

A MUSICAL VARIANT OF THE METAPHYSICS OF THE SUBJECT

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Translated by Justin Clemens¹

We depart directly from sub-jacent ontological components: world and event, the latter rupturing with the presentative logic of the former. The subjective form is thus assigned to an ambiguous localisation in being. On the one side, the subject is only a set of elements of the world, and therefore an object on the stage where the world presents multiplicities; on another side, the subject orients this object in regard to the effects that it is capable of producing, in a direction whose provenance is an event. The subject can therefore be said to be the unique known form of “compromise” thinkable between the phenomenal persistence of a world and its eventual reshuffling.

We will call “body” the worldly dimension of the subject and “trace” that which, on the basis of the event, determines the active orientation of the body. A subject is therefore a formal synthesis between the statics of the body and its dynamics, between its composition and its effectuation.

The thirteen points that follow organise these givens.

1. A subject is an indirect and creative relation between an event and a world

Let's choose as a “world” German music at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th: the last effects of Wagner suspended between virtuoso burlesque and exaggeratedly sublime adagios in the symphonies and lieder of Mahler; certain zones of the symphonies of Bruckner, Richard Strauss before the neo-classical turn, the early Schönberg (*Gurrelieder*, or *Pelleas and Melisanda*, or *Transfigured night*), the very young Korngold....the event is the Schönberg-event, which breaks the history of music in two by affirming the possibility of an acoustic world not ruled by the tonal system. An event as laborious as it radical, which takes nearly twenty years to be affirmed and disappear. We pass in fact from the atonality of the second quartet (1908) to the organised serialism of *Variations for Orchestra* (1926) via the systematic dodecaphonism of *Piano Pieces* of 1923. All this time was necessary for the painful opening of a new music-world, of which Schönberg wrote that he had assured “the supremacy of German music for the next 100 years.”

2. *In the context of a becoming-subject, the event (whose entire being is disappearing) is represented by a trace; the world (which doesn't admit any subject as such) is represented by a body.*

Literally, the trace will be what allows itself to be extracted from Schönberg's pieces as an abstract formula of organization of twelve constitutive sounds. Where the system of scales and fundamental harmonies of a tonality was, we have the free choice of a succession of distinct notes, fixing the order in which these notes should appear or be combined, a succession that is called a series. The serial organization of twelve sounds is also named "dodecaphonism" to indicate that these twelve sounds of the old chromatic scale (thus: do, do#, re, re#, etc.) are no longer hierarchised by the tonal construction and the laws of classical harmony, but treated equally, according to a principle of succession chosen as the sub-jacent structure for such or such a work. This serial organization refers the notes only to their internal organisation, to their reciprocal relations in a determined acoustic space. As Schönberg said, the musician works with "twelve notes that have a relation only among themselves."

In reality, the trace of the event is not identical to the dodecaphonic or serial technique. It is, as almost always, a statement in the form of a prescription, of which technique is one consequence (among others). This statement would be, in the case that concerns us: "There can be an organization of sounds able to define a musical universe on a basis entirely subtracted from classical tonality." The body is the effective existence of musical pieces, works, written and performed, that attempt to construct a universe conforming to the imperative that the trace details.

3. *A subject is the general orientation of bodily effects in accordance with the demands of the trace. It is therefore the form-in-trace of bodily effects.*

Our subject will be the becoming of a dodecaphonic or serial music, that of a music that legislates on musical parameters — and first of all on the licit succession of notes — on the basis of rules without relation to the licit harmonies of tonality or the academic sequences of modulation. Here it is a question of the history of a new form, incorporated in works, under the name of a subject.

4. *The real of a subject resides in the consequences (consequences in a world) of the relation that this subject constitutes between a trace and a body.*

The history of serial music between Schönberg's *Variations for orchestra* (1926) and, let's say, the first version of *Répons* of Pierre Boulez (1981) is not an anarchic history. It involves a sequence of problems, stumbling on obstacles ("points," of which more below), extending its base, fighting enemies. This history is coextensive with the existence of a subject (often bizarrely named "contemporary music"). It realises a system of consequences of the initial given: a trace (new imperative for the musical organization of sounds) formally inscribed in a body (effective suite of works). If it became saturated within nearly a half-century, this is not because it failed; it is that every subject, if internally infinite, constitutes a sequence whose temporal limits can be fixed after the fact. Whence the new musical subject. Its possibilities are intrinsically infinite. But, towards the end of the 1970s, its "corporeal" capacities, those that could inscribe themselves in the dimension of the work, were more and more limited. One could no longer really find "interesting" deployments, significant mutations, local completions. Thus an infinite subject comes to its *finishing* [*finition*].

