

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF STYLE IN EUROPEAN MUSICAL THINKING

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SUMMARY. Essentially, the emergence of the concept of *style* in European musical thinking is the consequence of the shift produced at the end of the Renaissance. The trend towards the simplification of language and musical expression and the subordination of both to the notional-poetic discourse determines the unimaginable: the hegemony of rhetoric and, implicitly, of style as a rhetorical sub-category having the function of organizing and controlling musical suggestiveness – the taxonomy of musically expressible emotions. It is also during the period of the musical Baroque that the practical insertion of the concept of *style* begins by cohabiting with the idea of *genre* in all its three forms: as a specific habitat for the performance of the musical act, as a composition coefficient and equally as a type of ethos. This confusion will persist for the entire period of use of the concept of *style*, which gradually fades as the insertion of postmodernism gathers momentum. As a tool for functional and semantic dislocation, *style* also acts in relation to the term *canon*, the only value reference until the shift from the mathematical-cosmic quadrivium to the discursive-philological trivium (the Del Bene moment, 1586). Apart from taking over the attributions from the concept of *genre*, *style* also claims the function of *canon* as the exclusive value reference. Starting with the Baroque, we already speak of the *stylistic canon*. The complete absorption of the canonical function by *style* takes place during the Viennese Classicism, when *style* becomes a *personalizing-biological* reference, attached to the musical thinking of a prominent personality (Wilhelm von Lenz, *Beethoven et ses trois styles*, 1855). Musical Romanticism raises the understanding of *style* to the level of an almost absolute exclusivity, on a par with the transcendentalism displayed by the genius-musician (the Liszt-Wagner paradigm). The dissipation of Romanticism determines the return to the identification through ethos: verism, expressionism, impressionism-symbolism and naturalism, so that it is only during the first musical modernism (1900-1914) that we witness the return to the purely technical Renaissance acceptance: the

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atonal style, during the second modernism (1918-1939) – the dodecaphonic style, the serial style, and further, during the third modernism (1946-1968) – the style of stochastic music, the style of aleatoric music, the minimalist style etc. The uselessness of the concept of *style* as a procedure of *identification through differentiation* (Boris Asafiev) and obviously as a *meta-narrative* is already revealed in musical postmodernism, with all the three anti-metanarrative “ideologies” of postmodernism: the ideology of distrust, the ideology of the fragment and the ideology of recovery.

Keywords: history of style, stylistic canon, style as a genre, style as a metanarrative, liberation from style

By virtue of its extensive historical use that has long become tradition, the phrase ‘musical style’ is taken as a given of an indisputable scientific value. In other words, musical style is regarded as a fundamentally strong concept, also acting as a generative epicentre for a distinct field of musicological research, namely musical stylistics.

1. Four “styles” of formulating the relationship between style and music

The ways in which the concept of style is understood in European musical thinking and practice are spectacularly diverse in terms of typology: individual Beethovenian or Bachian style, the style of the vocal or instrumental, symphonic, oratorio or chamber genres, style as an aesthetic-periodizing term – Romantic, Baroque or Renaissance, performing or compositional style, style as an aesthetic-technical term – serial, stochastic, aleatoric or minimalist, the style of German, French or Italian music, group style – *Le Six* or *The Mighty Handful* etc.

Hence the diversity, but also an obvious “blurriness” of the definitions which, quite relevantly, are structured more like borrowings from literary analysis. To simplify things, only a few titles of some important monographs should be invoked, which conjointly could provide a useful mini genealogy for understanding the phenomenon of style over the course of its semantic evolution in relation to its parent field, which is musical thinking. American musicologist Leonard B. Meyer’s monograph titled *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology*² will serve as a starting point. Both terms used in the title are placed in a relationship of equidistant neutrality guaranteed by the particle ‘and’, with no possibility of semantic interference.

² Meyer, Leonard B. *Style and Music: Theory, History and Ideology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1989.

A second step is suggested by the title of Russian musicologist Mihail Mihailov's monograph – *Стиль в музыке*³ (Style in Music). Here we already have an active semiotic relationship between signifier and signified, suggesting the possibility of adaptively embedding the concept of style into the pool of musical thinking as a conceptual dominant and a signifier of style, respectively. Both terms still retain their identity as nouns, as strong forms of semantic individuation.

