

A PHILOSOPHICAL-AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE MUSIC ACT

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SUMMARY. The article rivets our eyes on the conceptual instruments meant to set the status of the artistic creation in the context of the other cultural manifestations, evaluation and comprehension parameters, particularly the broad definition of the artistic phenomenon, namely the particular act of musical creation. Starting from Cassirer – who prefigures the aesthetic conception of the *presentational symbol* by defining it as a preceding stage which at the same time educates thought - we thus discover that the interaction between the receiving subject and the artistic act is possible through a special perceptual channel that Susanne K. Langer calls “presentational perception”. This channel can seize the *form* of the artistic act beyond the material and physical features of the “aesthetic object” itself (without neglecting all the other perceptible characteristics). The course of the aesthetician in the prefiguration of this main thesis is articulated as follows: in *Feeling and Form*, Susanne K. Langer develops a theory, already anticipated in the volume *Philosophy in a new key*, which states that apart from the language symbolism that is characterized by discursiveness, there is another type of symbol denominated as “presentational”, specific to the arts.

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1. Philosophical-Aesthetic Theses on the Artistic Act in General

1.1 The “Representational” Symbol vs. the “Presentational” Symbol

In *Feeling and Form*, Susanne K. Langer brings forward a theory already anticipated in the volume *Philosophy in a New Key*, which states that apart from the language symbolism characterized by discursiveness, there is

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another type of symbol denominated as “presentational”, specific to the arts. The difference between the two systems of symbolizing consists in the opposite polarization of the perception on reason: on the one hand there is the reason that operates with the characteristically “univocal” symbols of “denotation”, symbols that result from the codified conventions that are connected by succession and calculation. On the other hand, somewhere in our most inner depths, we hide an abyssal rationality that establishes the relation between elements through intuition and which takes the ‘form’ of the poly-semantic senses in order to exteriorize. Still in *Philosophy in a New Key*, the “new key”, “new answer” proposed by Langer (following the lines of Kant, Hegel, Cassirer) is the customizing of the symbolic forms that express the variety of the human experiences. Thus, similarly to her predecessors, Langer focuses on the myth as a primordial ontological form, the existential condition of the human being, who unlike the animals is doomed to create. In *Mind* the distinction between the discursive symbolism and the presentational one is better and better shaped, with a view to investigating the ‘common place’ of any human production: the articulation into ‘form’ of the experience lived. The term “feeling”, namely “sentimento” in the Italian edition of the book *Feeling and Form*, reveals the author’s vision on arts and artistic symbolism. This is the “form of the feeling”, states Susanne K. Langer, feeling capable of establishing constitutional relations of meaning or even set the bases for the first degree of reification, the fundament for any artistic form, as well as for the scientific conceptualization.

The endeavor of analyzing made by art aims at the perspective of a phylogenetic process, namely a social-historical one of sense formation and ‘sharing’, specific to the human being, who anticipates and conditions the existence of any symbolic system. The question we ask ourselves is: how does reason manage to interfere in this system of symbolization, built on feeling and intuition? Langer finds the solution by resorting to the Kantian tradition whence she takes the idea of the *elaboration function* specific to the human mind, which she applies however to any form of feeling. The ‘objective’ aspect of this approach is given by the organizational function of the symbolic forms. Once formed, the symbols (the formative aspect refers to the signifier form that, first and foremost, pervades the symbol) have the capacity to structure our vision on the world, modifying the perception on reality itself. The circulated form of the symbol not only organizes what we call objects at the perception and cognition levels, but also succeeds in establishing the reports among them, to organize the world as a global, experiential system. Thus, the object does not constitute the main existential system, but is the result of an original sense through which the multitude of experiences acquires a form. According to the presented conception, the

symbolization process does not derive from *a priori* categories but from cultural forms, socially modified by the interaction between individual and species, the author using the term of 'communion' so as to express the profound communion, created within the symbolic systems of a society, precisely due to its own vital way of expression. Consequently, a new perspective on arts and the symbolic forms reveals itself, socially shaped, where art is perceived as an articulation of the "emotional experience" forms, due to which the societal gap between human beings is annulled, whereas the artistic creation thus becomes a shared act, able to be objective and recognize. Nevertheless, Langer is opposed to the strictly social approach of the symbolic forms because this perspective would assign a pragmatic note to its approach, thus rendering it incapable of establishing the qualitative difference between the act of artistic creation and the common experiential act. Hence, by using the terms "feeling", namely "sensation", her philosophical-aesthetic vision on language and art appears only subjectively physiological. So, the act of 'emotion', 'experiencing' includes both the subject "*feeling*" and the object "*felt*". However, we will not be able to totally detach ourselves from the physiological perspective on the feeling and sensations because of their contribution to the mental outlining of the first forms of the sensibility. The «Language is by no mean our only articulate product. Our merest sense-experience is a process of formulation.»² From the author's point of view, the sensory organs are the ones to run the first categorization of the sensitive impulses felt by the human being. From this relatively chaotic plethora of stimuli, the sensory organs will select only the predominant forms, at first perceived as objects and then assimilated in their 'real' form, as it was 'built' by the sensory and intelligent organs, simultaneously becoming an individual experience and a conceptualized symbol. The theory according to which art is the 'form of the feeling' starts precisely from this first stage of sensorial perception assumed by the "Gestalt" psychology, which Langer develops and adapts to the demands of the act of artistic creation. The background theory on which Langer will be articulating her analysis of the art as a presentational symbol can be synthesized in two great principles:

- a) the signification act will be produced through symbols;
- b) the attribution of the signified precedes the sphere of the logical-discursive conceptualization.

Consequently, according to the author, it is at the level of the aforementioned

² Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a new Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1942, p.72; transl. Pettenati, *Filosofia in una nuova chiave*, Armando, 1972 (hereinafter FNC), p. 124: «linguaggio non è affatto il nostro solo prodotto articolato, già la nostra esperienza più puramente sensoriale è un processo di FORMULAZIONE».

sensorial 'insight' that is placed the ability to abstract forms or more precisely to attribute certain signifiers. In opposition to the neo-positivist theories (which pay particular attention to rational knowledge and logics, as well as to the logical analysis of the scientific language), but also unlike the Cassirerian conception, this 'abstraction' does not represent the result of the thinking activity that operates with well delimited facts, but represents the main form that is outlined as a consequence of the contact between the human being and reality. Susanne K. Langer believes that the 'abstraction' process anticipates the logical-discursive thinking, and even more it makes it possible; it is due to this primary ability to abstract that reality reveals itself to us as a constant, despite the chaotic alternation of the sensations we perceive. The sensory field, organized in groups and models through the intervention of the abstraction capacity, namely the selection of impulses, is part of the category of sensitive perception processes that purvey the brain with already organized information, *forms* of our sensitive experiences. Thus, each sensorial activity triggers "the stamp of mentality"³, since the very first contact of the receivers with the exterior world. « Our sense-organs -Langer says- make their habitual, unconscious abstractions, in the interest of this "reifying" function that underlies ordinary recognition of objects, knowledge of signals, words, tunes, places, and the possibility of classifying such things in the outer world according to their kind.»⁴. The articulation of the forms of reality is seen by Langer as a prerogative that refers both to the logical-discourse thought and the perception. Besides the symbolism specific to the language, with its reflexive and discursive nature, there is another kind of symbolism characterized by instantaneity, the lack of discourse, which Langer calls "presentational symbolism". What entitles Susan K. Langer to be detached from the analytical and positivist philosophy that annuls the existence of a different symbolism from the logical-discursive one is precisely the acknowledgement of a system of forms, present since the first stages of perception. «May not the order of perceptual forms, then, be a possible principle for symbolization, and hence the conception, expression, and apprehension, of impulsive, instinctive, and sentient life? May not a non-discursive symbolism of light and color, or of tone, be formulative of that life? And is it not possible that the sort of "intuitive" knowledge which Bergson extols above all rational knowledge because it is supposedly not mediated by any formulating (and hence deforming) symbolci is itself

³ Susanne K. Langer, *FNC*, p. 126/73: "lo stampo del fatto mentale".

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 129/75: «I nostri organi di senso fanno le loro abituali, inconscie astrazioni nell'interesse di quella funzione di "reificazione" che soggiace all'ordinario riconoscimento degli oggetti, alla conoscenza dei segnali, parole, melodie, luoghi e alla possibilità di classificare tutto ciò nel mondo esterno a seconda della loro specie»

perfectly rational, but not to be conceived through language—a product of that presentational symbolism which the mind reads in a flash, and preserves in a disposition or an attitude?»⁵ Once again Langer distances herself from Cassirer, enlarging the spectrum of action of the “presentational symbol”, from the initial preparation stage of the rational act to that of instrument necessary in the articulation of what would otherwise remain unexpressed: the existence felt, lived and experienced by the human being. Starting from these premises, Langer elaborates her theories on the artistic product, which she considers the symbol of the experience lived, the original stage of the relationship between individual and the world. Consequently, the expressiveness of the work of art does not result from singular differentiated elements that compose it (whether they are lights, shades, colors, figures, sounds, etc.), but from the total form built on their interaction. Through this statement, the author touches on the sensitive subject of all debates related to the power of signification of the artistic creation. We can justly raise the question whether the identification of the forms pertaining to the art and its synthesis function are enough to guarantee the difference between the perception of an object and the one of an artistic product. In other words, if the *form* is already present at the level of the sensorial perception, what will determine the artistic object to detach itself from any other common object? How can we define the artistic sense and what type of significations do the expressive forms of art communicate? It is more than obvious that when we refer to the artistic act we cannot talk about a sense established by convention because in this process there are neither the conventional external references nor the fulfillment objectives that outline the internal and external relations of the artistic object. In Langer’s view, in a painting with an aquatic subject, the sense is given not by the water or the boats, but by the signified to which refers the sum of the elements composing it. According to the author’s theories, the work of art is characterized by the so-called “import”⁶, the structure of life itself as it was felt and known directly. Therefore, the dynamic structure of the artistic object is what confers to the

⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *FNC*, p. 135/79,80: «L’ordine delle forme percettive non potrebbe essere un possibile principio della simbolizzazione, donde la concezione, espressione e presa di coscienza della vita impulsiva, istintiva e senziente? Un simbolismo non discorsivo di luce e colore o di toni, non potrebbe esser formulativo di tale vita? E non è possibile che quella specie di conoscenza “intuitiva” che Bergson estolle al di sopra di ogni conoscenza razionale, in quanto, suppostamente non mediata da alcun simbolo formulante (e quindi deformante) sia essa stessa perfettamente razionale, benché non destinata ad esser concepita attraverso il linguaggio? Sia un prodotto del simbolismo presentazionale che la mente legge in un lampo, e conserva in una disposizione o attitudine?»

⁶ See S.K.Langer, *Sentimento e forma*, Feltrinelli, Roma, 1975 (hereinafter *SF*) and *Feeling and form*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1953.

latter its capacity to change into a symbol the forms of the experience lived, so that « Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import. ».⁷ The term “import” connotes both the emotional charge of the artistic creation and the rational one. To claim that art is an act through which one expresses “the feeling, life, movement and emotion” does not mean that one militates in favor of a mimetic or symptomatic significance, because the constructive finality of the artistic act is not the one of stimulating the emotions or of playing the role of a signal; art, namely music, has an *a priori* emotional content, similar to the language that contributes to the symbolization through the artlessness of its conceptual nature. The difference between the two processes of symbolization – the logical-discursive one and the artistic one – consists in the fact that the artistic act does not establish a conventional report with the signified, whereas the latter does not blossom from the sensitive mark of the signifier. The way of expressing proper to the art and what we can highlight through the artistic symbol is precisely the opposite of the self-expression. The purpose of the art is not to express the feelings of the artist, to the extent to which the term “to express” will not refer to an uncontrolled ‘liberation of feelings’ but to their articulation through structured forms, more specifically the symbolic forms. By its very nature, the symbol does not imply the interference of the analogy, of the logos, of the direct contact with the object or experience subsequently subjected to the abstracting process. Consequently, we wonder what the fundament of Langer’s theory is when she defines the articulation of the artistic form as a “**logical expression**” (n. Logos). What allows us to label the artistic product as a symbol, namely “logical expression”, given the lack of conventional referentially and strong involvement of the perception in assimilating creation? Langer believes that «Very real work of art has a tendency to appear thus dissociated mundane environment. The most immediate impression it ereone of “otherness” from reality—the impression of an illusion the thing, action, statement, or flow of sound that constitutes.»⁸ Thus, from the author’s point of view, one of the art’s features is the “impression of illusion” that it manifests, its ability to reveal itself to us in the form of a “pure image”. Here, the ‘illusion’ has no negative sense of fiction or disillusionment, but it is the manner in which the work of art dissociates itself from the reality *per se*, becoming independent of the spatial and temporal relations that compose the quotidian, namely “the current sensitive experience”. In Langer’s

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 48/32: «Sentire, vita, moto ed emozione costituiscono la sua portata».

⁸ Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p. 61/45: “Ogni vera opera d’arte ha la tendenza ad apparire [...] dissociata dal suo ambiente mondano. L’impressione più immediata che essa crea è un’impressione di “alterità” rispetto al reale: di **un’illusione** in cui si dispiega la cosa, l’azione, la frase o il fluire di suoni che costituisce l’opera”.

opinion, the aura of illusion can be attributed to any object of the real world, if the object undergoes an abstraction from its material existence, so that we see it as unique in its way of presenting itself as “pure image”. The illusion appears at the moment of our appropriation of the image as «An image is, indeed, a purely virtual “object.” Its importance lies in the fact that we do not use it to guide us to something tangible and practical, but treat it as a complete entity with only visual attributes and relations.»⁹