5. *In regard to a given group of consequences conforming to the imperative of the trace, it practically always happens that a part of the body is available or useful, another passive, even harmful. Consequently, every subjectifiable body is riven (erased).*

In the development of “contemporary music,” that is, all that which in the 20th century merited the name of “music” – if, at least, music is an art and not what a minister believes must be subordinated to a trying entertainment – the serial organization of pitch (the rule of succession of notes of the chromatic scale) is a rule that easily authorises a global form. But pitch is only one of three local characteristics of the note in a given musical universe. The two others are duration and timbre. But the serial management of durations and timbres poses redoubtable problems. One sees rather quickly that the contemporary treatment of durations, therefore of rhythms, passes by Stravinski (*The Rites of Spring*) and Bartok (*Music for strings, percussion and celesta*), that neither incorporated with dodecaphonic or serial music. One also weighs, in this history, the importance of Messiaen (the invention and theory of “non retrogradable” rhythms). But even if he had shown in his *Four studies of rhythm* (1950) that he knew how to practice a serialism extended to all the musical parameters, Messiaen, taking account of his attachment to themes and his use of classical harmony, could not be entirely taken for one of the names of the subject “serial music.” Thus the treatment of the question of rhythm follows a trajectory that does not coincide with serialism. All the same, the question of timbre, if rigorously broached by Schönberg (theory of the “melody of timbres”) and above all by Webern, still had pre-serial origins, singularly with Debussy — in this regard one of the “founding fathers” of the same order as Schönberg. Between the two wars, via Varèse and again Messiaen, it follows a complex line. It is at least around the question of timbre that the French group *L’Itinéraire* (Gérard Grisey, Michaël Levinas, Tristan Murail...) ruptured with the “structural” orientations of Pierre Boulez and contested the heritage of serialism. One can therefore say that the musical body “serialism” found itself riven, at least for certain developments, between the pure written form and the auditory sensation. As Lacan said, timbre in fact names in today’s music “what doesn’t stop not writing itself.”

6. *There exist two species of consequences, and therefore two modalities of the subject. The first takes the form of adjustments continuous with the interior of the old world, of local appropriations of the new subject to objects and relations of this world. The second treats of closures imposed by the world, of situations where the complexity of identities and differences is brutally referred, for the subject, to the exigency of a choice between two possibilities and two alone. The first modality is an opening: it operates the unbroken opening of a new possibility closest to the possibilities of the old world. The second modality is a point. In the first case, the subject presents itself as an infinite negotiation with the world, whose structures it distends and opens. In the second case, it presents itself as a decision, whose localisation is imposed by the impossibility of the open, and the indispensable forcing of the possible.*

If, as Berg knew how to do, for example in his violin concerto called “To the memory of an angel” (1935), you treat a series almost as a recognisable melodic segment, you give yourself the possibility that it serve a double function in the architecture of the work: on the one hand, it ensures, in replacing tonal modulations, the global homogeneity of the piece; but, on the other hand, its recurrence can be heard as a theme and is thus reknotted with a major principle of tonal composition. One will say in this case that the (serial) subject opens a negotiation with the old (tonal) world. If, on the contrary, as Webern did with genius in *Variations for orchestra* (1940), you extend the series to durations, even to

timbres, so that there is neither development nor return of any element, and, finally, you concentrate the exposition in several derivatives, then it becomes entirely impossible to identify a segment on the classical model of the theme. And then the new musical universe forcefully imposes itself by the crossing of an alternative: either an unheard-of musical effect convinces you that the creative event is just what carries the subject to the borders of silence; or it is impossible to grasp the coherencies of a construction, and everything disperses itself as if merely a punctuation without text. Berg is an inspired negotiator of openings to the old world, which is why he is the most “popular” of the three Viennese, and also somebody who knew how to install the new music in the particularly impure realm of opera. Webern only concerned himself with points, with gently forcing what presented itself as absolutely closed, by means of a choice without appeal. The first incorporated himself to the “serial music” subject in the guise of a brilliant game, of a fecund transaction. The second figured the mystical nature of the decision.