A third option along this line could be *Stilurile muzicii* (Styles of Music), in which, even despite the genitival relationship of possession, we are still dealing with two nouns, which stand in a distant relationship guaranteed by the middle particle. The succession of these particles suggests a gradual closeness between the terms in the title – and, in, of –, as well as a passive, instrumental relationship between style and music as host concept. A final surprising aspect suggests a “coup d'état”, successfully carried out as a result of a plot. This is the most widely used form of relationship between the two terms, as illustrated by Richard L. Crocker's monograph titled *A History of Musical Styles*⁴.

By turning the noun music into an adjective, acting as an attribute and an identifier for the noun 'style', the semiotic relationship is inverted. In the new variant, the concept of style becomes a signifier and host for the entire heretofore autonomous field, and at the same time acts as a filter or sieve through which the meanings of music must be “sifted” to be understood according to their stylistic value. This last title concludes the process of ingraining music into the concept of style, although apparently things could be understood in the exact opposite way. This representation emerges from the very relationship between two concepts of different status: style – understood as a suggestive manner of discourse, serving as a secondary accompaniment to the dominant concept of rhetoric and discursive-linguistic in substance, – and music – an autonomous and exclusively sonorous type of artistic thinking and practice, generated in the pool of religious thinking and practice as a mystical-mathematical analogy of the universal order. The simple adjoining of these two terms reveals nothing but absolute heterogeneity and the impossibility of establishing even the faintest communication.

However, musicology now operates with the phrase 'musical style' as a legitimate analytical operator. The logical conclusion of the first three titles of integration of style into music, should have been 'stylistic music' (as opposed to 'canonical music') and not 'musical style', although as the reality of historical

³ Mihailov, Mihail - музыка, Стиль в. Muzika, Leningrad, 1981, and also Этюды о стиле в музыке [Studies on Style in Music], Muzika, Leningrad, 1990.

⁴ Crocker, Richard L. *A History of Musical Styles*. Dover Publications, Inc. New York, reprint 1986.

evolution has shown, both variants are equivalent conceptual emulations serving to demonstrate a shift that had already occurred in European musical thinking around the turn of the sixteenth to the seventeenth century.

2. Giulio del Bene and the stylistic “invasion” in music

In terms of origin and identity, the concept of style is an attributive constituent of rhetoric as a discipline and art of persuasion, and linguistic-philological in substance. In other words, style refers to the suggestive quality of a spoken or written notional discourse. This strictly linguistic nature of style is validated by identifying style, as subordinate to rhetoric, as an element of the philological trivium as conceived by Martianus Capella (active around 400 A. D.) in his treatise *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*.

This differentiation of style as a constituent of rhetoric, a fundamentally secondary and conceptually weak element, in the trivium, and of music in the quadrivium of the cosmic-mathematical disciplines is a normative imperative only to the extent that the two constituent groups of the *Septem artes liberales* are subdivided into two ontologies or, more precisely, into one ontology (quadrivium) and a set of technical means with applied instrumental value, entirely non-autonomous and therefore weak in comparison with the autonomy and power of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy as strong conceptions, of direct knowledge and representation of reality.

The sciences of articulate language – rhetoric, grammar, and logic (or dialectics) – hold the well-deserved second place as discursive emulations of a causal precursory reference. This division faithfully reflects both the qualitative power – the number in opposition to the concept, discourse and interpretation –, and the quantitative one – four mathematical-cosmological sciences as opposed to three philological ones, the perfect imaginary order in the distribution of attributions, functions, meanings and generative potential. This order of things persisted as a norm throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, until 1586, when an upheaval occurred with dramatic consequences both in the collective imaginary and, logically, in the subsequent historical evolution of artistic thinking. In that year, Giulio del Bene, a member of the Accademia degli Alterati, proposed transferring music from the quadrivium to the trivium, as described by Daniel KL Chua in his monograph *Absolute Music and Constructing of Meaning*:

