

BOOK REVIEW

WHY THIS BOOK HAS BECOME SO NECESSARY TO ME (PASCAL BENTOIU, *GÂNDIREA MUZICALĂ* (MUSICAL THINKING), BUCHAREST: EIKON, 2022, 2ND EDITION)

This introductory text is not an actual *book review*. To explain my statement, I will invite the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, for whom a written and published text that finds its recipient and becomes necessary to the latter is an epistle. And I know his answer would be the one I would expect: *This is a reply to a letter*. One sent to Pascal Bentoiu in this rather unusual way. And that would not be untrue, because this is a letter to the Maestro. And I would personally add that it is also a *confession*. Indeed, going through the text of the book, I understood that it was addressed to me. Because by writing it, the composer unwittingly revealed to me, in such a fatherly way, things that I needed in my professional growth. He thus obliged me to write my own “letter” to him, even though he will never receive it. Consequently, I see myself compelled to make my own confession, convinced that he would have shown complete understanding towards my attitude. Just as he did years ago when he accepted several interview questions from a novice musicologist.

It is only conventionally that I treat the text of this book as an essay. Even more so as Pascal Bentoiu says it himself: *This work is therefore intended to be an organized confession rather than a philosophical approach to music*. The emphasis obviously falls on the phrase *organized confession*. One formulated in perfect analogy with Johann Sebastian Bach’s prefaces to his own works: ... *for the use and profit of young musicians who are anxious to learn* (The Well-Tempered Clavier), and in another place: ... *for music lovers, to refresh their spirits* (The Goldberg Variations).

The first thing I disagree with Pascal Bentoiu about is his quality of *aesthete*, which he explicitly claims in *Avertisment* (Disclaimer). There is nothing aesthetic in the architecture of the book, nor in the interpretive



discourse applied to the abstractions of a composer's consciousness. And that is because the aesthetic justification is glaringly insufficient for the ideas contained in this book. This is an essentially musicological text and discourse. With a clear and gradually accumulative structure. With an orientation toward thoroughness, differentiation, taxonomic expansion, and involvement of increasingly advanced concepts. With an efficient and accurate albeit clear terminology, richly argued and revealingly suggestive. With concise and pertinent definitions, closely accompanied by convincing demonstrations meant to guide and inculcate the author's personal views as deeply as possible in the reader's consciousness. And with everything camouflaged in a reflective and overtly essayistic garb.

Indeed, in *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking), the discourse is different from the technical consistency and analytical excellence exhibited in the masterful book titled *Capodopere enesciene* (Enescian Masterpieces) (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1984). Or, this is not about *the same* musicology, with its excitingly diverse applied forms. And, to paraphrase Ioan Petru Culianu, one can say that in the case of *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking) we are speaking of a true *composer's toolbox*¹, essential to a musician who embarks either on the path of compositional development or on that of musicology. A poetics and a hermeneutics whose common denominator are the title – *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking).

This last title is emblematic of both the value of the work and the composer's profound and brave intuition because it puts forth the key phrase for the understanding of musical theory and practice. For example, what has existed so naturally for a long time already – the phrase *philosophical thinking* (of the Ancient Greece, of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance, of Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Husserl etc.), or *political thinking* (from Plato and Machiavelli to Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Habermas, Popper, Hayek etc.) – finally finds its relevance and recognition also in the craft and art of *organized sounds*. We know about *mousike techné* (skill, prowess in the practice of music) and *aesthesis* (meaning "sensations", or rather *feelings of beauty*, utterly *beautiful* or downright "barbaric" – a feeling accompanying music). But we know nothing about *μουσική σκέψη* (*mousike sképsi* – musical thinking), about which neither Pythagoras, nor Plato or Aristoxenos of Tarentum, the musicologist, left a single line. And then, thinking itself is commonly represented as an operating procedure carrying lexical meanings. An exclusively notional thinking. Even more so, because, as the

¹ Borrowed from: Ioan Petru Culianu, *Călătorii în lumea de dincolo* (Otherworldly Journeys], Bucharest: Nemira, 1994, title of Chapter 1 – *Trusa istoricului pentru a patra dimensiune* (A Historian's Kit for the Fourth Dimension].

