STUDIA UBB MUSICA, LVI, 1, 2011 (p. 17-21)

COMPOSITION: INSPIRATION OR TECHNIQUE? (A CRITIQUE ON THE MUSICAL COMPOSITION SYSTEMS)

VANGELIS KARAFILLIDIS[1]

SUMMARY. Musical composition systems play the role of a scientific-like approach to composition. Under this perspective one can study harmony, counterpoint, fugue, music morphology, serial composition techniques, etc. and utilize this knowledge in order to compose music. What is the influence between musical composition systems and inspiration? How these two contradicted procedures can be combined and give a balanced result? This article is trying to focus on these questions, to analyze the evolution of the musical composition systems and to survey the significance of inspiration in musical composition.

Keywords: music composition, composition, musical composition systems

Musical composition is an expression – maybe even a confession – of the composer's inner cosmos. The composer describes his inner state, an event, an image, an idea or even a story. The creative process through time is a process of self-knowledge. Not only does the composer investigate what is aesthetically beautiful for him, but he mostly listens to his soul when he creates music. Also, he tries to transmit these "messages" through his compositions to the audience and to communicate with other people using sound as a form of "language".

If somebody intends to compose music, he should have: a) the ability to express himself through sounds (something that most people can't do) and b) a relatively high level of knowledge of musical techniques (something that almost everybody can achieve). Thus, composition is a balanced cooperation of two different elements: that of "inspiration" and "knowledge of techniques". Each one of them alone can't produce effective results.

"Inspiration" has a relatively fuzzy meaning because of its nature. We could say that inspiration is the composer's ability to "translate" into sounds the messages he wants to "transmit". On the other hand, "knowledge of techniques" has a relatively distinct meaning. It refers to the knowledge of instruments and generally that of musical means, the assimilation of contrapuntal

[1] Music Teacher, State High School, Greece (Second Chance School of Alexandroupoli, Aftokratiras Theodoras Str. 15, 68100 Alexandroupoli, GREECE). Contact: karafil@yahoo.com

polyphony and harmonic texture, the historic knowledge of the musical styles and the systematic study of musical forms both in the macro-structural level of form and in the micro-structural level of exposition, processing, development, combination and contradiction of musical ideas.

For systemization, composition studying is often approached using the formalism of compositional systems. In general terms, these systems play (or at least we wish they did so) the same role as the models and theories we find in the Physical Sciences. From the historical point of view, the aim for systemization of composition could be directly related with the success that mostly the science of Physics presented in the description of effects through various theories that were developed for this reason. For the formulation of these theories we use the concept of the “model”. Using models, we try to interpret in a unified way a variety of effects or to approach the already known behavior of other phenomena. The model could be a hypothesis, a construction, or even an equation. A model is chosen under the following criteria: it should a) be the simplest possible, b) be in accordance to other well-validated theories or models in relevant scientific fields and c) permit further predictions which can be verified with experiments.

In the case of music, there are various compositional systems that attempt to formulate the creative process. For example we can study the contrapuntal polyphony of Palestrina, the classical tonal harmony, the form of fugue, etc. using the formulation of compositional systems. For each one of the above cases there is a corresponding “compositional system”.

One significant alteration between the Physics models and the compositional systems is that the first refer to relatively simple natural processes while the second handle with a human mental and creative activity. Another important difference between them is that the function of nature remains stable in time and space and we try to reveal incrementally more and more fundamental secrets, whereas music evolves through time and could clearly vary from place to place, and we try either to describe in terms of rules, musical idioms that have already been ripened or overcome, or to “construct” a new musical aesthetic often using revolutionary different rules for the formulation of the musical material. Thereby, some compositional systems “supervene” while some others “precede” the music idiom or aesthetic that attempt to describe.

Also, we could say that the evolution of music reminds us rather strongly of the evolution of species in Biology. Generally, in both cases we have evolution from the simplest to the most composite structures and forms. We could create a parallel between the art evolution generally and that of DNA mutations. From the historical point of view, until the end of the 19th century, music tended to evolve on the basis of prior well-founded formulas, mostly because of the saturation in aesthetics and in the expressional abilities of some

musical idioms. This evolution was unforced and it was a natural consequence of the necessities for musical expression. Likewise, in Biology we have the natural process of the species evolution as a process of orientation of organisms in the alternating environmental conditions. Conversely, from the beginning of the 20th century we can see a clear attempt to overthrow and negate tradition via pre-constructed compositional formulas and numerous experimentation attempts. At this point, the parallel could refer to Mechanics of Molecular Biology, which tries to interfere directly with the genetic material of organisms disregarding the natural processes.

