



An interview with Andrea Agostini by Fabio De Sanctis De Benedictis

ANDREA AGOSTINI, FABIO DE SANCTIS DE BENEDICTIS

This conversation is related to the essay by Fabio De Sanctis De Benedictis, *Andrea Agostini, gli atomi che si accendevano e radiavano, for barytone saxophone and live electronics: from the neutral to the poetic level* 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).

FABIO DE SANCTIS DE BENEDICTIS Andrea Agostini, I am addressing to the reader, is a complete musician that does not need any presentation, and that embody the present composer figure faithfully, whose skills range over the musical composition, informatics and electronic music, both in the creative sphere and in research field. Co-author with Daniele Ghisi of the well-known algorithmic composition system, *bach: automated composer's helper* for Max/MSP, he is active and invited in the most significant realities of musical contemporary landscape. Dear Andrea, I would begin with asking you for news about your training and your present main occupations.

ANDREA AGOSTINI I started playing piano as a young child, half self-taught and half guided by my grandfather, an amateur but amazingly talented musician who wrote a lot of music in his life. Then I began studying composition and electronic music at the Conservatory of Bologna and, in the same years, around my early teens, I fell in love with rock music. It was a blinding revelation whose impact was perhaps strengthened by the fact that we mostly listened to classical and romantic music at home. So I started playing with lots of bands, sharing with my pals not only the love for electric guitars and the length of our hair, but also a lot of political, ethical, cultural and countercultural references—I really believed in that stuff, and I guess I still do. Then I peeked into the universe of composition masterclasses, but I was seriously disappointed by seeing, everywhere I went, self-important teachers looking for a court and obsequious students

striving to become courtiers, and the unhealthy network of relationships this kind of attitude tended to create. So I spent several years basically on my own, making music of every kind (including, of course, lots of rock'n'roll) and writing pieces whenever I had the occasion, without any thought of having a career in contemporary music. My lone wolf phase came to an end in 2008 when, well in my thirties, I enrolled in the famous Ircam's *Cursus*. A lot of interesting stuff happened there, including the unexpected and somehow sudden discovery of musical informatics as a universe of research topics, rather than a mere set of tools: this made me brush up the crude programming notions I had learned as a hobby many years before and start, together with Daniele Ghisi, the conception and development of the *bach* system you mentioned. Even more importantly, at Ircam I literally spent months in a room full of other composers, most of whom I genuinely liked and became friends with, and that made me feel for the first time part of a community. In retrospect, that was the moment when I stopped being a guy doing lots of stuff including writing pieces, and started calling myself a contemporary music composer—a tag I have never felt completely at ease with, but which nonetheless I have identified with since then.

And now? In the latest years, I have done a lot of teaching—mostly at the Conservatory of Turin, plus some classes at the Scuola Civica in Milan and the occasional masterclass or seminar. I still work on *bach* and related things, both practical (other pieces of software, such as the *cage* project) and theoretical (writing articles, attending conferences and so on). For some years I wrote about new music and its social and political context on the blog */nu/thing*, together with a group of friends which, by the way, includes Daniele: the blog is sleeping now, but I still ask myself how the discourse can be kept alive. And, of course, I compose music, which is the center of gravity around which everything else revolves.

F. D. S. D. B Your words press me for a lot of questions. I would begin with some specific one: among the composers you have had the opportunity to know, or with whom you trained, of course without doing anything wrong, do you remember anyone that concurred to specific aspects of your formation more directly? This question inevitably involves another one: what is your relationship with musical tradition?

A. A. The first living composer I met was my grandfather: everything that came afterwards is rooted in what he taught me, and he taught me a lot. I have learned so many things from Chiara Benati that I can hardly name them now—she really showed me how composing can, and to some extent must, be a speculative activity; she was the first *contemporary music composer* I ever came to know, and arguably the first person from whom I heard the name *contemporary music* itself. When I met Giovanni Verrando, I saw that that same name could refer to something much more radical, wide and free than I had imagined: Giovanni used to talk about Grisey, Reich, King Crimson, IRCAM and his friends Riccardo and Fausto, he has showed me that our music is, or should be, an act of freedom rather than a system of rules; he really was the composer I wanted to become. Paolo Aralla, whom I met soon after, had a decisive influence on me for a number of reasons, including the fact that he gave me the basic knowledge of the things that really interest me in the field of computer music—not only tools and techniques, but