7. A subject is a sequence that comprises continuities and discontinuities, openings and points. The “and” incarnates itself as subject. Or again (em-bodies) [encore (en-corps)]: A subject is the conjunctive form of a body.

It is enough for us to say that “Berg” and “Webern” are only two names for sequential components of the subject “serial music,” in such a way that the genius of openings (theatrical continuities) and that of points (mystical discontinuities) are both incorporated into the same subject. Without at least this, it couldn’t be proven that the Schönberg-event was really a caesura in the world of “tonal music at the beginning of the 20th century,” because its consequences could have been too narrow or incapable of treating difficult strategic points with success. The local antinomy, internal to the subject, of “Berg” and “Webern,” constitutes the essential proof of “Schönberg,” just as, in the case of the subject that Charles Rosen has named the “classical style,” the names “Mozart” and “Beethoven” prove with a quasi-mathematical rigour that what drew itself inaugurally under the name “Haydn” was an event.

8. The sequential construction of a subject is easier in moments of opening, but the subject is then often a weak subject. This construction is more difficult when it is necessary to cross points; but the subject is then much more secure.

A commonsense remark: if, like Berg, you subtly negotiate with theatricality (or lyricism) inherited from the post-Wagnerian border of the old world, the construction of the sequential subject “music torn from tonality” is easier, the public less stubborn, consensus more rapidly obtained. Berg’s operas are today repertory classics. That the subject thus laid down in the openings of the old world is nonetheless fragile can be seen from the fact that Berg, insensibly, multiplied concessions (purely tonal resolutions in *Lulu* and in the violin concerto), and, above all, that what he did not open was the way to the resolved continuation of this subject, to the unforeseeable multiplication of effects of the musical body newly installed in the world. Berg is an immense musician, but if one refers to him, it is almost always to justify reactive movements internal to the sequence. If, on the contrary, like Webern you work on points, and therefore on the discontinuous lines [*arêtes*] of the becoming-subject, you are faced with considerable difficulties. For a long time you are held to be an esoteric or abstract musician, but it is you who opens the future, you in the name of whom one generalises and solidifies the constructive dimension of the new acoustic world.

9. *A new world is subjectively created point by point.*

This is a variation on the theme introduced in point 8. The treatment of continuities – of openings – creates, bit by bit, zones of relative indiscernibility between the effects of the subjected body and the “normal” objects of the world. Therefore, finally, zones of indiscernibility between the trace (that orients the body) and the objective or worldly composition of the body; at the end, zones where event and world are superposed in a confused becoming. That is, by those (René Leibowitz, for example) who think in the 1940s that the victory is assured, and that one can “academicise” dodecaphonism. Only the careful crossing, through non-negotiable decisions, of several strategic points, proves its novelty by destroying what this academicisation takes for an established result. It is this that the generation of Darmstadt (Boulez, Nono, Stockhausen...) would noisily recall in the 1950s, against the Schönbergian dogmatic itself.

10. *The generic name of a subjective construction is: truth.*

In fact only the serial sequence opened by the Schönberg-event pronounces the truth of the post-Wagnerian musical world of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. This truth is unfolded point by point, and cannot be held in any unique formula. But it is possible to say that in every domain (harmony, themes, rhythms, global forms, timbres...) it indicates that the dominant phenomena of the old world effectuate an extensive distortion of the classical style, to finally arrive at what could be called its structural totalisation, which is also like an emotive saturation, an anxious seeking, finally hopeless, after effect. It turns out that serial music — the truth of the classical style arrived at the saturation of its effects — is the systematic exploration in the acoustic universe of what has the value of counter-effect. It is due to the genius of this deception that one supposes that this music is so often held to be inaudible (unlistenable). And certainly, it would not be any use to hear once again what the old world had declared appropriate for the ears of the human animal. The truth of a world is not a simple object of this world, since it supplements the world with a subject where the power of a body and the destiny of a trace cross. How to make the truth of the audible heard without passing by the in-audible? It is like wanting the truth to be “human,” when it is through its in-humanity that its existence is assured.

