



An interview with Ondřej Adámek by Carlo Benzi

ONDŘEJ ADÁMEK, CARLO BENZI

This conversation is related to the essay by Carlo Benzi, *Timbre, gesture, communication and musical meaning in some recent works by Ondřej Adámek* included in *Nuove musiche*, no. 7, 2020, in the context of the project *Writing <--> Technology. Composers 1973-1983* (G. Albert, A. Valle, eds., *Nuove musiche*, 5-7).

CARLO BENZI May you describe how the different instruments that you play did influence your approach to composing and to think about the timbre and the sound articulation?

ONDŘEJ ADÁMEK In my childhood I played the piano. I loved taking different objects, like kitchen pots, glasses, toys, and sort them to create a scale and play it together with tapes of baroque music. During my youth I also played the horn, the organ, exotic percussion, flutes, electric guitar and I started to sing. I particularly enjoy having a direct experience, a physical touch of instruments as a way of creating sounds. Now in my studio I have a violin, a viola, a cello, a guitar, a trumpet, a flute, and a bunch of instruments from other cultures. I love to develop a piece of music only on paper, without any sound, just by inner hearing. Furthermore, while composing, I also need to sing, to conduct an imaginary orchestra, to play the piano, to try out things on percussion or objects. A very exciting part of the work is the rehearsal process and the direct work with the interpreters. That is why I also became a conductor.

C. B. Which contemporary composers did influence you the most, both from a pure musical point of view and from a more ideal one?

O. A. When I was 15 years old, I first got in touch with music from other cultures, like the one that just appeared after the liberation from the communist isolation in the '90s. For me, it was a big culture shock. If I had to mention some of my biggest inspirations until today, I surely should name:

North Indian traditional music, West African music, aboriginals (Inuits, Australia), music from Tibet, Japan, Bali. I was very inspired also by György Ligeti, Igor Stravinsky, Martin Smolka, George Crumb, Heiner Goebbels, Giacinto Scelsi and Gérard Grisey.

C. B. Which philosophers did influence your understanding of arts and music? Which is for you the main aim of the music? Do you attribute a social value both to theoretical aesthetics and to concrete musical works?

O. A. Usually I am not a philosophizing artist. For sure I am very influenced by Hinduism for what concerns the perception of the world. An artistic creation is a mysterious process. We can try to observe the process and let it become more efficient or developed it, but finally it will never fully reveal itself. In the end, who can understand where ideas actually come from and why inspiration comes to us?

C. B. In which sense could a composer influence his audience, not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also from an ideal one? Does Adorno's perspective of social critic through arts and music still apply to our modern world?

O. A. To fully become a witness of art, there has to be an exchange of energy. It should enlarge the perception of our life, our world, and bestow it a new dimension. The spectator is assisting in the accomplishment of a piece of art and should therefore experience a feeling s/he had never known before. The universe feels larger, that it did before. It could be only a sensation.

C. B. You integrate many body movements in your pieces; does it only represent a visual, complementary element to the music, or do you use it because you want to underline the necessity of an integration between body and soul in a holistic way? Is it related to your interest in Indian culture?

O. A. A concert is a performance, that cannot be reduced to music, but includes also a visual part which shows some forms of a ritual. It occurs tremendously often, that musicians are just artists that perform a certain piece, showing an underdeveloped body language which sometimes makes it funny due to this lack of expression. Extra-European musicians often have a gorgeous and strong body presence. A typical Western musician tends to hide behind the score, the music stand, the instruments itself or the pile of notes. In contrast to this attitude and in order to better the performance as well, I like to uncover the artist, wake up their bodies, find a strong presence through special tasks (movements written in the score, playing with objects) or through special body work (warm ups). It enhances also the intensity of sound, voice, and the whole energy.

C. B. Which influence does the Japanese culture have on you, and the Nō Theater, in particular? Did they help you develop a new personal idea of musical theater?

O. A. My pieces *Nôise*, *Karakuri*, *Ça tourne ça bloque*, *Imademo* are each a deep excursion into one voice of culture phenomena in ancient and current Japan, each time very different. For example: In *Nôise*, the energy and the vibrato, are the expression of Japan's voice, while in *Nō* and *Bunraku*, in *Ça tourne ça bloque* the same elements

represent a fast and automated way of talking and behaving.

C. B. What is the role of the Spanish culture in your late compositions? Does Flamenco in your eyes represent a dance or rather a discipline to connect body and mind together?