the idea itself that computation can enrich and extend the way music is conceived: and of course he is a wonderful composer and, although his works were probably a bit too complex for the 23-year-old version of me to understand, that really mattered a lot. My last, great teacher was Yan Maresz, under whose guidance, at Ircam, I somehow took all these threads and many more, and started figuring out how to lace them together. One of these threads is the relation with musical tradition—or, I'd rather say, with musical traditions, which leads us to the second part of your question. I'd say that it is a strong, deep and complex relation: referencing existing music is something inevitable for me, but—trying to quote by heart a text by Fausto Romitelli I read but can't find anymore—in a modern sense, not a post-modern one. Schubert, Brahms, Led Zeppelin, but also, with less competence, Tunisian *nouba* or Balinese *gamelan* are the very nourishment of my work, I can learn new things from them at any time. But my approach is somehow the opposite of a quotative one: what I look for is not borrowing pre-existing items and patching them together, but rather assimilating elements of other idioms and investigating their underlying archetypes.

Speaking more specifically of the great classical-romantic musical tradition, it is an immense reference for me, one I feel increasingly close and compelling as I grow older. As a teacher, I still believe it is, and will long remain, an inescapable cultural background, and I urge all my students to deepen their knowledge of it, as, at the very least, it seems to me the only way to acquire the lexicon necessary to talk and think about music and musical composition in a systematic, non-anecdotal way. As an observer of today, I wonder whether the models this tradition provides are still believable, relevant and, above all, reproducible; I notice that terms we use to talk about our everyday lives are often perceived as pointing at some glorious but now defunct past: I'm thinking, for example, about "composer" and even "music", a word—and perhaps a notion—that has been largely replaced by the more generic "sound art", at least when talking about non-traditional and non-pop forms and practices. As an artist, a composer, a musician, I look somehow nostalgically at that lost world I have never seen, and at the same time I must and I want to be in the present—and, ideally, in the future. It is difficult...

F. D. S. D. B *In the future...* An immediate symmetry leads me to put you another question: what is your relationship with the future? How do you see future music development, both about your production and in a wider sense?

A. A. Ah, the future... We should probably talk about the present first...

F. D. S. D. B Of course. In present we can have the seeds for future. Please, say us something about your thoughts on actual situation.

A. A. Six years ago I wrote on the */nu/thing* blog a post called "NewThings", in which I tried to outline a map of what I perceived as the major topics, themes and trends in contemporary music at the time. In that post, I talked, for instance, about composers taking inspiration from other, "lower" musical genres; incorporating in their idioms elements that were tabooed until a few years before, such as repetition, measured rhythm and harmonic objects reminiscent of tonality; embracing their own subjectivity

and even capriciousness, rather than yearning for higher, objective truths; and things like that.

Looking back to it now, I think I had got it all wrong, or maybe I was right at the time but the tide has changed quickly over these few years, or maybe the post was more a private manifesto than the wide survey I had in mind. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that virtually none of those New Things is relevant now. If I should write it now, I'd talk about how the relation between gesture, timbre and extended instrumental techniques has somehow superseded pitch as the main parameter of the musical discourse in time; I'd possibly mention musical genres, but not as a source of inspiration as much as a given, sorts of "found meta-objects" mostly useful, if anything, for ironic quotation; I'd make no reference to categories like consonance versus dissonance, or fluid temporality versus rhythm, as they have been made essentially meaningless by the considerations above; I'd recognize a sort of new normativeness, quite distinct from the ones that preceded it in its prescriptions but less so in its method and theoretical foundations.

My problem with all this is that I miss the things from six years ago. I somehow feel that the current, overarching trends are a step backwards rather than forward. I try to convince myself that it's only a generational thing; that, as almost everyone past, present and future, I have come to think that music has died at some point during my twenties: but I don't really succeed, and it seems to me that we are in one of those "the emperor has no clothes" situations instead; and so, my not-so-secret hope is that this is an ebb, and a flow will follow.

As of now, the things I find most interesting don't belong to these big currents, and often not even to the contemporary music world: the African-American pop scene (including Kendrick Lamar winning the Pulitzer), for example, which I discovered during my mourning for the death of rock'n'roll, seems to me like the *real thing* today, although, for sure, it is something so different from Mozart that it might even require a partial redefinition of the concept itself of music—but in a not-so-distant past this applied to Boulez as well, didn't it?