That said, the asceticism of the serial universe is exaggerated. It in no way prohibits great rhythmic, harmonic and orchestral gestures, whether they operate dramatically as counter-point in regard to techniques of effect, as the brutal successions of forte and pianissimo with Boulez, or whether they organise the contamination of music by an unfathomable silence, as so often with Webern.

The essential point to grasp is that there is no contemporary information about the classical style and its becoming-romantic, no eternal and thus current truth, of the musical subject initiated by the Haydn-event that does not pass by an incorporation to the serial sequence, and therefore to the subject usually named “contemporary music.” Those numerous types who declare that they like only the classical style (or the romantic, it’s the same subject), and that serial music repels, can certainly know what they love, but remain ignorant of its truth. Is this truth arid? It is a question of use and continuation. It is with the body of the new music that it is necessary, patiently, to associate its own listening. Pleasure will come, beneath the market. Love (“I truly don’t love this...”), which is a distinct truth procedure, doesn’t enter into the account. For, as Lacan recalled with his customary frankness, it’s to religious obscurantism and misguided philosophies that we have to abandon the motif of a

“love of truth.” It is enough to desire to incorporate ourselves to the subject of an arbitrary truth, that it be eternal, and thus, by the discipline participation imposes, the human animal sees itself accorded the chance — of which it hardly matters if it is arid — of a becoming Immortal.

11. Four affects signal the incorporation of a human animal to the subjective process of a truth. The first is evidence of the desire for a Great Point, of a decisive discontinuity, that will install the new world with a single blow, and complete the subject. We will name it terror. The second is evidence of the fear of points, of a retreat before the obscurity of all that is discontinuous, of all that imposes a choice without guarantee between two hypotheses. Or, again, this affect signals the desire for a continuity, for a monotonous shelter. We will name it anxiety. The third affirms the acceptance of the plurality of points, that the discontinuities are at once imperious and multiform. We will name it courage. The fourth affirms the desire that the subject be a constant intrication of points and openings. It affirms the equivalence, in regard to the pre-eminence of the becoming-subject, of what is continuous and negotiated, and of what is discontinuous and violent. Subjective modalities are there alone, which depend on the construction of the subject in a world and the capacities of the body to produce effects. They are not to be hierarchized. War can have as much value as peace, negotiation as much as struggle, violence as much as gentleness. This affect by which the categories of the act are subordinated to the contingency of worlds, we will name justice.

The terrorism of Pierre Boulez was very quickly condemned, at the beginning of the 1950s. And it is true that he had no respect for “French music” of the interwar period, that he conceived his role as that of a censor, that he condemned his adversaries to nothingness. Yes, it can be said: in his inflexible will to incorporate music, in France, to a subject that in Austria and Germany was already half a century old, Boulez didn’t hesitate to introduce, in public polemic, a certain dose of terror. Even the writing was not exempt, as one sees in *Structures* (for two pianos) of 1952: integral serialism, violent discursivity; the counter-effect pushed to the extreme.

The anxiety of those who, all the while admitting the necessity of a new subjective division, and saluting the power to come of serialism, didn’t want to rupture with the prior universe and took for granted the existence of a single music-world, deciphers itself as much behind the sympathetic blustering of tardy enthusiasts (the conversion of Stravinsky to dodecaphonism, initiated by the ballet *Agon*, dating from 1957...), as in the negotiated constructions of a Dutilleux, the most inventive of those who remained in Berg’s wake (heard for example in *Metaboles* of 1965). Whence one sees that by “anxiety” we understand here a creative affect, inasmuch as this creation remains normed by the opening rather than by the abruptness of points.

The courage of a Webern is in looking for the points that the new music-world must prove, by deciding the issue in every direction of this world. To do this, he centrally dedicates such or such piece to such or such a point, from which one easily sees that he operates a pure choice in regard to rhythms, to timbres, to the construction of the ensemble, etc. The elliptical side of Webern (as Mallarmé in poetry) derives from the fact that a work does not have to extend itself beyond showing what it decides, from the point at which it has arrived.

