ways of listening to music. It is quite another methodology which would be employed for studying, on a statistical plane, what listening behaviours are adopted according to the personality, the culture, the music.

On the contrary, what is clearly seen to appear, even with a very homogeneous population of only nine subjects, is that there are different strategies, depending on different motivations and attitudes.

And it seems, as far as it is possible to trust in a method which is based on verbal statements analysis, that one can pretty well describe individual listening behaviour as a

combination of only a few listening types. Anyway, in a certainly less reducing manner than by using the ideal listener model or the average listener model.

But we can see more. What appears too is that certain listening types are doing better than others in front of a given music. Here, for instance, taxonomic listening led to a feeling of failure, while the others two types of listening brought out a very coherent and satisfactory path for the listener. There is, no doubt, a reciprocal adaptation of listening and the object, that could be described in terms of assimilation and accommodation. The listener adapts music to his listening, as much as he adapts his listening to music, but the music more or less fits, and we can perhaps see there an explanation of preferences. But these are only leads. Very much is left to be done.

(1) Ref. : EMI, CDC. 7476092.

Methodological aspects of this study are more developed in "La Terrasse des Audiences du Clair de Lune de Debussy : Essai d'analyse esthétique", *Analyse Musicale* n°16, Paris, 1989.