And you know, in fact I don't think that *contemporary music* as a genre (which, in fact, I think it should not be) will live on much longer—it seems to me that it is already on life support, if only because of the lack of money and public interest, and I won't be missing its mannerisms when they're gone. But it would be a great loss if the kind of adventurous, exploratory mindset and the very specific body of knowledge that the name contemporary music can point at at its best were forgotten. Rather than attempting any kind of prophetic outlook on the future, my attitude is more of the kind "wait and see, cultures don't stop producing the forms of expressions they need", and I'm quite convinced that formally rich musical idioms are too deeply entrenched in our own culture not to find new ways to show up, even if most of what comes out of the Darmstädter Ferienkurse has been smelling funny since a while.

F. D. S. D. B What you are saying underlines the subtle question about musical genres and the relationships with means of production. Of course what I am going to

say is somehow also valid for today and past classical music, but don't you think that in some musical genres a relationship too close to the market can be dangerous for artistic freedom? I am putting this question without any prejudice, perhaps in a little provocative way, because I think it is an important matter and I would like to know your thought.

A. A. The relation between the various musical genres is a big, open question for me. Please, don't mistake me: I'm not so naive to think that "music is music *e basta*", or to believe in syncretizations as simplistic as curry risotto. The fragmentation of musical experience intrigues me—why those who ask you about the kind of music you listen to don't want to know the kind of books you read, films you see or cuisine you eat? Wherever you look, there are macro- and micro-taxonomies, sometimes linked to whole cultural constellations detailed down to the dress code. Why? What happened? What does this mean? I firmly believe that every different way music is made today is potentially interesting and has a lesson to teach about how to articulate one's musical thinking. Symmetrically, I muse on the defining features of what we call contemporary music and wonder whether it is a musical genre or not. As I hinted at before, my answer is that, as a matter of fact, it is, but it shouldn't—it should be a way of thinking, a disciplined but at the same time voracious disposition of the musical mind: which is why, when it crystallizes into a style, it loses much of its interest.

At this point many of my friends usually argue, just like you do, about the greater freedom of the contemporary music composer, usually implying that this freedom is some sort of *conditio sine qua non* for higher artistic quality and relevance. I disagree strongly. First of all, no artist lives in isolation, we are all conditioned by what we swim in, and the socio-economic context in which our work gets exchanged for money and fame is no exception. The only completely free artists around are hobbyists—people having either fortunes or day jobs allowing them to produce art without any kind of constraint other than their will, including Mahler (day job: conductor), Ives (day job: insurance broker), Scelsi (fortune) and the few lucky ones who made awful lots of money which then they used to only do what they wanted. All those who consider themselves professional composers have a relation with some kind of market, which can sometimes force them to tough compromises with themselves. In this respect, I don't believe there are inherently good and bad musical genres: it is surely true that some musical styles appeal, at least potentially, to a much wider and richer market than others, and in this sense contemporary music is definitely not on the wealthy end of the scale (would you compare Murail and Madonna?), but this doesn't mean that everything produced in the realms of pop has stemmed from some cold calculation about how the general audience will react (on the contrary, there are whole strands of the pop music world whose primary *raison d'être* is uncompromisingness): nor does it mean that the average young composer striving for recognition could truly say not to be influenced in her writing by preoccupation with how her work will be received. And, in fact, I'm pretty sure that I heard lots of very exciting and revelatory music crafted for the masses, and lots of very dull and conventional music conceived in an ivory tower or a gathering of free minds. I'll go even further and say that it seems clear to me, looking back at history, that some artists and masterpieces thrive within a relationship with the market (think of Mozart's operas, and let me add the Beatles), whereas others clearly needed total

freedom and isolation to be fully realized (the obvious example here is Beethoven's late period). Zooming out again, we could say that all this has to do with the two essential forces that have driven artists throughout the ages—the need to express the deepest parts of themselves and the will to reach out to as many other human beings as possible, the utopia of communicating universally. Some artists choose one side, some the other, some try to find their own balance, great works of art span effortlessly both sides (which doesn't necessarily mean that the great artists who created them do) and, all in all, I really don't believe the truth of those who think they're better, smarter, purer. If anything, I think that the contemporary music world has a lot to learn from other genres, including pop, for example in how to establish a mature relation with technology, or explore novel models of production such as collective writing, or even, very pragmatically, make things *sound awesome* (thank you Mr. Maresz).

