

YESCOLAB #5 (26 August 2021)

Accompanying Thoughts

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We discussed an audio-visual work (in progress) by Fernando and the beginning of a larger composition by Maryam. In both discussions we touched the topic of *narration*, so I try to think more about it.

Narration and Material

1. It is one way (not the only way) of composing to have a “story behind” the music.
2. A story *behind* the music as not the same as a story *in* the music.
3. If there is a story *behind* the music, the story is there as own layer, as text. So here we have narration as language.
4. If there is a story *in* the music, the music itself tells a story. If we want to figure out this story, we have to read the music (not to read a text), or even better: to listen to the music.
5. So even if we speak about music as narration, it is not a simple thing. I will here use the term “narration” in the first meaning: as story “behind” the music. Or in other words: A story which is already there, in words, which the music is about to show.
6. When we imagine a line which has “extreme narration” at one end, we can set something like “l’art pour l’art” (= the art only for the art) at the other end. This means: a way of composing which is focussed on the material itself, without any reference to out-of-music reality. For instance, in western classical tradition, “The Art of the Fugue” by J. S. Bach, or “Variations” for piano by Anton Webern.
7. So perhaps we can set this as model: We imagine a line which describes different ways of composing. On one side we have “Composing as transformation of material”; on the other side we have “Composing as narration” (telling a story). In between we have different mixtures, like “focussed mostly on material but with some narration”, or “mostly narrative but with some work on the material”.
8. (I don’t feel good in this idealtypic way of thinking. Too one-dimensional? Too static?)
9. Looking at the extreme material conception: Is it possible that there is no narration at all? Yes, if we understand narration as “text behind”. But probably no, if we understand narration in a broader sense, comprising things like dramaturgy and development in time. Or in other words: Even a variation of a musical motive (Gestalt) “tells something”. Referring to

Bach's "Art of the Fugue": At this time it is common to say that the subject of a fugue "suffers its fate".

10. In contemporary music we can find some positions which are in no way narrative (or sometimes even against narration), for instance John Cage's music and aesthetics. It depends mostly on the music and its grammar whether we can speak of any way of narration any more, or not.
11. (Just to mention that there are a lot of texts in contemporary writings which are not any more narrative, or think in a new way about narration. A very nice and genial way to do it are for me Gertrude Stein's lectures called "narration".)[1]
12. Looking at the other end, on the extreme narration: Is it possible that there is no dealing with material at all? Perhaps yes, but it would be a pity, in my opinion. Because always, but in particular in art, material should not just be *used* for a destination, but each material should be understood as having an own value, a value for itself. A plucked note of tar or guitar is not only there to serve in telling a story, but each sound has a value in itself. It may suggest us to do certain things, and it may suggest us not to do certain things.
13. For instance, most sounds require variations. When I work with a *Gestalt* (it can be a rhythm, a chord, a timbre, a gesture), it usually wants me to develop variations of it. At least in the process of composing (= as sketches), but mostly also in the composition itself. For me, this exploration is something which connects me with the tradition (for instance with Beethoven but also with Hossein Tehrani), and it prevents me from using material without regarding its own qualities.
14. So perhaps we can say: If we work with narration, let us be careful to pay proper attention to the material. To the material *as material*, without the meaning which may be connected for us with this material. Perhaps for us this tone means happiness or sadness, but nevertheless the tone is a tone for itself, and requires attention for itself. And when we listen to the material "as it is", we may come to new ideas — perhaps also for our narration.

[1] Gertrude Stein: Narration. Four lectures. University of Chicago Press 1935.