author himself states: *Scientific thinking is valid when it accords with reality. Which is the reality artistic (i.e. musical – author’s note) thinking must accord with?*

And here is Pascal Bentoiu’s proposal – the book *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking) as a dictionary, learning guide, set of instructions, descriptions of procedures and conceptual tools, and, ultimately, a set of maps of the mind thinking through sounds – all of which are required in representing the phenomenon of music in its own terms and, obviously, in knowingly relating about music. Because, according to Pascal Bentoiu, *musical thinking* is by no means *thinking about music*, no matter how aesthetic or philosophical both may be, but *thinking the music*. Like a personal formulation of the answer to the question *how* (that is, *in what way*) *can music be thought* and, especially, *from what* and *how is music* (itself) *made*?

And this, without the “flares” of some descriptions of psycho-affectivity, accompanied by false “road signs” such as the aesthetic categories, analytics of the beautiful and the sublime, the insufficiently adequate tropes of rhetoric or the multitude of allegedly illustrative signs of semiotics. Hence my flat-out refusal to accept *the aesthetic*, as well as the *philosophical* in this text. And gradually, as the reading progresses, it becomes clear that in an unostentatious (albeit for me exciting and seductive) way, we are speaking about *the technology of the musical* (object) and of *musicality* (substance and quality) as *technologies of the impossible*. Because how else can it be when thinking the *invisible* and the *unrepresentable*? Or when (this time more extensively) *thinking* the *sonorous* and the *actual (real) sound* (as understood by Polish musicologist Jozef Chominski), for whom music proper, in its traditional Baroque-Classical-Romantic sense, becomes only a particular case. And here again, I will paraphrase Culianu, who suggests a *fourth dimension*, obviously meaning the situation *in another dimension of thinking*.

After the reflexive and the essayistic, a third parameter of (self) “camouflage” is the propaedeutic in its heuristic sense. The transmission of knowledge involves “coercion”, which produces revelations. Far from being condescending and in no explicit manner, the author’s narrative aims, with the wisdom of a true teacher, to achieve the only goal of this book: to transform the reader by inciting his curiosity and ultimately by awakening his enlightening amazement at the *unveiled mystery* of each abstraction treated like a “character” of the narrative “performance”.

Each “abstraction” is assigned a chapter. And each provides an answer to the question above: *from what* and *how is music made*? It is only here that logic intervenes. One that is even more necessary, the more abstract – i. e. *invisible* and *non-referential* – the object it is applied to is – music itself. The logic of the discourse *about* music will have to be, in this case, exquisitely

“forged”. The architecture of the book’s content is simple, and therefore effective. I would say even of an *elegant consistency*. And in total agreement with composer Edison Denisov’s statement: “If the score looks bad in one place, it will certainly sound bad in that place.” Hence the conclusion: the author of this book organized his text as a “score” and conceived the narrative dramaturgy literally in terms of an “orchestration”.

The consecution of the ten (actually nine) chapters numbered accordingly is organized like an ascending “slope” – from (more) simple to (increasingly) complex. The author himself confesses: *Essentially, I was showing that musical thinking follows (at least in the initial stages of the work) the uncertain paths of induction rather than the implacable paths of deduction. Induction, as is known, is the set of logical processes whereby we rise from the particular to the general, from the phenomenon to the essence* (p. 182).

At the same time, glancing over the *Cuprins* (Contents), we notice the symmetrical ordering of the chapters: 1+4+4+1. Starting with a (self-)explanatory *Introducere* (Introduction), the book concludes with the keystone of the entire discourse – the tenth chapter titled *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking), grounding and legitimizing the idea and concept of the entire book. Two “tetralogies” are located between these extremes, an idea borrowed first from Wagner (*The Ring of the Nibelung* tetralogy) and later from Mahler (with a double symphonic “tetralogy” – Symphonies Nos. 1-4 and 5-8, respectively, as ordered by researcher Irina Barsova).