F. D. S. D. B I agree with what you are saying. Sometimes I simply (perhaps too simply) speak about good or bad music, for heart and mind, without discriminatory intent with respect to musical genres. If I asked you about explaining what we could mean for "good or bad music", what would you say?

A. A. Oh, I have no idea. You know, I don't think composers are good judges for music, I wish I could rely on critics for that. Composers can write, but this doesn't mean they can read. We are too acquainted with, attracted and distracted by the technical qualities of music, our judgement is unbalanced. Good music and skillfully made music are very different things, we can recognize the latter in the blink of an eye but, generally speaking, have no tools for discerning the former and, if anything, we can easily confound the two. The fact that composers hold the reins of the discourse about contemporary music produces a very dangerous short-circuit, in which we evaluate our music according to the very same parameters we use to create it, whereas we need other people trying to discern meaning, context, implications and reasons in what we do beyond what we think we do, people looking at our work from a detached point of view and creating a bridge for non-insiders to appreciate it, or reject it. There is a tradition of incredibly good, literate criticism for pop and rock music (think of Lester Bangs or Robert Christgau or Simon Reynolds, but actually there are dozens of great writers around), and I think their role in the transition of rock from a brainless kind of dance music for teenagers to an inescapable cultural phenomenon and, ultimately, a major art form can't be underestimated. They raised the stakes, and led people who possibly wouldn't have come in contact with such an originally low-brow form of expression into seeing the potential it had. I really believe that the fact that our music, today, has virtually no audience and no cultural relevance is tightly connected with the shortage of criticism proper about it—but then again, why do critics ignore us? Who is to blame? More about this below, I guess...

Back to your question, I like to think that there should be as many criteria for judging music as musical works, or more, but perhaps the only way to say if music is good is seeing how it stands the test of time. We may argue whether we prefer Haydn or Mozart, but, whatever our choice, I don't think any of us would maintain that the works of Clementi are superior to theirs, and it seems unbelievable that this used to be a lively

debate in the late 18th century. Trying to assess the value of today's music is much more problematic, and it involves accepting the risk of being like those who preferred Clementi to Mozart, or worse. I'm attracted to music both intellectually and viscerally, and the two kinds of attraction don't always pull me in the same direction—but, for sure, I trust more my guts than my brains and, if anything, I'm usually more successful in reconciling *a posteriori* the latter with the former than the opposite. I love Ferneyhough's "Unity Capsule" more because it overwhelms me with information to the point of making me feel dizzy than because that information is meticulously devised according to a very detailed rationale, although this knowledge surely adds interest to the aesthetic experience; I love ABBA's "Dancing Queen" more because it has a soaring melody and bouncy rhythms than because it is immaculately crafted, played and sung, although the part of me that feels elated at simple but perfectly shaped forms and shiny, lush sounds surely responds with happiness to the aesthetic experience. But saying whether this is good or bad music, as opposed to saying whether I like it or not, requires both a theoretical framework and serious articulatory skills that composers don't and perhaps can't possess, because they would collide with what is needed to actually create music. Not that possessing these qualities gives access to any kind of truth, of course, otherwise critics would always agree with each other: but, at least, it allows to put judgements into a context that is more than just technical.

All this might open up another can of worms: what can rightfully be judged with purely intrinsic tools is scientific research, and there has been a lot of talk since decades about artistic research and musical research, including Milton Babbitt's crucial article "Who cares if you listen?". At the very least, musical research should be peer reviewed, thus replacing critics with the community of the composers themselves: and, as Babbitt correctly suggests, it should not be of any greater interest to the general public than advanced mathematics. The idea that contemporary music is musical research is not without merit, and definitely a fascinating one, but I find it somewhat simplistic, and it looks to me a bit like a tentative relief from our frustration of having lost contact with the audience. But ok, I'm definitely straying off topic...

F. D. S. D. B In your composition practice technology plays a fundamental role. I would like to invite you to deepen the topic.