Giulio del Bene said as much in 1586 when he gave a speech to another Camerata in Florence, the Accademia degli Alterati, proposing that music should be transferred from the quadrivium to the trivium, that is, from the immutable structure of the medieval cosmos to the

linguistic relativity of rhetoric, grammar, and dialectics. In the trivium, music becomes human and can be made infinitely malleable by the power or rhetorical persuasion. This shift allows man to bend music according to his linguistic will, twisting and distorting its intervals to vocalise his passional self. Monody deliberately breaks the harmonic laws of the cosmos to legitimise humanity as the new sovereign who creates his own laws out of his own being. This new *style* (our emphasis) of singing, by ‘transgressing through several forbidden intervals’ as Caccini puts it, articulates the heretical ego of the new humanity. [...] The shift from the quadrivium to the trivium signals a modern ontology⁵.

Thus, the positions of power are first reversed quantitatively – the original trivium turns into a new quadrivium –, philology takes over from ontology as a conceptual dominant, and the acoustic (Pythagorean) mathematical essence of music is replaced by the narrative-discursive one. Thus, an apparently formal proposal to mechanically transfer music from one place to another later reveals its function as a “leverage” whereby Del Bene practically reinvents the meaning of music, while also determining a reversal of the direction and content of the evolution of European culture for at least three centuries. This reformulation had a weakening effect, even though in the period immediately following the (musical) Baroque it was precisely this apparent “liberation” of music from the shackles of mathematical ontology that produced that playful and wild “orgy” of the invention of musical style. Music is taught to narrate in perfect harmony and obedience to the morphology and logic of the notional text, under the strictest constraints of rhetoric. In other words, music will have to learn to narrate with style.

3. Causes: from the fetishization of Antiquity to Giordano Bruno’s pyre

One of the major causes of this shift was the predominantly philological quality of the Renaissance, given that at the core of Renaissance humanism was above all the discovery and research of the texts of Greek and Latin Antiquity. This preoccupation with the ancient texts gained great momentum during the Renaissance as the stage of accumulation, assimilation through transcription and translation, storage and conservation had already been achieved in the monasteries of the Middle Ages.

⁵ Chua, Daniel K. L. *Absolute Music and Constructing of Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge / New York / Port Melbourne, 1999, p. 34-35.

This preoccupation was amplified by the influx of Greek scholars in early fifteenth-century Italy, because of the ever-increasing Turkish pressure on Constantinople, which finally fell in 1453. Regarding music, this preoccupation with the text and especially with the clarity of the text in a musical work serves as an important argument in the debates of the Council of Trent, concluded in 1563, and Palestrina's *Missa papae Marcelli* is an exemplary model for resolving the dialectics between text and music in favour of the text, even at the cost of simplifying the polyphonic style. This case serves as an argument for understanding the tendency that led to del Bene's decision in both senses:

1. the option to treat music as a discourse and
2. the imperative need for semantic and suggestive-expressive accessibility, while the musical would have to be conceived based on the model of poetic suggestibility, which technically speaking determines
3. the emergence of homophony both as a departure from the complexity of contrapuntal writing, moving beyond the esotericism of religious expression and of certain doctrinal-symbolic contents, and as the emergence of opera as a genre and of the tonal functional harmonic style.

A second major aspect was the shift from the theocentric imaginary to the anthropocentric world-view, which, in general terms, would translate not only as the humanization of the divine faces in Renaissance paintings but also as the need for a different type of expression (than the dogmatic-conventional one) and for the expression of something else (than the narrow range of states determined by the Christic drama), of real human emotions that can be represented in a poetic-textual form as opposed to the biblical-textual or evangelical one.

The third aspect is the dichotomy between the irrational (mystical-Christian) and the rational (philosophical and intellectual), while the joining of two seemingly different facts – del Bene's proposal (the disenchantment of music) and Giordano Bruno's pyre (the disenchantment of the European imaginary) – reveals the same idea of demystification of thought and the break with both the religious mysticism and the dangerous esotericism of magical practices. This mutual weakening between the religious and the magical is a major step forward towards a rationalist-philosophical secularization. In fact, all these three elements – the preoccupation with philology and intellectualism, the option for the world of human experiences and emotions and the departure from mysticism through the exclusive focus on rationality – can be viewed as a solid causal argument for del Bene's idea to qualify as a milestone in the European artistic thought and as a starting point for a second cultural cycle in European history.