It should be stressed at this point that the composition systems finally didn't succeed in deriving everything we expected. We may describe a music form or idiom in terms of formalism and systematization, but unfortunately (or fortunately?) the substance of beauty and the enchantment of creation lie far from the action field of the compositional systems. We could say that one reason is that their development was done without taking care of the factor of aesthetical beauty. This happens because we don't yet have the ability to describe in terms of a "model" what is aesthetically beautiful or not. Although there is a clear convergence (concurrence of subjective evaluations) in a significant degree, for example if a melody is beautiful or not, the compositional systems haven't succeeded yet in finding a formalism that could judge if a melody is beautiful or not, and even more a formalism that could create a beautiful melody.

Another significant problem regarding the compositional systems is that one could contradict and reject the other. To make clear the contrast with Physics, we should notice that according to the principle of correspondence which was proposed by Bohr, each new theory (that aims to replace a previous one) should produce the same results as those of the previous one in the field that the conclusions of the previous one have been completely confirmed. Unfortunately, in the case of music without considering the infirmity of the previous and relatively plain compositional systems, we try to develop new ones, which are more complicated with uncertain perspective, oftentimes just for experimentation.

At this point, a substantial difference to science should be stressed: in Physics we work so that the various models and theories have the best possible compatibility one to the other and the aim is to achieve an amalgamation of the miscellaneous theories into one more completed and coherent theory, while in music (and especially from the beginning of the twentieth century) a clear "immunity" lies in the field of developing new compositional systems, which not only reveal incoherence, but oftentimes one intentionally refutes the other. Another problem regarding the compositional experimentations is that any "pioneer" one is overstated and overestimated just because it happens to be experimentation. In the scientific field the experiments are worked out after having been systematically planned and with the final aim of (often exhaustive) processing of their results and the derivation of conclusions.

A representative case of music compositional system that refers to the encoding of a previous musical idiom is that of the tonal classical harmony. During the study of tonal harmony we work on the rules (the formalism) of the chord progression as it was formed (in general terms) during the 18th and 19th centuries. Tonal harmony has a variety of rules, mostly of prohibitory character. It succeeds in describing what we should (or shouldn't) do in order not to "fall" into chord progressions that make the sense of tonality fuzzy. What it doesn't succeed in is describing what we should do to write a work with splendid tonal sonority.

On the contrary, two systems, which are representative for the composers' experimental intentions, are the serial one and the aleatoric one. Both try to overthrow the tonal system and the conventional – classical approach to musical composition. Both of them had already been organized before undergoing a process of maturation and "verification" and possibly they anteceded the creation of congener works. If we carefully examine both systems, we will realize that although they are based on completely opposite principles, they generate similar aesthetical results, or more precisely, although their principles are completely different, we could write works having similar sonority. Thus we see that most likely the perception of the human mind for the "construction" of sound material is completely different to the compositional systems' approaching attempts.

This makes us skeptical, because if completely different principles can produce similar results, then possibly it should be carefully examined if there is really any reason to develop new compositional systems aiming for experimentation, while it's almost certain that the already existing systems suffer. Generally, the immoderate rhythmical complexity and the vast use of atonality give a sense of "randomness" throughout the compositions. Maybe the works should have some tonality centers, rhythmical patterns, or generally some kind of reference points for the listener.

Is it perhaps the high time for "analyzing" the results of our experimentations and surveying them, instead of trying to do something "pioneer"? Some composers have shown an alternative direction. Despite the saturation and the dead-end of many musical styles, they found a way out based on previous compositional formulations, which they restored and used in another perspective. Such cases are the techniques of modality and expansion of the rhythmical structure in works by Stravinsky and Bartók, the restoration of prior and traditional norms and the incorporation of national or even exotic elements into the Western European musical language. As Greeks, we have a rich music tradition, and it's actually possible to find outlets referring to composition, through the revision of our traditional and Byzantine musical language.

The compositional systems are useful for the (theoretical) study of music. They assist the process of learning, because the student has a standard that guides him. But afterwards, they could be proved useless or even more dangerous for the authentic creation, because some of them “construct” works in such a mathematical way and they are so rational, that limit the composer’s expression. Inspiration is always the kinetic power of composition. Without it the enchantment of creation and the power of expression are lost.

Any algorithmic (mathematical) approach to composition, is at least until now pointless, because the capabilities of mathematics to describe what is aesthetically beautiful are actually nonexistent. In the future, we might invent a way to approach in terms of some mathematical formalism the fact for a work being beautiful or not and also to achieve programming a machine (computer) to write beautiful music. But even then, the computer will not be able to compose in the human sense, because it doesn’t have an inner world. Maybe if we indeed understand precisely the mechanism of musical composition, it won’t be any sense for us to write music. The expression – and confession? – of our inner cosmos embodies something metaphysical and unexplained. The reason that we write music and don’t try to communicate through other more conventional ways with the audience can not be completely understood. A possible reason is that even here we can find the excitement for creation using a “fuzzy” language, the language of sounds: the enchantment of unanswered questions. It’s quite possible that we write music because the mechanism of composition hasn’t been decrypted yet. Its decryption would cause the disappearance of the metaphysical and unexplained character of composition, along with the extinction of our desire to create.

REFERENCES

This paper contain an authentically conception of the author on musical composition.