A. A. I think the contemporary music world has, very often, a quite troublesome relation with technology. There is widespread confusion between means and ends: I've seen too many times the fascination for the tool, the understandable desire of exploring and exploiting it, take the place of aesthetic reflection. This technocratic approach has indeed had the merit of pushing the boundaries of technology, but at the cost of poisoning the relation between technology itself and art, creating false myths and dogmas that limit and distort imagination and action.

Moreover, this confusion is not limited to material technologies, but extends to compositional techniques in a more abstract sense: how many pieces have we heard, whose only interest seemed to reside in the formal processes set up by the composer? This is a very problematic matter, because the relation between technique and the sublime that, by means of it, an artist can sometimes evoke is one of the great mysteries of art,

but it seems to me that, in the contemporary music world, it is very often misunderstood. Once again, I advocate borrowing some of the pragmatic attitude of other musical communities, which of course are not free from problems and contradictions but surely don't let theoretical apriorisms hamper them: pop producers have been mashing up acoustic and electronic instruments, non-realtime and realtime paradigms of sound processing, pitch- and sound-based compositional strategies since decades, to the point of making this kind of rigid classifications inapplicable, and they have been doing all this without any kind of fetishistic commitment to the process, but rather—in the best cases—with a painstaking attention to the result. I think there's a lot to learn for us there.

F. D. S. D. B Changing the subject, the composer figure has had a certain evolution over the centuries, from artisan composer, to say, until Classic era, to romantic *Weltanschauung*, preceded by Beethoven's titanism, until more complicated and articulated figures in last century. How do you see the figure and the role of the composer today? Can we affirm that he has still a social, political, ethical function, and if yes, what do you think it can be?

A. A. It's a mess! There we go again: the composers we refer to, with whom we studied, whom we consider our peers or whose fantastic careers we envy count nothing in the wider cultural discourse. People who attend contemporary art exhibitions, watch arthouse films, read fiction and poetry don't listen to our music, are unaware that we exist. They love jazz, rock, pop, electronic music (as in Alva Noto, not John Chowning), *chanson*, the Alan Lomax archive, sometimes classical music (be it Austrian, Moroccan, Hindustani): not us. As I was saying before, our music has disappeared from the network of references of contemporary culture. We are irrelevant and we must ask ourselves why, how we can change this. The basic question is if contemporary culture needs contemporary music, if the irrelevance has to do with what we do, or how we place ourselves when we do it, or how forces and circumstances out of our control have maliciously or inadvertently cornered us.

For sure, the severe lack of musical education in school—at least in Italy, but I'm afraid it's a widespread situation—and the downfall of the status symbol that opera and concert seasons used to represent until few decades ago play an important role in the big change that has happened in the culture of listening and in how spaces for an intrinsically non-functional musical as our own have shrunk. Let me take a detour and elaborate upon this. I think music is undergoing a radical process of simplification, at least along some of the conceptual axes of our musical tradition, whereas parameters such as texture and flow, which are hardly taught in most composition schools, are rising to prominence—and I am thinking about the new take on *bruitisme* many young composers are embracing as much as the cultural ubiquity of pop music, which has crossed and virtually obliterated every possible divide between high and low music, having become the *only* music present in today's cultural discourse and referenced in today's cultural production at large: and pop music itself, at least in its most interesting areas, is less chordal and melodic and more textural and sonic than it was some decades ago—think of hip-hop.

I think that this trend of simplification of music goes along with a primitivization of its role in society: music producing discourse today is either song, or dance music, or it deliberately eschews intrinsic articulation, building its aesthetic interest through a network of extrinsic relations (with other forms of expression, from mainstream cinema to experimental installations, or through the constant, liberal and literal reference to pre-existing, recognizable sound objects), until renouncing the definition itself of ‘music’, supplanted by the more generic ‘sound art’. Singing, dancing or referring to other: I can imagine music in the Paleolithic roughly functioning in these fundamental ways, and for sure we are a world away from the sublimation and abstractness of our classical tradition. I’m not judging the aesthetic value of all this: if anything, I am fascinated and attracted by this primitiveness; but, at the same time, I can’t help thinking that many people of culture, intelligence, curiosity and love for beauty are missing wonderful things because they don’t have the chance, or have not been recommended, to investigate non-functional music, be it the Art of the Fugue or a piece written yesterday.