4. The realignment of music: from the quadrivium to the trivium, from the canonical tradition to the free play of stylistic canons

In the large pool of musical artistic practices, it is already relevant to join the del Bene moment – 1586 – and the activities of the Florentine Camerata, started by Giovanni de' Bardi as early as in 1573. The shift from polyphonic thinking to the principle of accompanied monody (homophony) and the development of a new technique – *stile recitativo* in accordance with the *afettata* manner of expression – could only be imagined as a consensus between the two intellectual actions unfolding in the same Florentine space.

The emergence of this orientation is predetermined by the dispute between Vincenzo Galilei and Gioseffo Zarlino and later amplified by the controversy between Claudio Monteverdi and Zarlino's student – Giovanni Artusi. Del Bene's proposal can in turn be considered as the effect of an implacable convergence of several determining factors, related to which the shift of music from the quadrivium to the trivium was the only compromise solution made under the immense pressure of a general process of paradigmatic change. In other words, all the cultural accumulations acquired until 1586 propelled the collective imaginary as well as the nature of social demand (even as a need manifested in a small circle of the Florentine intellectual elite) to a new level of the evolutionary spiral, while the nature of the qualitative changes of mentalities revealed that religious and magical thinking, and in the particular case of music – contrapuntal polyphony –, were already anachronistic (ancient) and consequently useless for the purpose of a cultural qualitative leap. Only thus can one understand del Bene's preference for a (modern) conceptual configuration offering real evolutionary potential, albeit at the price of a considerable weakening determined by the abandonment of ontological approaches in favour of the linguistic hermeneutic-speculative ones.

Giordano Bruno's pyre (February 17, 1600) is set aflame in the same year that Giulio Caccini publishes the manuscript of his opera *Eurydice*, both events coming as mediated/immediate responses to del Bene's idea. A third direct logical consequence would be the entire musical Baroque, a period which, even on a brief analysis, reveals the drama of a situation of an indecisive break with the religious-dogmatic and vocal contrapuntal past and of enthusiastic testing of an utterly unusual secularity through homophony, harmonic thinking, the opera and orchestral-instrumental genres and, perhaps, the most important consequence of del Bene's "revolution" – through the generalized implementation of the concept of style in music. In this regard, the moment of transfer of music to the old trivium can be viewed as one that separates a first properly stylistic artistic era – the musical Baroque – from a non-stylistic

past – the musical thinking of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Russian researcher Marina Trubeţkaia offers a series of clarifications of this situation in her doctoral thesis on the concept of canon in music⁶.

A first idea refers to the closeness between the canonical version of Eastern Christianity and myth and the transformation of the Western Christian canon into style. A second idea highlights the fact that the Renaissance mass of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries represents a last page of the Western compositional canon as a musical accomplishment of a cosmogonic model seen as an uninterrupted tradition in the evolution of European musical thinking from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Thus, the “literaturizing” transformation of the myth in the Renaissance artistic consciousness determines the rethinking of the function of the canon in terms of a playful approach, while the increasingly pronounced revelation of the subjective subtext in the reading of the sacred text determines the emergence of the first signs of the concept of individual style. From this moment on, it will only be about the concept of stylistic canon or, for short, about style.

5. The beginnings of the Baroque: the new world of stylistic disorder

Viewed from the perspective of the new placement of music in the linguistic-philological trivium, the entire musical Baroque appears as an era deliberately focused on aligning music with the figures of a poetic-notional rhetoric. A relevant parallelism could be drawn between the enthusiastic practice of the concept of canon by the ancient Greeks and the overwhelming enthusiasm of playing with the rhetoric of affects and especially with style in the musical Baroque. As Russian researcher Marina Lobanova states:

The very theory of style in music is an achievement of the age of Baroque. In the sixteenth century, a distinction was made between different types of counterpoint, and not styles. In the seventeenth century, numerous style classifications appeared. They were extremely diverse and sometimes rather odd. There was no unity between criteria, because they had not been formulated and therefore such unity could not appear during that time. The concept of “style” is the product of the Baroque culture, but under these conditions it does not receive

⁶ Trubeţkaia, Marina. *Канон в музыкальной культуре: к проблеме единства традиции* (*The Canon in Musical Culture: on the Problem of Unity of Tradition*), (culturology candidate's thesis), Saratov, 2006.

precise definitions. Originally, its meaning was extremely unstable. It was felt intuitively that a new musical dimension had been discovered, but the laws had not yet been formulated⁷.

