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Phenomenology of materials and field of decisions.  
Some reflections on the art of composing.

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## 1.

In the following pages, we would like to start with some reflections about music as “art of composition”. Certainly the arts in general could be characterized in this way. But already the current language, which sometimes implicitly contains valuable clues for analysis, recognizes the “composition” as an eminently musical act. First of all, we call composer the composer of sounds.

Perhaps this occurs because a painter or a storyteller goes - or they seem to go - just beyond the materials they use, words or colors, to achieve what they represent visually or verbally, and we, in our turn, are careful to seize in the painting that part of the world which is represented through colors; reading a novel, we live the trials and tribulations that are parts of the story. The same cannot be said, however, in the field of music. In a piece of music no part of the world is represented, and if there are ups and downs, these are ups and downs of sounds. For the musician, sounds don't occur like tools that must be used for a purpose that goes beyond them in more or less extensive way, but like materials that are themselves the foundation of artistic practice. This is why this practice is eminently a compositional practice: a practice of putting together, establishing orders and relationships. The result of this process is a musical construction that claims to be taken exactly as it is, with its relationships and forms of connection.

## 2.

Were we to look at this issue more closely, many complications and perhaps some reason for discussion may arise. But we are not interested in clarifying to what extent the difference between music and other arts is well founded; instead it is helpful for us referring to this difference in its less subtle and more evident form.

The sound materials are already in front of the musician. They are the

problem. The musician must make decisions. We could say that our reflection on the art of composition take place entirely between these two focal points: the materials on the one hand, the decision on the other. Such a statement seems rather obvious at first. Yet when we try to examine it more closely it turns out to be full of difficulties. Its meaning is much less cut-and-dried than it seemed at first glance, and - according to one or the other interpretation - divergent routes can start.

We need to ask: what is meant with “materials” and what with “decisions”? The first word is opposed to the second, from the point of view of the areas of meaning that they seem inevitably to involve. The first word evokes the material as an inert objectivity, which has no intrinsic order and awaits some shaping, while the word decision seems even to contain the essence of voluntary action: the eminently subjective marked trait of activity is not, after all, the mere execution of an action, the pure and simple doing something - that may mechanically takes place or otherwise under the imperative of a purpose. It is rather just the decision: we might say: I am questioned by my decisions. I will do this and I do: I decide.

Now the projection of a similar conception must be thought in relation to the problem of composing. It certainly suggests an image of compositional activity that appears immediately, in many ways, controversial: on the one hand, it is perhaps too simple, on the other it does not correspond to what a composer really makes. According to this image the subjectivity of the composer stands in front of the material as a creative subjectivity, which is able to infuse in soulless and lifeless matter the form which it needs to live as a work.

Conceived in this way, both decision and material become pure abstractions. Instead we should draw attention - first of all - to the fact that the creative subjectivity is always immersed in a historical dimension - and this naturally involve the understanding of its decisions, which are necessarily subject to the constraints determined by historical relativity.

On the opposite side: a notion of material as a mere sound material is too weak, because the material always has a linguistic mediation: it is never given neutrally, but it is always suggested to a musician within a musical tradition.

Speaking of linguistic mediation is the same as speaking of historical mediation - both problems are encapsulated one in the other. Perhaps it is already wrong to talk of "material": we should instead speak of "language". What is before the composer is not merely material, but it is first language and this is why - beyond any more precisely consideration of this term, whose meaning can be

very broad and controversial - the composer is part of a tradition.

When we speak of tradition - I want to notice - we should not necessarily push or look back far away. What just has been new, almost in a whisper, becomes tradition.

### 3.

We want now to reflect on this point. In fact, this objection, which seems entirely reasonable, cannot be understood only as a critical adjustment of the previous position, but as its total reversal. What do you mean by talking about a dive in a historical dimension, or by referring to a tradition of composing with which the composer has to compete with in various forms of acceptance or rejection? According to the answers we give to these questions, we may take a lot of very different roads.