All this being said, I think the issue is bigger: there is something deeply unappealing in the contemporary music world. Too often, when going to a contemporary music concert, I feel like I’m expected to tolerate intolerable things—dull lighting, badly rehearsed stage changes, sloppily conceived programs, to name a few typical ones—but pretentiously served, as if I was being somehow being lectured about “what serious music is” rather than exposed to a hopefully sublime and necessarily ritual aesthetic experience. Too often, the music I hear is not exciting, not daring, not beautiful but only *well made*—a synonymous of kitsch, as far as I know. I’m not saying that any form of art can only produce masterpieces, but what strikes me is how the focus seems always to be on the quality of craftsmanship rather than of invention, and how the strict adherence to a set of essentially technical precepts that have evolved very little over the last 70 years (and that basically define contemporary music as the punitive musical genre it is perceived as) seems to be held as the main judgement tool by jury members, artistic directors and most of the few critics we have. But craftsmanship is not sexy, you know what I mean? How can our work be expected to be culturally relevant if its outstanding quality is its level of technical accomplishment?

You cited in your question the figure of the artisan composer, but that artisanship (Ockeghem’s, Bach’s and, to some extent, even Mozart’s) had, just like a carpenter’s or a tailor’s, an immediate, practical goal: a religious ceremony, a prince’s feast. Our world is academical, it revolves around few powerful people deciding who will be powerful tomorrow, around schools producing legions of self-confident youngsters, too often carbon copies of their important professors, and this kind of craftsmanship is a sad by-product of academia. Moreover, this supremacy of great schools and institutions makes a career in contemporary music a privilege for the high-income classes of Western society: and, if we are starting to see a small but growing number of female composers, most ethnicities are still virtually absent from the scene. Isn’t this a huge political and ethical problem, and a huge waste of creative potential as well?

F. D. S. D. B This is the *dark side* of academic world. I think, too, that today is more difficult for too much social strata to approach musical composition, and, unfortunately,

not only it. A real democratic world should have to permit everyone to realize his aptitudes. Do you think there could be a possible, even if not easy, solution to this problem? At least in musical world.

A. A. I can't see how to discuss this kind of problems without looking at the much larger frame of society as a whole. And I don't believe that artists can have the recipe for changing the world—that's a politician's job, one that I'm sure must have to do with inclusion, opportunities and a wider access to education. If I were in charge, higher education would be free and compulsory, everybody all over the world would have the same amount of wealth (hopefully a lot), an AI would choose and enforce the right career path for everyone according to each one's skills and inclinations, and all the music, food and shoes I don't like would be forbidden. Alas, I'm not in charge. What I can do instead, what we all must do, is choosing attentively who to support and try to make our voices heard. That's our weapon. This is especially crucial these times, as we see that, with few exceptions, the Western world is being taken over by political forces whose agenda is openly against inclusion, opportunities and a wider access to education: and it is painful to see how many people, including some of the less privileged, are making choices that in a moment will turn dramatically against them. And yes, more opportunities and less inequality would mean that it would be easier for people of diverse geographical, social and cultural origins to choose a career in contemporary music: this would indeed be a great enrichment for our small world, and perhaps the only possible way it could overcome its current stagnation—a very minor side effect compared to the increase in global happiness that more enlightened politics would bring, but, as far as I'm concerned, a pretty welcome one.

F. D. S. D. B I am a little older than you, so even more so I am in full harmony with what you are saying and I feel the importance of your words. Returning to technology, in your work Artificial Intelligence (or perhaps it should be more correct to speak about algorithmic composition or computer aided composition) plays an important role, role that I fully agree. About a year ago Stephen Hawking, even if agreeing with the advantages in using it, has expressed strong reservations about an inadequate use of this tool. Those who imagine the composer like an inspired figure will have probably difficulty in not scandalizing with what they could see like a delegation, or even an abdication, of creative act. As I was saying in opening of this interview, you are co-author of a software for algorithmic composition. I would like to ask you about your relationship with these composition tools.

A. A. To be honest, my work has nothing to do with artificial intelligence—actually, Daniele and I have had some discussions about whether to include into *bach* tools oriented to AI research and applications (you know, neural networks and stuff), but that's far beyond what we can manage for now. As a composer, I can't see how to integrate AI in my work—I mean, AI is essentially about organizing and interpreting complex data sets, and producing new pieces of information based on existing models. I'm not saying there are no interesting compositional applications for it, but that is not really my kind of approach. A phase in which rules and grammars are set up explicitly is inescapable for me, whereas the very point with AI is that, at some level, rules and grammars are

inferred from examples—which is brilliant in many contexts where the amount and the complexity of information is such that it would be impossible, or highly impractical, to find out the underlying patterns, but doesn't really fit the way I conceive my music.