O. A. The real Flamenco (*saetas, canto jondo* etc.) is a very complex and unique music. Today people tend to associate with this word pop flamenco mix, *Sevillanas, cajon*, and not the pure one. The chant in Flamenco is modal and micro-intervallic, the guitar cadenzas and harmonic commentaries are shifted into the tonality. This results into an interesting tension.

I am interested in these phenomena, because, in contrast to other vocal traditions, in Flamenco the energy is pulled inside the body and not outside.

C. B. Your original instrument, the Airmachine, unites more dimensions together: the power of the compressed air and a wide palette of timbres, depending on the form and the material of the pipes you use; the mechanical and rhythmical way to play the sounds, also due to computer control, and your movements while changing the pipes during the performance; the game- and joke-oriented way to play it and the full integration of this instrument with the timbre of choirs, ensembles and orchestras of different pieces you have composed that involve the Airmachine. Do you think, it will be always more important for the composers to precisely define the timbre they want to achieve or could it also be interesting to allow some freedom and to give importance to musical improvisation?

O. A. In your question you already mentioned and defined the Airmachine. Airmachine was an experiment that was supposed to be small and grew quickly very big. Finally, it is a mixture of all of that: finding new timbres, accumulation of micro-intervals, enlarging the sound and timbre palette, combination of controllable (rhythm) and uncontrollable (exact pitch) elements: A visual theater of gesture and a different relation between man and machine (machine as slave or man as slave).

C. B. You seem to have several ideas of the “form”: at the micro-level you prefer short sound fragments, often with an innovative timbre and a strong gestural dimension. At the middle-level you recurrently build contrasts between a sound situation and the next one. What is your form conception at the macro-level? Do you think, form needs a clearly defined direction that the audience can individuate, also in an intuitive way (e.g. climax, anticlimax, development, predictability)?

O. A. I think that form is a very important and mysterious element of composition. It is hard to say why a form sometimes does or does not work.

My method consists in taking a lot of time to develop each piece and playing it through my inner hearing, shorten or develop each part until the form works. There are multiple elements that do influence the form, like: note lengths, contrasts, tempos, repetition, cuts, blocks, processes, returns, tonal centers, etc. I personally use all of them. I don't use a predetermined detailed structure anymore. I want to stay free. At the start of the work, I have a global vision, and by keeping this main idea in mind, I give each element

enough time and space to live and die. Sometimes my pieces work much better in the concert than on a recording. I often spend a great deal of time developing the beginning of a piece but, in the end, it creates a huge energy in the end.

C. B. Which role do the new technologies play in your compositional experience? Do you involve it only to modify the timbre of the instruments and the voices or also to invent and define new compositional constraints (e.g. through tools for the Computer Aided Composition)? Are the new technologies intended to reach an innovative sound design? How do the instrumentalists interact with the new technologies while performing your compositions? Which is the role of the videos in your works?

O. A. I use new technologies less and less. For now, I adopted it only in some projects. I need to keep a pure and natural energy in my music and that is why I worked with computer just a small part of my creative time. I use computer for composing to quickly express my ideas when the paper and the pencil are too slow (writing words, recording voices, etc.). I like to use technology in a very simple way (programming sampler played through keyboard and Kontakt-software, triggering sounds by the spacebar of the computer, real time video etc.) since I prefer spending time by working with interpreters than doing tests with technology.

C. B. In which sense do you think that the action of writing music represents a technology (or a complex of techniques)? How is it possible for you to integrate old or traditional models and forms (e.g., the opera, the counterpoint, the block-form) with very new sounds and timbres or also instruments (like your way to reinterpret the sound of the acoustic instruments in an innovative way or your Airmachine)?

O. A. I stay quite traditional, but I create very special, new sounds. Sometimes, I reverse tradition in a sarcastic way and laugh about it a bit.

C. B. The instrumental, vocal, and corporal gestures play a very important role in your compositional world. Do you intend your activity as a synthesis and a new elaboration of different cultures and experiences, not only related to the contemporary music?

O. A. Yes, you are right. I am definitely influenced by everyday life mechanisms, but also by theater, dance and other cultures. But I like to connect sound and movement in a very abstract way too.

C. B. What message does your music communicate to the audience? What is the “sense” of composing, as you see it? Is it a craft, a way to communicate your ideals, a social critic, a multicultural experience, or maybe all that at the same time?

O. A. The answer is within the very question. The composition is an urge, a necessity for me. The result might be a strong experience for the public, direct energy, communication. It can also involve a concrete story, text, social critic, multicultural experience or not, it depends on each project.

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