The first thematic “tetralogy” in Pascal Bentoiu’s book (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5) presents, at first, what generically could be called *the premises*: the habitat and the *primary* constituent elements that populate it. The actual *seeds* and *soil* occur in Chapter 2 [*Materialele și spațiul* (Materials and Space)], which is both normative and explanatory. The materials are the musical sound and its four parameters – pitch, duration, intensity, and timbre. All these four qualities are, in turn, generators of sound space with its dimensions: horizontal (durations), vertical (pitches), diagonal (sic! melodic synthesis) and depth (intensities). And all eight already have their own history as technical and expressive elements, each time different, depending on the historical context from which they are extracted. Eight premises with a distinct ontological potential, proving their fecundity by “summoning” the durations to generate *rhythm* and *rhythms* (Chapter 3), with an openness towards the sonic realization of musical time, while the pitches reveal their hyper-fecundity by embodying the categories of the *melodic* (a synthesis between durations and pitches, Chapter 4) and of the *harmonic* (pitches “layered” in strict simultaneity).

While the simple enumeration generates a true “polemical” struggle between *intensity* and *timbre* (Chapter 2), the author’s demonstration, like many others in the book, turns this “belligerent” negotiation into a genuine

plot with an unpredictable ending. At the same time, *rhythm*, and *meter* (Chapter 3) have also claimed their right, thus causing a further admirably logical demonstration. Here are just two narrative contexts, which have invited me to multiple (re)readings. (Re)readings with “accelerating” effects.

In turn, the melodic (Chapter 4), in the same cumulative “layering” of several horizontal levels, opens access to the (this time) *polyphonic* dimension. Both the *harmonic* and the *polyphonic* are enlarged upon in a subsequent thematic section of the book. But things do not stop here either, because, in a new generative momentum, the *melodic* becomes able to also produce *sound organization systems* such as the *modal* one (Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance), the *tonal-functional* one (the Baroque, the Viennese Classicism and Romanticism) and the *atonal* one (the last European Modernity with the three musical modernisms). These are structures of a completely different order of complexity than the indivisible entities.

The second “tetralogy”, however, is focused on the treatment of some *complex* entities (of structural synthesis) with an advanced degree of abstraction. It is worth noting that the historical order of appearance of each concept is observed in all four following chapters (6, 7, 8 and 9). First, *Dimensiunea polifonică* (The Polyphonic Dimension) (originating in the European Middle Ages), closely followed by *Conceptul armonic* (The Harmonic Concept) (invented in the Enlightenment Baroque), and then by *Conceptul timbral* (The Timbral Concept) (assimilated compositionally only in twentieth-century modernist music). The list ends with *Forma și formele* (Form and Forms) (a concept formulated in a modern sense in the Viennese Classicism). This concept cumulates the contents of both “tetralogies”. And if *polyphony* and *harmony* are *sound organization systems*, and *timbre* is one of the four parameters of the musical sound, then *form and forms* excel at cumulating several states ranging from the simple *compositional scheme* to the *exclusive ontological state* (performed, sonic) of any musical work.

Musical Thinking itself, as the last conceptual frontier of this book, thus proves to be an entity – substance, process, and space –, in which the pressure of the intuitive and pre-formal *a priori* triggers the *will for form* and for its *aural realization in performance*. Hence starts the convergent cumulation of the *elements*, as well as the progressive multiplication of the *relationships* between them, towards an *a posteriori* of the musical composition performed like a “three-headed” fact – *psychological*, *cultural*, and essentially *ontological*. In an obvious *archetypal triunity*. It is in this last quality that it justifies its value, primarily as a representative sign of the thinking that engendered it. It is precisely the *musical thinking* of the composer, who is his own first listener, performer and evaluating critic. How else could Beethoven’s three *Leonores* be explained? How else, if not in a (self-)generative loop, did Bruckner’s

endless versions and editions of his own symphonies occur? Moreover, and already on an inter-subjective level, how else can one explain the successive editions of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, edited in turns by Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Carl Czerny, Bruno Mugellini, Vincent d'Indy, Friedrich Chrysander, Ferruccio Busoni, Hugo Riemann, Gabriel Fauré, Hermann Abert, Alfredo Casella, Béla Bartók etc.? And finally, how else does the musical thinking of Palestrina (the *Saviour*), Bach (the *Unifier*), Beethoven (the *Revolutionary*) and Schoenberg (the *Liberator*) become, one by one, a *Canon of European Music*? Because, through their thinking, the European musical culture was able to achieve successive *reloadings* leading to ever-new evolutionary mutations.

