

## Reflections on organic music

(Lecture for the symposium on contemporary music at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest 2015)

This paper is called “Reflections on organic music” because – if I understood it correctly – we have been given a free choice of topic. For that reason I decided to use this opportunity to refine/polish my thoughts on my own compositional approach that – until now – I have been writing down on scraps of paper without any order. I believe that the issue which I want to briefly describe has broader applicability in present day composition and that my example can provide at least a partial guidance to understand contemporary views on music. Not that I would consider myself a representative of the young generation, but I feel that many young composers share today something in common; something that unites their musical language. Time and again I am becoming convinced that despite countless number of approaches, it is not possible to avoid the impact of globalization, global changes in the society and most importantly the technical development that teaches us ever since our childhood to think differently.

When speaking on the “organic music” I am referring to a set of compositional techniques that I began to develop on my study-internship on The Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in Tallinn. It was a time that gave me enough space to systematically discover the aesthetics of my own musical language and reject the stylistic layers that every young composer needs to work his way through to achieve his (or her) individual expression. This free process of discovering oneself as a composer enabled me to understand how I perceive the music, by which means I am able to express myself and what musical material has the capacity to become semantically principal. First of all I tried to retrospectively bring back almost forgotten memories and impressions from my childhood that shaped my later attitude. I was learning what my musical nature is, which compositions have a special meaning to me and what is causing it. I don’t want to go into psychological details so let’s get to the results of this process. Based on the analysis of my own musical reception I understood that I perceive music through images; (in other words) as a three-dimensional object in space. This kind of synesthesia has always been present in my compositions – unbeknown to me, and it might be the reason why I was repeatedly notified that my music has the ability to evoke images in the listeners’ minds or that it has a “scenic character”. At this point I would like to lean on a well-known statement by Eduard Hanslick that “the content of music is moving sound forms.” Validity of this claim, which was originally intended as a reaction on the Romantic conception of specific musical meaning, is nowadays more than confirmed by the omnipresent music visualizations, whether it is in the form of graphical interface of notational and editing computer programs, audiovisual projects, music videos or the issue of sound spatiality.

Sound, as a form/shape moving in space, became one of the biggest topics of contemporary musical discourse which doesn’t need to be elaborated here. In my short paper I would rather like to focus on sound shape in the mental space of a mind; a sound architecture, so to speak, whose initial impulse subsequently determines the formal shape of the whole composition.

At this point I believe it is necessary to clarify certain aesthetical elements concerning the origin of the organic music. If, in my case, the initial inspiration is a shape or a process,

then it was necessary to create a corresponding technique that would allow me to convert the said sound shape from the mental space into the score. Intuitively, I started to draw these shape concepts on a piece of paper and I noticed a dominance of flowing oval shapes best characterized as conic sections such as a hyperbola, parabola or ellipse. But my intention was not to transfer these mathematical functions into the musical material with an engineering-like accuracy. I wanted to change a smooth gesture with all the points of its imaginary trajectory initially mainly into a melodic line. That's why I systematically avoid the fragmentariness and the heterogeneity of the used musical material which is used for example in multi-style collages. I understood that the shapes I drew are "biomorphic" because their natural occurrence can be observed mainly in the organic nature. The organic nature with its processes and morphology inspires me the most when I am creating the architecture of a new composition. This is manifested for instance during the rhythmical segmentation of the melodic lines which I compare to the characteristic trajectory of raindrops running down a window pane. Artists of all disciplines have always taken inspiration from the nature. In the last century alone it was the Art nouveau, organic design or the organic architecture (for example Frank-Lloyd Wright, Antoni Gaudí, Makovecz Imre or the blob architecture by Jan Kaplický). But it was only the development of a wide discourse on the sound spatiality and the new technical possibilities that allowed us to fully reflect upon musical forms as architecture in space. With my approach, the compositions become "living organisms" whose shapes and processes smoothly change from one to another. Usually they are based on a common set of rules and selected material – a genetic code of the composition, so to speak. I realize this is a completely holistic point of view.

The specific understanding of time and of its relativity plays a key role in the process of shaping the form. My presumption is that the musical silence represents the timelessness, while a rhythmical acceleration or retardation means shrinking or stretching of the sound events in the course of time. This leads to constant variations of metric units in different zones, during which the time continuously stretches and shrinks. Such bar lines function merely as partial guiding points or a grid for the stream of music. I am still working with a traditional notation system without using the proportional notation, because I find satisfaction in solving specific rhythmical constructions which are firmly fixed and do not allow any improvisation. The compositional work with several music streams, each possessing seemingly different logic, becomes a work with events passing in different times.