We witness a process not of reality reproduction but of ‘abstraction’ in the way the symbolized object offers itself to our sensitive perception. Thus, art tends to produce that *form* which is configured when contemplating its sensitive qualities, extracted from their real meaning. The concept of “virtual reality” or illusion, as we named it above, is thus the one that conditions the artistic abstraction ability and, consequently, art’s ability to signify in the absence of a conventional signified. However, the problem is how we will be able to distinguish between an artistic phenomenon and a common event or familiar object through our everyday practical experience? To support her thesis, Langer insists on the ‘illusory’ quality of arts, underlining that the artistic work lacks practical significance: «All forms in art, then, are abstracted forms; their content is only a semblance, a pure appearance, whose function is to make them, too, apparent—more freely and wholly apparent than they could be if they were exemplified in a context of real circumstance and anxious interest. It is in this elementary sense that all art is abstract. Its very substance, quality without practical significance, is an abstraction from material existence; and exemplification in this illusory or quasi-illusory medium makes the forms of things (not only shapes, but logical forms, e.g. proportions among degrees of importance in events, or among different speeds in motions) present themselves *in abstracto*. This fundamental abstractness belongs just as forcibly to the most illustrative murals and most realistic plays, provided they are good after their kind, as to the deliberate abstractions that are remote representations or entirely non-representative designs.»¹⁰ We hence notice that art presents articulate forms which, although they do not refer to concepts, are nevertheless endowed with

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 64/48: «un “oggetto” puramente virtuale. La sua importanza sta nel fatto che non la usiamo come guida a qualcosa di tangibile e pratico, ma la consideriamo come entità compiuta avente relazioni e attributi solo visivi».

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 67/50,51: «fatto che le forme delle cose (non soltanto le forme materiali, ma anche le forme logiche, come i rapporti fra gradi di importanza negli eventi, o fra velocità diverse nel movimento) si manifestino attraverso questo medio illusorio o quasi, fa sì che esse si presentino *in abstracto*. Questa fondamentale astrattezza è propria con pari necessità degli affreschi più illustrativi e dei drammi più realistici, purché riusciti nel loro genere, come delle astrazioni deliberate, che sono rappresentazioni remote o disegni assolutamente non rappresentativi».

meaning. The abstraction or re-elaboration of the experience, necessary when talking about signification, is identified by Langer through its features of “belonging” to the arts. The purpose of the ‘illusion’, claims the author, is: «In art forms are abstracted only to be made clearly apparent, and are freed from their common uses only to be put to new uses: to act as symbols, to become expressive of human feeling.»¹¹ The rapport between the image and its model can be interpreted as mimetic but this sensitive manipulation of the reality is called by Langer “transformation” (as she completely excludes the idea of imitation).

1.2 Conclusions on the theses regarding the artistic symbol, namely the “presentational” symbol

As a consequence of the logical-demonstrative endeavor so far, we deduce that the artistic symbol is neither the copy of an object nor the symptomatic expression of an emotional state, but its ability to refer us to an *a posteriori* semantic load. The artistic symbol – in Kant’s vision, developed by Langer – could be defined mainly by the representation act of the mutuality relation between subjectivity and objectivity, and secondly as an image of a new reality, fruit of the creation not of the mimesis, considering art’s potential to express the rapport between real and “appearance” through form articulations, interpretation and possible reorganizations. The association object-artistic representation is based on an abstracting process that allows the artist to surprise the forms in a certain object, similar to the reencountered articulations at the moment of feeling, which, in its turn, appears as an absolute value of the content of an image.¹² The artistic transformation of the reality, known subjectively in objective “appearances”, immediately appropriated as expressions of the sensitive “appearances”, is possible due to that “primary illusion” that, in Langer’s view creates the main substance (in the sense of *substantia*, not of “matter”) of every piece.¹³ So, the substance of the work of art is in fact an illusion articulated in the rhythm of the experience lived in such a way that it coincides with its “feeling”: «To produce and sustain the essential illusion, set it off clearly from the surrounding world of actuality, and articulate its form to the point where it coincides unmistakably with forms of

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 67/51: «In arte le forme sono astratte solo per risultare chiaramente apparenti, e liberate dai loro usi comuni solo per essere adibite a nuovi usi: per agire come simboli, per divenire espressivi dell’umano sentire».

¹² See Susanne K Langer, *SF*.

¹³ Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: an Essay on Human feeling*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, v. I 1967, (hereinafter MI).

feeling and living, is the artist's task.»¹⁴ Given the context, it is necessary to recall that the term "feeling" used by Langer does not refer to a particular subjectivity independent of the object it determines, but needs to be circumscribed as an "expression" of the changes made in the body through interacting with the specific environment of the art. This explains the entire theory of the author who associates the term "feeling" to space, time and movement when detailing the different manifestations of the art. Regardless of the aspect it symbolizes – spatial or temporal – art expresses through these coordinates the articulations of the "feeling's form. Langer believes that space "così come lo conosciamo nel mondo pratico, non ha forma. Non ne ha neppure nella scienza, benché in questo caso abbia una "forma logica ».¹⁵ Naturally, apart from the artistic act, senses help us acknowledge the limits whether spatial or temporal. Art's spatiality and temporality, in return, make no reference to limits of any kind, but have the extraordinary capacity of shaping the space or time, thus creating a virtual reality. The artistic time and space is constituted in the shape of a "primary illusion" following the form seen, or heard, charged with human sentiments and the equivalent of the feeling itself. In this way, the space (as "vision" in language, poetry and painting) and the time lived due to the artistic articulation gets a shape, constituting the main object of the perception. The work of art is not therefore merely a simple form of the space but the source of the new spatial and temporal conformations, where it finds again its symbolic articulation.