And although Lobanova offers no causal arguments (the *del Bene* moment) and has a *per abrupto* approach to the invention of style in musical Baroque as a self-evident fact and a simple consequence of the evolutionary shifts in musical thinking, she continues with the presentation of an impressive panoply of stylistic variants of the musical Baroque: In the Baroque age, the traditional schemes were maintained – for example, the rhetorical division into high, middle and low styles, but at the same time new, individual and sometimes even surprising formulations were developed.

Thus, Monteverdi distinguishes between the “agitated” (*concitato*), “soft” (*molle*) and “tempered” (*temperato*) style, and, in his *Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi*, libro ottavo – the warlike, amorous, and representative (*rappresentativo*) style. In Heinrich Schütz-Christoph Bernhard’s theory, there is constant reference to “*stilus gravis (antiquus)*” – “the solemn (old) style”, in which “the music is superior to the text” (“*Harmonia Orationis Domina*”) and “*stylus luxurians*” in two variants: the “the common luxuriant style” (“*stylus luxurians communis*”), in which “word and music are of equal importance” (“*Sowohl Oratio als Harmonia Domina*”) and the “comic luxuriant style” (“*stylus luxurians comicus*”), where “the text has absolute dominance over music” (“*Oratio Harmoniae Domina absolutissima*”). Marco Scacchi distinguished between the church, chamber and theatrical styles. Kircher mentions the “church”, “canonical”, “motet”, “madrigal”, “melismatic”, “symphonic”, “fantasy”, “theatrical” and “hyporchematic” styles⁸.

This quote clearly reveals two states of things. The former refers to the understanding of style as a coefficient of the relationship between text and music, which directly refers to the already accomplished act of placing music among the linguistic disciplines. The latter refers more to a generalized freedom in the elaboration of any and all interpretations of the concept of style as a coefficient of the concept of genre – church, theatrical, symphonic, canonical etc. This essentially philological origin of the concept of style

⁷ Lobanova, Marina. *Музыкальный стиль и жанр: история и современность (Musical Style and Genre: History and Modernity)*, Sovetski kompozitor, Moscow, 1990, p. 121.

⁸ Lobanova, p. 122.

amplified by its radical novelty determines, already in the second half of the seventeenth century, the emergence of the concept of mixed or combined style, with the latter being imposed and advocated by musician-theoreticians such as H. Purcell, J. J. Fux, J. Mattheson, J. J. Quantz or C. Ph. E. Bach.

This conception involved the combination of techniques corresponding to several different styles such as the concertante and church styles, the old (Palestrinian, contrapuntal and vocal) and the new (homophonic, instrumental, or operatic) styles, or the combination of several national styles, hence a third meaning of style as (national – A/N) taste. All these become possible by virtue of the multiple identity of the musical Baroque which embraces the ecclesiastical and the secular alike, homophony and polyphony, the harmonic and the contrapuntal, all culminating in the “kaleidoscopic” and alternating several national dances (styles) in a single suite, inserting stylistically heterogeneous foreign fragments in author’s works, treating genres such as the chorale in several styles – church or theatrical, not to mention J. S. Bach’s *Mass in b-moll* which, according to Marina Lobanova, is a true anthology of Baroque styles.

Finally, worth mentioning is the role of the two “twins”⁹ of the Baroque – J. S. Bach and G. Fr. Handel –, whom Manfred Bukofzer¹⁰ defines as the achievers of the stylistic fusion (Bach) and of the coordination of national styles (Händel). The end of the musical Baroque also revealed the need for (co)ordination and fusion, for bringing a certain order to the meanings of the concept of style and for securing it a solid position in the European musical language and thought. In other words, Bach’s fusion and Handel’s coordination provide a strong operational understanding of the concept of style, allowing it to evolve towards those of Viennese classicism and Romanticism.