Let's suppose, for example, to emphasize the continuity of development: in this case the components of decision and subjective action could be weakened. Who underlines this aspect regards any transitional moment, and also any truly innovative element, even an event of break with the past, as a phase of musical language in its development, which has its own internal logics, connected or even dependent on a broader socio-historical logics, with its own necessary direction. The center of this view is the musical language itself, dynamically regarded as an evolving language - as a language which is continually being modified.

A very significant example of this attitude is precisely the Vienna's School: to show the depth of the break with the musical past, it is necessary to assume an approach extraneous to its position. Schoenberg has always insisted on the need that leads to the overcoming of tonality, on natural evolution of musical language. Berg and Webern, too. Therefore the focus falls not on the decisions the decisions taken on language, but on the development of language itself as a necessary development - suggesting an explanatory model that survives in a surprisingly large extent even today among theorists, historians and musicians.

From such point of view, what sense can speaking of compositional decisions have? Actually it would be possible to argue that the component of choice is only a simply psychological detail, a psychological facade, something merely apparent, according to the dual value - negative, positive - of the term "appearance": the decision is the place where it appears, on the psychological-individual level, something that belongs to a trend that overcomes this plan

and that is instead part of the deep historicity of musical experience. Here we should search for the reality, in relation to which the decision is a mere appearance - in a psychological sense: therefore, irrelevant fiction.

This direction of thinking has a philosophical justification - perhaps more than one, since it refers to an idealistic, and more generally historicist, view of reality and culture events: however it can also be expressed in empirical and sociological terms. Calling attention to the fact that such approach has a philosophical justification or even more than one, doesn't mean at all that it is flawless from theoretical point of view. On the contrary: it is exposed to the debate and controversy, as always it happens precisely in the context of philosophy. We are not obliged to accept it as such - as someone claims.

To show how this approach can become a problem let's try to project it on the present, which is the original place of historicity.

History is not something that begins in the past, crosses the present and continues into the future. The present, in turn, is not merely a state of transition: it is instead the primary state of time in which our lives take place and from which we start to reconstitute the horizon of the past and to build the future. The history has a center and source, and we, by living in present, are in this center and origin.

To this remark we must add another of great significance: looking at the past belongs in principle to a historical point of view, but this look tends to turn into a kind of necessity something that was not a necessity, tends, as we have said, to weaken the component of choice and decision.

This already happens in our personal lives. If we look at our past events - marked by crucial steps that have guided our lives in one direction rather than another - we tend to weaken the component of the decision and to accentuate the component of necessity. There are several circumstances that facilitate and simplify this inclination. For example: the decision, with his characteristic openness to a variety of possible paths, after its completion has become a matter of incontrovertible fact. Having permanent knowledge of the openness of our decisions took in past would be burdensome in terms of personal experience. Of course this remark cannot be inserted as such within our context, however it is not entirely out of it.

We must not feel our present as we feel the past; otherwise, we cannot understand the present itself as the original state from which the historicity springs and - instead of living directly its internal tensions - we will take

towards the present an "historical", and therefore paradoxical, attitude.

In relation to our problem, one could believe that even now, in my present, there would be an internal logic of the evolution of musical language. The only difference would be that this logic may not be entirely clear to me. But the crucial point is the idea that there is a necessary tendency in my present, a leading road of the evolution, even if we may be unsure on the road direction, on the tendency to which the future language of music is delivered. Thus, the problem of decision becomes the problem of achieving clarity on the question about this historical destiny. This clarity is evidently a condition to integrate the composition into the supposed leading trend, consequently avoiding an outdated approach.

Earlier on we said that, according to this conception, the compositional decisions are not important as such, but because they are the materialization of a necessary direction of development. The transposition of such an attitude on the field of present is also a transposition from the field of being to that of having to be: the compositional decision is conceived as strictly subordinated to the idea of a necessary trend of development, as if the compositional problem were essentially discovering this trend and adapting to it.