We will say that Boulez learnt justice, between 1950 and 1980, in that he had acquired the power to relax the abruptness of the construction when necessary, to develop his own proper openings without ferociously denying them with a heterogeneous point; all the while relaunching the work through concentrated decisions, when it is was necessary that chance be “vanquished word by word.”

12. To oppose the values of courage and justice to the “Evil” of anxiety and terror is only an effect of opinion. All the affects are necessary in order that the incorporation of a human animal be deployed in a subjective process, so that, to this animal — in the discipline of a Subject and the construction of a truth — the grace of being Immortal might occur.

No more than Boulez could or should have avoided a certain dose of terror in order to drag our supposed “French music” from the mud, could he have had a creative future outside an apprenticeship with justice. The creative singularity of Dutilleux drew precisely from the invention, at the borders of the subject (at the margins of its body), of what one could call a muffled anxiety (whence the remarkable aerial éclat of his writing). Webern is nothing but courage.

One will say: terror! Not in politics, certainly, where against Crimes of State we have no other recourse than the rights of man; nor in pure abstraction, in mathematics for example.

But yes! We know political terror. There is also a terror of the matheme. From what the one takes from living bodies and the other from established thoughts, one will infer the serious harm of the first if one holds that life, suffering and finitude are the only absolute signposts of existence. Which presupposes that no eternal truth exists to whose construction the living can incorporate itself — sometimes, it is true, at the cost of its life. A conclusion, consequently, of democratic materialism.

The materialist dialectic will assume without particular joy that, up until the present, no political subject arrived at the eternity of truth that it unfolds without moments of terror. Because, as Saint-Just demands: “What do they want who want neither Virtue nor Terror?” His response is well known: they want corruption, another name for the failure of the subject.

The materialist dialectic will also make several remarks concerning the history of sciences. From the 1930s, reporting the retardation in mathematics in France following the bloodbath of WWI, young geniuses like Weil, Cartan, Dieudonné undertook a sort of total refoundation of the mathematical apparatus, integrating all the striking creations of their time: set theory, structural algebra, topology, differential geometry, Lie algebra, etc. This gargantuan collective project, given the name “Bourbaki,” legitimately exercised an effect of terror on the “old” mathematics for at least twenty years. And this terror was necessary in order to incorporate two or three new generations of mathematicians into the subjective process opened on a grand scale at the end of the 19th century (if anticipated by Riemann, Galois, even Gauss).

None of this, subordinating it to the eternity of the True by its incorporation to a subject in becoming, overcoming the finitude in the human animal, can ever occur without anxiety, courage and justice. But no more, as a general rule, without terror.

13. The ethics of the subject, of which “ethics of truths” is the other name, comes back to this when it is a question of the incorporation of a human animal: to find point by point an order of affects that authorises the continuation of the process.

One can’t but cite Beckett here, at the end of the *Unnameable*. In this text, the “character” prophesies between dereliction and justice (Beckett will later write, in *How it is*: “In any case, one is within justice,

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I have never heard said the contrary”). Tears of anguish stream down his face. He exerts towards himself an unspeakable terror (the bond between truth and terror is one of the great preoccupations of Beckett). The courage of infinite speech makes the prose tremble. Then this “character” can say: “I must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

Today, the music-world is defined negatively. The classical subject and its romantic avatars are entirely saturated, and it is not the plural “musics” – folklore, classicism, light music, exoticism, jazz and baroque reaction in the same festive bag – that will resuscitate them. However, the serial subject has been equally enervated for at least twenty years. Today’s musician, freed from the solitude of the interval in which the old coherent world of tonality as well as the hard dodecaphonic world that produced the truth of the first are dispersed in unorganised bodies and empty ceremonies, can only heroically repeat, in his very works: “I go on, in order to think and carry to their paradoxical brilliance the reasons that I have for not going on.”

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1 The text presented in translation here is “Scholie: Une variante musicale de la métaphysique du sujet” from Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 89-99. *Parrhesia* would like to thank Professor Badiou for his permission to publish this translation.