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Accompanying Thoughts

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For me, the talk about Fernando's first question touched many essential topics. It felt like stepping on different vital points in the space of composition. I try to find a path here, in writing, which touches some of these points, and tries to understand some of their connections to different realities. This is of course my own path (others have others), but I'd like to share it here.

This was the question: "What place do external comments, or feedback, better and worse, about your work occupy in your own perception of the composition?"

1. We agreed that the comments of others affect us. How could it be else? We are happy and encouraged if someone likes our music. We are not happy and perhaps discouraged if someone does not like our music.
2. But it is not that simple. Both, the 'someone' and our reaction to what this someone comments about our music, is fairly complex. It consists of different parts, aspects, forces.
3. Obviously, when someone whom we estimate very much, says something positive or negative about our music, it has a bigger effect than a someone whom we don't know.
4. But if a journalist whom we don't know writes something good or bad about a piece of us, it may have a big impact.
5. So it is not only about someone we know and someone we don't know, but also about the role (position, function) of this someone. A negative article of a journalist, a book of a musicologist consisting of bad comments about a composer, can, in extreme case, destroy the existence of a composer.
6. This destruction (or, on the positive side: the praise by which someone can become famous) can have two aspects: internal and external. Internally we can feel bad, worthless because such an important person rejected our work. Externally it may affect our life in many ways. Perhaps we get a well-paid commission because of a positive article of a famous writer in an important journal. Or we get a scholarship because an important person in a jury likes our music.
7. All composing is about the relationship between internal and external.
8. Note which images reside in the space which is marked by the ex-

tremes of ‘destruction’ (being bad, worthless, condemned) versus ‘hero’ (being good, admired, famous). The space in which these images reside is the space of competition and hierarchy, of fight and war. (It is in war that we want to destroy the enemy, his goods, his country; it is in war that we can become a hero in fighting better than others.)

9. Is there another space, except this competitive and potentially destructive one? What about the internal side here?

10. It seems that we all experience the outer war internally, too. At least I can say that no one who trusted me that much to really let me look inside his/her heart did not experience this inner war. We all seem to have a layer in ourselves on which we struggle with the feeling of being bad, worthless, not respected by others.

11. Why am I all the time speaking about these personal or psychological dimensions? Is it not about compositions, so scores and sounds, files and tools?

12. Probably such a question sounds silly for us all. We know how few ‘my piece’ and ‘my person’ can be divided from each other.

13. But it is nevertheless good to make clear that ‘I’ and ‘my piece’ are not the same.

14. At first, why should a negative comment about my piece be a negative comment about myself? Do we not put ourselves into prisons if we make no distinction between ‘me’ and ‘what I do’? Should we not claim our right to do something as experiment?

15. Or, looking at the position of the commentator: Is it not possible to criticise a composition in accepting its author?

16. It is, and it is actually the only productive way of critics. It is what is most productive for us as composers and as humans. Not the cheap words saying “Oh you are so wonderful, and all you do is so amazing”, but to accompany ourselves with critics, as honest and deep reaction.

17. As composers, we should welcome these comments most, because we can learn from them. It may offer a distinction, a new view about something in our piece, for ourselves. And if comments are made in this way, we will always see the commentator as a concrete person (instead of a function or representation), with an own position, an own aesthetics (which may differ from ours), own perceptions (which are always incomplete and subjective) and own criteria.

18. Only this commentator, not sitting on a horse in a uniform, judging from top to down and not showing himself, but standing on the same earth and speaking with respect, is someone who can be seen as a partner for a real talk. Commentators and composers can be partners, in understanding art, and perhaps improving a piece. Comments and critics are then, in the best case, accompaniments. For growth and development, not for destruction.

19. But how much of the critics which we experience — internally and externally — are of this kind? Which are not sealed by the sign of competition, hierarchy, war?

20. Perhaps not much, but nevertheless we may notice another important difference here: The critics itself is not the same as its effect to our work, because it depends very much on its environment (friendly versus hostile, to put it simple). And besides this, it depends on us: On our ability (or inability) to deal even with destructive critics.

21. We are never simply victims of something which happens to us. We always have possibilities to react in different ways. How destructive a comment, how influential its author, how big the external effect in terms of money be — the real effect to our work is not because of this, but because of the internal effect. Or back to Fernando's question: Which place occupy comments for our own perception of a composition?

22. Do we depend on them? Or do we have an own perception which is sure in itself? Where does this own perception come from?

23. I think there are two parts (qualities, experiences) which result in the own perception of what we do in composing, beyond all comments of others. The first is what we experience in working. We know how it feels when we are stuck, or when something opens up. We know how it feels when a piece lives, or when we only reproduce something which is dead. We know how it feels when we really work with dedication, or just throw things out.

24. When we know that we worked with dedication, and that something opened up and is alive in it, we should take it as our treasure, and certainty, and believe in it. Regardless which value others give or give not to our work, we ourselves should value it because of this knowledge. This means to have love for what we do, and this love can make us more certain and anchored. This love, and the experiences in the process of working, are two essential parts which should lead to an own position and judgement.

25. (This is, by the way, also valid in the reverse direction. Assume that we knew in the process of composing that we did not have the love for this piece, and experienced in working that it was without life. But now, perhaps anyone is excited about it, and we have a big success. Then we should also not

forget our own perception.)

26. We can only deal with external comments, they be positive or negative, when we have this own perspective, and believe in it. Then we can experience a dialog between the own perspective and the perspective of others. We can be irritated and hurted, but we have something we rely on.

27. (We do not any more rely on it when we lose our belief. This is the same as to lose the love to oneself.)

28. (And this is the same as to lose the love to others.)

29. What is the voice of destruction and devaluation in us? The voice which is activated by negative comments, but seemingly resides in us also when there are no such comments?

30. It may be related to the war in society, to the permanent selection which always produces the (few) ones on top and the (many) ones who did not get on top. It may be related to hierarchy and competition. It may be related to a dominant functionality which only values us when we fulfill a job in the desired way — a fundamentally counter-creative approach whose effects we can see at children which come in the world with a natural joy of being creative but are deformed by school and education to often lose it completely.

31. This all, and more, may be related to the destructive voice which we can often hear while composing, when we are alone, concentrating, in doubts and believes, good and bad expectations. But the question which is put to ourselves is: How can we come to a movement between the internal and the external, how can we value our own productivity and share it with others?

32. This needs both, belief and permeability. Belief is not fanaticism, belief is not egocentrism, belief should never feel like closing the doors and the windows. Love and belief should make the internal space able to meet the external, and deal with its challenges.

33. The internal needs the external, and the external needs this internal, to hopefully develop and grow. Art as dialog, and dialog as art.