Now the vision of the aesthetician Susanne K. Langer on art can be better contoured. She rigorously detaches the artistic object from any other object in the sphere of the common human experience, starting precisely from the premise that the artistic form does not reach achievement through relations of causality and utility, being shaped by the intervention of the imagination in the interior of another group of relations. The artistic vision thus has the role of transforming the object: «But it is not, as notably Croce and Bergson have said, the actual existence of the object to be depicted, that the artist understands better than other people. It is the semblance, the look of it, and the emotional import of its form, that he perceives while others only "read the label" of its actual nature, and dwell on the actuality.»¹⁶ We referred

¹⁴ Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p. 85/68: «compito dell'artista è di produrre e alimentare l'illusione essenziale, separarla in modo netto dal circostante mondo reale e articolarne la forma al punto che essa coincida, inequivocabilmente con forme di sentimento e di vita».

¹⁵ Langer believes that the logical form of an object is determined by the manner in which the object is built in relation to the sum of the rapports established between each element in the object's structure. (*An introduction to Symbolic Logic*, Houghton Mifflin Comp, Boston 1937, p. 24).

¹⁶ Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p. 94/76: «non è la resistenza effettiva dell'oggetto da raffigurare che l'artista intende meglio degli altri. È la parvenza, l'apparire di esso e il peso emotivo della

above to the manner in which art articulates the spatial forms, creating a virtual space that is different from the real one, a system totally closed in itself within which forms are tied by an infinite *continuum*. As Langer points out, in a work of art «All accents and selections, as well as radical distortions or utter departures from any “actual form” of objects, have the purpose of making space visible and its continuity sensible. The space itself is a projected image, and everything pictured serves to define and organize it. Even representation of familiar objects, if it occurs, is a means to this end.»¹⁷

This statement brings the author closer to Ernst Cassirer who stated: “The artist chooses a particular aspect of the reality but this process of selection is at the same time a process of concretization. Once set in its perspective, we are forced to see the world through their eyes.”¹⁸

Once a single line is traced within the virtual framework, we are already introduced in the world of symbolic forms, considering the prompt intervention of that line in the organization of the space and in the projection of a new visual form. The transfer that this would trigger mentally is similar to the one operating in our brain when we manage to distinguish the words from the chaos of noises: «The mental shift is as definite as that which we make from hearing a sound of tapping, squeaking, or buzzing to hearing speech, when suddenly in midst of the little noises surrounding us we make out a single word. The whole character of our hearing is transformed. The medley of physical sound disappears, the ear receives language, [...] Exactly the same sort of reorientation is effected for sight by the creation of any purely visual space. The image, be it a representation or a mere design, stands before us in its expressiveness: significant form.»¹⁹

The significance given to the form has nonetheless an analogy as its ground. The visual forms that are articulated, creating the feeling of a

sua forma, che egli percepisce mentre altri si limitano a “leggere la targhetta” della sua effettiva natura, restando sul piano della sua realtà effettiva.»

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 95/77: «accentuazioni e selezioni, come le radicali distorsioni o complete deviazioni da ogni «forma effettiva» degli oggetti, sono intesi a rendere visibile lo spazio e sensibile la sua continuità. Lo spazio stesso è un'immagine proiettata e tutto ciò che viene raffigurato serve a definirlo e organizzarlo. Anche la rappresentazione di oggetti familiari, quando si verifica, è un mezzo inteso a questo fine.»

¹⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *Eseu despre om. O introduce în filosofia culturii*, translated by Constantin Cosman, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1994, p. 204.

¹⁹ Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p.103/84: «Il passaggio mentale in questo caso è tanto definito quanto quello che avviene quando da un picchettio, o, un urlo o un ronzare, emerge un discorso, quando, all'improvviso, in mezzo ai piccoli rumori che ci circondano, riusciamo a distinguere una singolare parola. L'intero carattere del nostro udire ne è trasformato. Il caos dei suoni fisici scompare, l'orecchio accoglie il linguaggio [...].Esattamente lo stesso genere di nuovo orientamento subisce la vista, quando venga creato uno spazio puramente visivo. L'immagine, sia essa una rappresentazione o un semplice disegno, sta di fronte a noi nella sua espressività: è forma significante.».

unique space, could not be endowed with meaning by themselves if their rhythm did not represent another: that of the “feeling”, a mixture of sensations and emotions.

Inarguably, in Susanne K. Langer’s view, art is the symbol of feeling, because the latter reveals itself to us either as an image of the virtual space, e.g. plastic arts, or as an image of the venatorial volume, e.g. sculpture, or an image of the ethnic sphere, in architecture. A decisive importance is allotted to the presence of *the rhythm of the articulated forms of the experience lived*, which unites them all in a whole called art.