P.S. 1. Pascal Bentoiu's discourse is even more exciting and effective as it is not a monologue, but rather a fruitful polemic between several discursive postures of the author himself. A "monodrama" in several voices. In other words, the narrative is not linear, although it has a precise referential subject in each chapter but refers directly to the image of an *ideational multi-timbral polyphony*, instruments, as well as voices. And not only the space of the discourse is transformed, saturated by the "sections" of several "instruments" and "voices", but even time is re-dimensioned through a *pluriphony* of several referential cultural pasts, engaged by the author as special guests. And even despite the musicological substance of the narrative, these guests make their presence felt through the quotes by which Pascal Bentoiu invokes them as referential *obligato* sections. The author impregnates his discourse with references to ideas, titles of works and books, genres, and styles of thinking (philosophical, poetic, historical etc.) from various time periods and geographies, but which in the text of the book relate in a *consonant* and *harmonic* way, actively participating in the idea of the book. And finally, here is the quintessence of *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking), as the author himself states it:

A piece appears – with obvious chances of survival – if the author can think the music, that is, to operate in his imagination directly with the data of the sound field, if he is able to make and unmake a multitude of musical images, of possible models, from which to choose the ones that are most capable of leading to the intended meaning. And he must have intuited this meaning in the most perfect originality and with the maximum force and depth that he is capable of.

P.S. 2. For me personally, *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking) is still a pretext for voluntary re-readings of the book. This is because each re-reading of the text leaves me with the feeling that some "secret rooms" in the

book are still waiting to be unveiled. I read somewhere that to acquire a proper understanding of Wagner, Schoenberg went through twenty-seven re-readings of the musical drama *Tristan and Isolde*. By himself. On the piano. As for myself, I have given up counting my re-readings of *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking). Because what really matters is the fact that going through Pascal Bentoiu's text amplifies and accelerates me. And thus, this book of indisputable topicality, this text and discourse, these ideas clothed in a captivating narrative, have all remained necessary to me for over three decades.

P.S. 3. The first and only printed edition of the book was published in the distant year of 1975, by Editura Muzicală (Music Publishing House), in Bucharest. I got acquainted with the text in the not-so-distant year of 1990, when I arrived in Romania to continue my musicological studies. Indeed, it took me multiple readings of Pascal Bentoiu's "essay" to finally understand that I was dissatisfied with the "imprisonment" of these ideas of undeniable topicality within an "ancient" temporality and a visibly worn-out polygraphic body. At the same time, it really puzzled me to find that such a sample of musicological excellence had not been claimed as an imperative necessity and was lying forgotten on a shelf of some conservatory's library, as a marginal work of a famous composer. I considered it a tremendous injustice that this truly valuable piece of writing of such formative and heuristic power was excluded from the institutional-didactic circuit instead of acquiring its rightful place on the mandatory reading list. Even more so as *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking) was presented as a second volume, like a continuation of a previous book – *Imagine și sens* (Image and Meaning), published in the even more distant year of 1973 by Editura muzicală of the Composers' Union, in Bucharest.

It had become obvious that *Gândirea muzicală* (Musical Thinking), along with *Imagine și sens* (Image and Meaning), had to be republished. I re-typed the text of both volumes, grateful for the opportunity to indulge myself in yet another reading of some already intimately familiar lines. The page type area was also changed to a more adequate one, to allow for a more comfortable reading experience. And all this because, in my strong opinion, the republication of a book of such musicological calibre and obvious topicality was stringently necessary.

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