Back to your question: a delegation, or abdication, of creative act, you say. What do I think? My truest answer is “so what, as long as the result is good?”—really, I'm much more interested in art than in artists, and this includes myself. As far as I'm concerned, if Beethoven's Eighth Symphony (my favorite, lately) had been written by a computer, rather than a deaf, irascible alcoholic in 19th century Vienna, I'd have no complaints. One of the great topics of modern and contemporary art has been the questioning, and even the negation, of the artist's role, and composers as different as Cage, Donatoni and Grisey saw the potential of formalized processes as a way to liberate music from the restrictedness of their own minds, lives and individualities. On the other hand, many forms of art have always used rationality to make inspiration work—think of the knowledge of statics and materials that a sculptor must have, or all the geometry behind how perspective works in paintings from the Renaissance. And indeed I strongly believe in inspiration, not as something divine or transcendent but as a form of intelligence, a way yet unexplained in which our brain produces new ideas apparently out of the blue, but clearly rooted in our knowledge and experience. Since at least a millennium, composers have been creating music with numbers, tables, combinatorial rules, formulae: using a computer for some help with all this things (which it can manipulate much more efficiently and exactly than a bored human being) is only natural, and, according to how you use it, it may even change the palette of your potential choices and, ultimately, the way you think.

And yet, I believe that the whole story is more complicated than this, because formalization is sometimes necessary, but never sufficient. The ability to devise very articulated systems for generating or developing musical material means nothing if it is not supported by that other thing—a thing we can't define or fathom and relies upon algorithms and mechanisms that are immensely more complex than the ones necessary for constructing crab canons and that need immensely more data, a person's whole life and experiences and thoughts and feelings and places seen and food eaten and I could go on forever, to produce their result (and yes, I do believe that those are mechanisms, rather than magic, but many people I admire would disagree, and after all the Church-Turing thesis is just a hypothesis, isn't it?). And I love so much that other thing, intuition or whatever name you like, and I believe so strongly it is the single thing distinguishing a good composer from a bad one, that the older I grow, the more I want my music to rely upon it—somehow, it's my take on Pascal's Wager: if I'm a good composer it will work, if I'm not, who cares. Most of my recent compositional work starts off in a very unsystematic, free-flowing, almost improvisational way, and then, sometimes, perhaps more often than not, I employ computer-based formalized processes to enrich or develop these materials. It took me a long time to refine this method but, as of now, it is giving me some satisfaction: and somehow it gives me the feeling (illusory, of course, but a nice one anyway) that I'm taking the best of both worlds.

F. D. S. D. B This conversation is extremely pleasant and interesting, and it would

require more time and space, but unfortunately I am afraid we could be beyond the limits set here. So I would propose you to conclude with the usual, but not for this less interesting, question about your composition projects in the immediate future. Thank you for your disposability and courtesy, it has been a great pleasure.

A. A. Right now, I'm working at a very cool thing with Ensemble Vortex—the idea is that four composers write four pieces and then each one “remixes” the work of the others; the result will be released as a CD sometimes in 2019. It's an exciting project for a number of reasons—because I like the people I'm working with, all coming from different backgrounds, composition in a traditional sense, radical improvisation, computer music; because the whole thing has a very “indie” and unpretentious feel, which makes me feel at home; and, above all, because it questions the solitary authorship paradigm that is typical of contemporary music, and suggests the possibility of different production models (one of my obsessions, as you may have figured out).

After this, my next big project is a large-scale work for two pianos, two percussionists and electronics I'll write for Yarn/Wire, with its premiere scheduled for 2020—great musicians, great attitude, New York City, what more could I want?

Between the two, if I have the time, I fancy giving a try to a very ambitious idea I have been toying with since years—the completely autonomous self-production of something with one foot in contemporary music and one in pop, not too unlike what I did with my rock band many years ago (and which I'm still not-so-secretly fond of), but with many more, much more complex ingredients this time... Who knows...

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