2. Philosophical-Aesthetic Theses on the Art of the Virtual Time

The rhythm will remain a constant in the evolution of this research, because it is imposed as an essential feature of the temporal coordinate and consequently of the one that Langer, and not only she, catalogues as **the art of the virtual time: music**.

Starting from the notion of experienced time introduced by Bergson, Langer traces from the very beginning obvious landmarks between the act of real fulfillment of the consciousness and the process of conceptualization of the objective time with which science operates. Unlike Bergson (from whose point of view philosophy should try to intuitively capture the inner sense of duration), Langer considers intuitive knowledge to be perfectly rational because it finds its expression in the symbol. In reality, when it elaborates the theory of the form of the “feeling”, recognizable in music, Langer does not refer to Bergson, whom she cites directly, when using the phrase “the expression of time”, but to William James: the latter connecting the feeling expressed by duration with a certain “emotional feeling”, which, particularly in music, accompanies the intervals of time.²⁰

Music is the art capable of making the time heard, while its force and continuity are sensitive.²¹ It offers the hearing an “appearance” of movement, of the sounds endowed with height, duration and intensity, of the chords and the lines, creating an **auditory-perceptible virtual form**. In reality, when facing the music, we do not perceive visually any type of movement, but we do identify duration, the image of what we can only call lived or experienced time: the course of life, when each of us feels how the waiting becomes an hour, and the hour changes into an unalterable fact. This means of measuring the time is only possible from the prism of the sensitivity, the

²⁰ See William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Macmillan & Co, London 1901; 1^a ed. H. Holt, 1890, vol. I.

²¹ See Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p.130/110,111.

tensions and emotions, while it is not only characterized by a different account but also by a structure completely different from the one composed by the practical or scientific time.²² The virtuality consists in a new organization of the musical sound which our ear proposes with a view to creating new artistic forms, contrary to the ones specific to the scientific time, whose structure is given by a unidirectional order, measurable in the sequences of the practical experiences. Thus divided, time helps the individual in his temporal orientation, without creating the reflex, the ability to feel the *passage* from one moment to another, an exclusion of the ordinate, precise arrangement. Moreover, says Langer, the experienced time does not involve only indicators such as length or the interval between a moment and another (long or short time), but it can be perceived quantitatively (less or more time). So, the author introduces a new concept, the one of “voluminousness”. *The voluminousness of the direct experience*, she states, is the one that confers visibility to the time. The volume, in its turn, is “filled” with physical, emotional and intellectual tensions, and the existence of time is the result of the exact way we cope with these tensions and for which we are permanently seeking solutions.²³ Part of these tensions are lost in the background, while others are propelled on the experiential forestage, while their significance lies in the **quality** attributes to time, beyond the *form* that it offers, and which will be deployed according to the scheme imposed by the dominating efforts. The time expressed through music will have the **quality** as a main feature; more than that, it is the quality itself, because it represents the duration experienced by the human being, surprised by the qualitative perspective.

Therefore, we acknowledge that in a musical work time is not intuited in its effective form, but is its symbolic expression, reason for Langer to define it as *virtual*. Music will become the symbolic representation of the time experienced by the artist, who in turn appropriates this time, changes it and passes it forward to the music lovers.

The experience of the *passage* and *transit* is, according to Langer, «Yet it is the model for the virtual time created in music. There we have its image, completely articulated and pure; every kind of tension transformed into musical tension, every qualitative content into musical quality, every extraneous factor replaced by musical elements.»²⁴ Accordingly, the musical creation extracts from the experience *the image of the passage*, which it

²² See Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p. 129/109,108.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 133/113.

²⁴ *Ibidem*: «il modello del tempo virtuale creato nella musica: Lì noi troviamo la sua immagine completamente articolata e pura, e ogni sorta di tensione è trasformata in tensione musicale, ogni contenuto qualitativo, in qualità musicale; ogni fattore estraneo è costituito da elementi musicali.»

transforms in a perceivable artistic product, in an articulation of sounds, activating the symbolization process which makes the duration 'determination' possible.

Langer's contribution consists in the fact that the aesthetician managed to identify in art the presence of the symbolization act and, consequently, the presence of the process of the 'rational' re-utterance of the sensations, emotions and sentiments, on whose ground the logical 'abstractions' will be effected. In this context, we take the essential truth that music, similarly to the word, can depict «events we have not witnessed, places and things we have not seen, so music can present emotions and moods we have not felt, passions we did not know before.»²⁵ Even so, music, contrary to the language, has no fixed system of connotation. Apart from not being endowed with 'lexical meaning', the musical notes considered separately, recognize not even the notion of harmony, except for some onomatopoeia that have become conventions (for instance, the bells chiming, the rooster singing, etc.), music has no literary meaning.²⁶ Obviously, Langer believes, the message of a musical work is not a fix, immutable abstraction, an empty concept regardless of its fame among the large public and however much it recurred over the centuries. Its values and symbols are inexhaustible²⁷, so any artistic musical product would be reduced to a single interpretation and audition. Music, more than an art of time, is an 'art in time', not only because it needs a well defined time of perception, but because it articulates the time as a *form of its primary illusion*. Recurrence, in this case, becomes a benefit, an optimal indicator of its artistic value. But, referring to Susanne K. Langer, we can make a distinction between the *extrinsic recurrence* (such as the one mentioned above, which make reference to the act of the interpretation and expression) and an *intrinsic recurrence* (tightly related to the act of the creation, of the content).

