How to Talk about Music?

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EDITOR’S NOTE

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1 In a 1960 issue of the *Saturday Review*, Glenn Gould reviewed a book by Professor Erwin Brodsky, *The Interpretation of Bach’s Keyboard Works*.

2 Brodsky devoted part of his book to “seriously discussing the supposed intrinsic relations between the fourteen note subject of the *Fugue in C Major* of the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the fact that the alphabetic arrangement of the letters in
Bach’s name add up to a total of 14 and that if we add the initials J.-S., we obtain the inverse number of 41”. This kind of wild fantasy is far from being an isolated case. Certain exegetes claim to have discovered the importance of the number 3 and the number 7 in Bach’s work. Supposedly allusions to the Holy Trinity and the seven day week that punctuates the religious calendar, they are said to be plentiful in his works: thirds, triplets, number of notes, bars or sections that are multiples of 3 or 7, etc. Using this invention as a pretext, others have taken an interest in 14 (twice 7), miraculously found in the numerological translation of Bach’s name, in 41 (the mirror of 14), etc. This outmatching knows no limits. Another example of fascination that has motivated long essays relates to the Fibonacci sequence and the famous Golden Number. The Hungarian musicologist Ernő Lendvai has made it out to be the key to all of Bartók’s work, particularly his string quartets. He sees it in the count of notes, tempos, and bars. To do so, all kinds of arrangement with reality are allowed, as are distortions. Each numerological coincidence is seen as an oracle. This discourse on music lapses into cabbalistic thinking. It cloaks itself in a scientific appearance as a guarantee of reliability, and sets out to decrypt works exclusively for a group of the initiated.

This cult of Number, like sesame opening the way to music for us, has been supported by dodecaphony, which requires that only a series of 12 notes determined beforehand be used in a musical composition. Serialism then takes over. As Nicolas Ruwet writes, this music presents itself as complex, difficult to perform, announced by “stern titles (Polyphonies, Structures, Counterpoints) which imply an advanced elaboration”. Commentaries “insist on the problems of language and structure, mark their desire for rigour and complexity, reveal complicated schemes, long preparatory work to write the piece”. And yet, to cite Ruwet again: “when heard by unbiased listeners, this music seems surprisingly simplistic ... acceptable as background music, as decor, this music fails to create an autonomous discourse”. Add to this the fact that, as has been tried and tested, the composers themselves are often incapable of identifying by ear the series of twelve sounds underpinning their work. The profuse discourse is there to justify the system, which has taken the place of music. As Ruwet puts it, the composers have gone wrong in mistaking the ideological image painted by the commentary surrounding music, for musical reality itself.

Analogously, there are commentators who, speaking of works that are not all serial, insist on detecting elements hidden in the music sheet, whether perceived by the ear or not. Parodying Nietzsche and his famous “without music, life would be a mistake”, I would say that for them, “without the music sheet, music would be a mistake”. Their pernickety gloss is concerned with reading and not hearing. These music sheet enthusiasts are also adepts of the second meaning of the French translation of the term, partition, as their fetishism regarding writing cuts them off from other musics, excluding jazz, extra-European music, improvised music. For these exegetes, music is no longer the art of sounds but that of graphic signs. The uninstructed would struggle to imagine the importance placed by these people on quarrels that he or she would consider Byzantine. Any piece sees endless scrutinising of its outlines, its intermediate stages, the final score, all of which are compared to others in a quest for hidden treasures, and where the slightest graphic subtleties are marvelled at. And never in this entire process is the resulting sound taken into consideration. It is totally disregarded, all that matters being these pointless discussions in a language which claims to be scholarly but is often merely abstruse. The obscure is made out to be profound. For the more inaudible the hidden object, the more intelligent the one who discovered it is.
considered to be. In the realm of numerology, he who is short-sightedly fixed on detail is king; in the Oriental desert of “papyrology”, the deaf is king.

* Videos of lectures available online at www.college-de-france.fr

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