6. Conclusion

Essentially, the history of the so-considered stylistic period spans approximately three centuries and eight decades – beginning with the year 1600 until the establishment of postmodernism in the eighth decade of the twentieth century. After a first period – the musical Baroque (1600-1750) – in which music is “tamed” in its new, essentially discursive guise, the next qualitative leap occurs at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when

⁹ The two composers are thus represented in: François-Sappey, Brigitte. *Istoria muzicii în Europa (The History of Music in Europe)*, Grafoart, Braşov, 2007.

¹⁰ Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Era: from Monteverdi to Bach*. W. W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, 1947.

Ludwig van Beethoven abandons the elements of musical rhetoric in favour of an organic approach¹¹, used for the first time in the Third Symphony, *Eroica*, in E flat major, Op. 55. At the same time, the meaning of the concept of style is pushed to the point of identification with the musician's personality, as revealed in Wilhelm von Lenz's monograph titled *Beethoven et ses trois styles* (Sankt-Petersburg: Bernard, 1852).

After Bach, who fuses the national styles under the "umbrella" of the German one, the meaning of the concept of style undergoes a "biological" shift, suddenly acquiring the ability of ageing and evolving in accordance with the stages of human biology.

A third element, bringing a sense of special nobility to the concept of style, is the Romantic theory of the artist-genius, whereby style becomes the mark of an indisputable value superiority, thus usurping the functional prerogatives of the concept of musical canon.

We are referring here to Chapter 8: *Fusion of National Styles: Bach* and Chapter 9: *Coordination of National Styles: Handel*, respectively.

However, with the emergence of atonal thinking at the beginning of the last century, the so-called normative definition of style undergoes a return to an almost baroque understanding, namely a technical one – dodecaphonic style (Schoenberg) or serial style (Webern), bruitist style (Varèse) – or an aesthetic one – neoclassical (Prokofiev and Stravinsky) –, and therefore can no longer be considered as properly stylistic. Furthermore, the attempt to define Alfred Schnittke's conception as polystylistic style clearly reveals the utter inoperability of such a phrase, whereas in terms of postmodern musical practices it marks the complete abandonment of this type of aesthetic-periodizing identification.

However, the deforming "irradiation" of music proposed by Giulio del Bene paved the way not only for the rhetoricization of music and the reformulation of the strong concept of musical canon into the weak one of stylistic canon, but also for the proliferation of a historical series of conceptions regarded as sciences even despite a vehement polemical resistance. The emergence of a new rhetorical conception of music is illustrated by Johann Mattheson's book titled *Der vollkommene Capelmeister* (1739).

¹¹ Meyer, Leonard B. *Music and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values)*, delivered at Stanford University, May 17 and 21, 1984. The text is available on the Internet and can be downloaded from: http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-toz/m/meyer85.pdf

Later, in 1750, Alexander Baumgarten publishes the *Aesthetica*, his proposal for a new science of logical perceptions meant to describe the sensations of beauty and to educate the taste for beauty.

In 1902, Hermann Kretzschmar (who first used the word *Affektenlehre* related to the theory of affects in musical Baroque) publishes the text titled *Anregung zur Förderung der musikalischen Hermeneutik*, thus founding the science of "interpretation" of music, with applications in musical education, but also in the cultural studies embraced under the banner of the New Musicology (Joseph Kerman, Susan McClary, Lawrence Cramer, or Garry Tomlinson).

In 1867, Charles Sanders Peirce reinvents semiotics, and through the contribution of Gino Stefani, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Mario Baroni or Eero Tarasti, the inventor of musical narratology, all heirs of del Bene, it becomes the science of signs and of the mechanisms of constructing meanings in music. The attempt to understand the meaning of ontological and, implicitly, canonical music, by restoring the meaning this type of practice and thinking had in the original quadrivium, will, first of all, require the deconstruction and removal of any linguistic-philological "alluviums" (rhetoric, aesthetic, hermeneutic or semiotic) in the attempt to restore the pre-stylistic and pre-Baroque image of a practice whose authentic meanings could only be reached with great difficulty.

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