From the analysis of a musical work, we observe that the first stage of the creation is the elaboration of the artistic 'idea', i.e. the *form* of the composition that the artist feels the need to develop. Under the influence of this form, the composer will create part of the work, part that manifests itself as a 'movement', an avalanche that is to structure the entire play, in conformity with an implicit logic, which any conscientious artistic activity has the force to transform in an explicit logic. In alternating this recurrent form, the *rhythm* chosen by the creator is not reduced to a regulated repetition of

²⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *FNC*, p. 286/180: «eventi di cui non siamo stati testimoni, luoghi e cose che non abbiamo visto, così la musica può presentare emozioni e stati d'animo che non abbiamo sentito, passioni che non avevamo prima subito.»

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 306.

the events (as in the case of the cardiac pulse or the staccato of the hands of a clock), but to the symbolic *presentation* of the most elevated organic experience: the emotional life of any human being. «The commanding form of a piece of music contains its basic rhythm, which is at once the source of its organic unity and its total feeling. The concept of rhythm as a relation between tensions rather than as a matter of equal divisions of time (i.e. meter) makes it quite comprehensible that harmonic progressions, resolutions of dissonances, directions of “running” passages, and “tendency tones” in melody all serve as rhythmic agents.»²⁸

Coming back to the idea of tension that is alternated and impresses quality to the time, retrievable in a musical product, we will notice that it is developed in direct correlation with the rhythm (the musical one is a calculation of the organic rhythm), becoming its essence: rhythm will survive by creating new tensions by solving the previous ones.

Thus, Susanne K. Langer feels entitled to state:²⁹ Rhythm will be crystallized initially as *appearance* of the organic movement, so that later it becomes *the appearance of duration*, assimilated as a whole by the real events that announce new moments and make reference to the past ones. The experienced time and the rhythm identify themselves through music with the same *gestalt*, giving birth to a “symbol-world” of the experienced time. Once again, Langer makes us think of Cassirer who, by comparison, observes analogies between the natural symbols and the artificial ones. This way, our ability to recognize the rhythm in the sounds, figures and events becomes explicable. The process is based on analogies with the forms from the real world, but the music represents for Langer an obvious case of “symbol unconsumed”³⁰: the objectivity of a significance that transcends the one of the signified and is not reducible to their sum. In the case of the *presentational symbol*, claims the author, «Articulation is its life, but not assertion; expressiveness, not expression.»³¹

We are entitled to wonder how it is possible that a *symbol unconsumed*, with no stable sense, that contains a multitude of meanings in itself be understood?

²⁸ See Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p. 146/125: «La forma determinante di un brano musicale contiene il suo ritmo fondamentale, che è nello stesso tempo la fonte della sua unità organica e del suo sentimento totale. Il concetto di ritmo, come relazioni tra tensioni piuttosto che di eguali divisioni di tempo [...] rende ben comprensibile il fatto che le progressioni armoniche, le risoluzioni di dissonanze, le direzioni dei passaggi “rapidi” e i “toni risolvanti” nella melodia servano tutti come agenti ritmici.»

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

³⁰ Susanne K. Langer, *FNC*, p. 307.

³¹ *Ibidem*: «l'articolazione è la sua vita, l'asserzione, l'espressività lo è, non l'espressione.»

Langer herself answers this question by attributing the entire responsibility to the artist, the one that seizes the *form of the feeling* and *reifies* it, turning it into something perceptible, action that does not involve the correspondence between the *artistic form* and its precise signified. An *unconsumed artistic symbol* will be a continuous source of new meanings, while any artistic work will present forms endowed with meaning, even if they do not refer us to a real reference or to its own objective form. What is more, the Gestalt psychology to which Langer alludes many times, has made an empirical demonstration that the perceptive form is not reduced to the sum of all data it contains.

Langer also claims that any concept intercepted in an articulated form, different from the discursive unconventional one, but full of force, must not be perceived as a symbol in the broad sense of the term, but as a “signifier form”, where the factor that gives meaning is not discriminated from the logical point of view. This factor will have a role in identifying the quality of the artistic act and not at all in its functionality.³² The work of art builds in this way its own life, its own world, full of significant emotional values.

Returning to the theory stating firstly that art is a logical expression, because it has no ontological support and value, due to its expressivity, and secondly that an artistic symbol is the *common ground* where the relationship of the human being with the surroundings becomes concrete and takes shape, we can see more clearly the answer to the question above.