This technique has its roots in the history as well. For instance, the medieval notation allowed free flow of voices. The Baroque period has freshened its motoric rhythms with melodic decorations. Music of Romanticism substituted the stiff and strictly metric notation system typical for the Baroque and Classicism with a relaxed agogics which in turn emphasized distinctiveness of interpretation. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when certain school of thoughts revived early polyphonic way of thinking and replaced it with systematic polyrhythmics, polymetrics or stratophonics. The most inspiring personalities in this field (in my humble opinion) are Charles Ives, Iannis Xenakis – who was the first one to think about music as an "architecture in motion" and György Ligeti whose *Volumina* I personally consider to be one of the first organic score ever (if I do not count certain realizations of some graphic scores).

In contemporary music we can track down similar tendencies in vector compositions of Erkki-Sven Tüür, in music of Thomas Adès or Per Nørgård. The opposite of these stylistic tendencies is formed in the general sense by the punctualism, neoclassical currents and

some types of the minimal music, whose fragmentariness or motoric movement do not correspond to the “biomorphic” aesthetics.

I already mentioned perception of sound spatiality as one of the most discussed conceptions of today, and now I would like to comment on my own opinion which doesn't concern the spatial distribution as much as shaping/modeling of the sound itself and which corresponds with my mental images.

When dealing with the music composition as an organic image, I have several possibilities how to make this image three-dimensional. First of all, there is the dynamic shaping/modeling, which I understand as a tool to create abstract distance from the source (i.e. the louder the sound is, the closer it feels). By using the dynamic waves I am trying to achieve the three-dimensionality of the “surface” of the sound area. The instrumentation modeling allows us to arrange sound objects on an imaginary vertical line from top to bottom and vice versa (we, for example, feel very naturally the bass tones are positioned lower which is of course caused by the physical properties). The distribution of sound objects over the horizontal is ensured by rhythmical processes – I already mentioned their time importance. All those pauses/delays, accelerandos and ritardandos cause “rippling” of our usual continuous perception of time. I am deliberately not mentioning the articulation which I consider to have a secondary quality of a color. If we imagine these three kinds of sound shaping/modeling as axes x, y and z, then we get an abstract space for three-dimensional objects. The memory and the spatial fantasy play a crucial role for invoking this three-dimensional effect. I'd like to emphasize that mine subjective impressions don't have to be necessarily experienced by all listeners. But I consider it important, that this way of thinking gives rise to a compositional technique which enables me to fully express myself.

Positioning of musicians in space also plays a significant role for my compositions. In this matter I don't consider myself to be a systematically progressive author, but I would like to demonstrate how the organic way of thinking influenced the spatial arrangement of orchestration on two examples. In an orchestral piece called “The melancholic chicken” I developed the organic techniques thoroughly for the first time and I worked with two contrasting principles – one was dynamically organic and the other strictly metric. At the point where metric passages unravel semantically, I let the orchestral players march in groups in various directions to bring a programmatic idea into the otherwise pure/absolute music. And in the Violin concerto I work with the so called bipolar arrangement of voices, where the score is symmetrically divided into two identical halves in a similar way as the human brain has two hemispheres. Movement of the sound then occurs between these two spheres surrounding the soloist.

Now it remains just to mention the harmonic element of my compositions which does not have a clearly defines system. Most commonly I proceed from a predefined interval selection, from tonal series or modality. My piece called “Head Ood” which you will be able to hear at the concert, was created on the basis of particular intervals that were subsequently connected into symmetrical interval chains that function both harmonically and melodically.

The nostalgic mood and intimate emotions that literally established the shape of this composition were also important, because the emotions also have their own movement. As for the chords that I prefer, I would like to mention firstly the regular changes of minor and perfect intervals from which the quarter-fifth sequences separate. With these I worked in the Violin concerto. The foundation stone at the very beginning of this concerto was the tonal selection, the genetic code which determined the following harmonic development

and whose two strands of this double helix are comprised of two descending fourths over the circle of fifths. Resulting tonal matrix allowed reading of chords in verticals, horizontals, diagonals and groups of related tones from left to right so that the declining sequential character was always present. At the end of the piece the direction turns the other way round however, which causes a brand new quasi harmonic perception of the tonal material.

In this brief introduction into my musical attitude I tried to advocate the organic music as a compositional technique that is created by transferring a mental image transferred into the score. That's why it is more fitting to talk about the architecture of the composition, instead of its dynamic form, because an abstract spatial frame as a sound object is constructed, instead of the traditional dynamic form plan. Main aesthetic principles used are gestaltism, as opposed to elementarism, homogeneity as opposed to heterogeneity, and heterophony as opposed to homophony. The craftsman technique adapts to these requirements and is therefore constantly developed in the spirit of the concept. I find the main inspiration for composing new pieces mostly in biomorphic natural shapes and processes, as well as in human gestures, speech and emotions.

As for the future I wish to develop the whole methodology of the organic music and master the characteristic compositional techniques to such an extent that I could realize all my visual concepts and perhaps even pass it on the listeners. This is just one way how a natural human gesture and an close musical form is finding its way to contemporary music.

Thank you for an attention

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(Prague, May 2015)