In establishing a clear demonstrative landmark, the affirmation of Morpurgo Tagliabue is decisive. He would write in one of his studies: « the «new key» that Langer wants to use as the core of her philosophy was not that new given the fact that it had already been introduced in a well-known work of Ernst Cassirer. From Cassirer whose pupil is Langer herself, she gets the concept of the human attitude as symbolizing disposition; by «symbol» she envisions its most extended meaning, corresponding to abstraction (“A symbol is any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction.”)³³.

Related to what art is capable of producing and transmitting, another important factor that we have already mentioned is the *appearance* or *illusion* either of a *virtual space* or of a *virtual time*. From the author’s point of view, the illusion is an important principle of art – a cardinal principle according to which **artistic abstraction** is not to be reached by any of the generalizing processes used in order to reach scientific

³² Susanne K. Langer, *SF*, p. 49.

³³ Morpurgo-Tagliabue, *Scuola critica e scuola semantica nella recente estetica americana*, in “Rivista di estetica”, 1956, III, p. 39: “ogni mezzo attraverso cui siamo resi capaci di fare un’**astrazione**”. The passages presented within the ample quote have been extracted by Morpurgo-Tagliabue from Susanne K. Langer, *Sentimento e forma*, p. XI.

abstraction.³⁴ Langer continues by stating that the scientific abstraction is produced by successive generalizations, whereas the artistic one is not conditioned by the succession of intellectual studies. The artistic abstraction is achieved by the mere recognition of the *form* that gives birth to perceptions and intuitions, thus confronting us with a spontaneous and natural process of abstraction. The only common point of reference between science and art remains the *form*. Both are able to abstract only in relation to the *forms* they manage to capture from the multitude of existing and lived experiences.

Thus, the *artistic abstraction* converges towards what Langer calls “presentational abstraction”³⁵, meaning that the ‘understanding’ of a work of art starts from the intuition of the feeling, presented in the totality and complexity typical to any artistic product, then continuing with the moment of the contemplation, which will gradually reveal the force of the artistic work of art. Unlike the discourse, where the meaning is built synthetically by a succession of intuitions, art in exchange, visualizes and anticipates its complex unity. As we remarked above, the illusion created by art cannot have any utilitarian scope, as it represents only the *sensitive appearance* of the practical structure of life.

In the activity of *artistic* or *presentational abstracting*, as Langer prefers to call it, no successive levels of abstraction are reached; art involves in this mechanism constant relations of rephrasing acts, both abstractive and projective, based on an incommensurable range of principles, which forces the *presentational abstracting* to include many subspecies, often in close relation with the means of creation specific to each art. These various subordinate types of abstraction allow for the different logical projections to blend in order to create a complex symbol, the created image that presents the idea of the artist.³⁶ These “subspecies”, mentioned by Langer, are not independent from each other, standing on general analogies that are articulated within the primary illusion created by each art in particular, thus constituting the most direct type of “presentational abstraction”. The “primary illusion” results from the interaction of the multiple abstracting processes, of which to Langer the most important one is “tension”.

Ensuing, states Langer, the different types of art favor different metaphors, but the basic concepts of each one of these are tension and resolution.³⁷ How do these tensions act? In the first moment they “produce structures”, Langer considers, only by their mere appearance. The structure

³⁴ Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957.

³⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *MI*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

is then coagulated into visible or heard *forms*, either by their intensity or their calm, either by their solving or their transformation. In any type of art, regardless of the instrument with which it operates (lines, gestures, sounds, etc.), the first identifiable element, i.e. introduced by the creator is the “field of tensions” present, Langer believes, particularly in the works of art subject to execution, interpretation. And, in this context, Langer gives the example of the work *Impromptu opus 90* by Schubert, where, “the field of tensions”, created by the unison of the dominating accordion and the contrast between the dynamic notes is very easily retrievable.

The *tensions* that Langer mentions and which basically confer specificity to the work are configured as the sensitive expression of the organic dynamics of the experience lived. They are also determining in the construction of the essential structural element in imposing the ‘*primary illusion*’ to any artistic incipit due to their scope, potential and capacity to evolve, subsequently meant to spur the continuity and development of the artistic act. The form that the tensions acquired during the organization of the artistic act, namely the creative act, reflects what we subjectively feel emerging inside us, for instance the activity of the muscles felt by us and the agitation caused by the various emotions experienced³⁸. The articulation of the lines, forms, gestures, but especially of the sounds by creating tensions that reflect the *form* of what we feel, transforms art in a process capable of objectivizing and expressing logically.

On the dry and severe ground simplified by the philosophical-aesthetic expression, compatible with the framework here circumscribed, we have tried to etch with big, easily perceptible and identifiable lines the cardinal moments in the development and perception of the aesthetic universe of the art, namely music.

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