Can you talk of "authentic decision" in such a context of theoretical implications? Certainly not. Thus interpreted, the compositional problem occurs as an alignment to a hypothetical path of musical language. And this confirms what we previously observed about the flattening of the decision to a mere vehicle of language development, consequently to a irrelevant psychological detail.

This is why we have previously noted that the critique of pure and simple opposition between materials and decisions by appealing to historicity can lead to a real reversal of the image contained in that opposition. We are not persuaded by an emphasis on original creativity of the composer, on his ability to mold an inert matter, nor, conversely, by a conception of artistic decision as a mere adaptation to a trend of the development. Both seem far from reality of the attitude that internally characterizes the art of composing.

There is a secret kind of solidarity between one view and the other - that solidarity which inseparably binds together the opposing symmetry: the polarities are dramatically reversed, but one image is reflected in the other as in a mirror.

I believe that trying to understand what is wrong with both approaches has

several interesting consequences not only on the most remote theoretical and philosophical aspects, but also on issues strictly related to compositional practices, or more precisely about attitudes that are behind these practices. They are not consequences of them, but rather their premises. What gives meaning to the way we take the arsenal of compositional practices are ideal guidelines.

So let's start by saying that our first consideration of the compositional art as placed between material and decision - must be lively reaffirmed, although it needs a preliminary critique which takes a road quite different from the previous ones.

This criticism is meant to catch the way in which this opposition is proposed as a rigid polarity, lacking an internal movement, and its first step is not the immediate evocation of a historical dimension that can have no other result the reversal which I have mentioned before. Instead we must realize how misleading are some ideas that seem attached to these words: material and decision. By side of material: inertia, lack of form, pure content of which idealistic aesthetics in its different variants has always spoken; by the side of subjectivity who decides: the creative and forging activities.

If you propose this antithesis, we would note first that there is a phenomenology of the material and that the crucial concept is not the notion of the decision as such, but that of field of decisions, whose boundary is made precisely by phenomenology of material.

That there is a phenomenology of materials means first of all that the materials - in our case the sounds in general - have multiple characters, they differ in many ways and these differences and diversity are the foundation of possible forms of articulation and of possible expressive tension.

Perhaps you can argue: all the people knows this. Perhaps. Best of all, I believe, the composers. A little less, theoreticians, historians, critics, philosophers. In any case we need to underline this point, attracting the attention on it.

When you thought it over, you realize that this should have been the first evidence to be put on the ground of the discussion, because this first evidence immediately shows that it is quite wrong to talk of materials as mere content without form, as if the form could derive only from subjective activity; and in truth, if we talk about expressive tensions within the materials, we allude without a doubt to an internal activity that contradicts their claimed passivity.

I dare to say that maintaining a phenomenology of material means, among other things, that, in their own way, the materials have already made their decisions. Of course the true sense of such a formulation is to show what characterizes this opposition: it is not the sheer polarity between the two poles (with old resonances of the form/content aesthetics), but the shift from one to other pole.

There is activity on the side of the sounds, but there is, in a peculiar sense, passivity also on the other side. We do not trust too much in activistic accentuation of the verb "to compose". More precisely, we should not assume that this emphasis covers whole area of this word meaning. Maybe we may represent the composer foremost as a great listener, as someone who hears sounds even when there is no sound around, as a visionary of sounds, if I may say so. This great listener hears, meanwhile, the decisions of sounds.

But saying this is not enough: at the same time, it must be re-evaluated the subjective moment of the choice, according to a set of considerations that inevitably brings back our theme, in a new way, to its historical dimension.

Such a re-evaluation starts from the observation that the peculiarities and differences among the sounds and in the forms of scalar order, the differences between consonance and dissonance, of course, and even before, the differences of timbres with their expressive latencies, and so on, are only able to delineate areas of pure possibilities: these areas determine the range within compositional decisions may act. No decision, no choice is possible, if a field of decisions and choices is undetermined.

Of course we also take note of the fact that the sound materials as materials of composition are in any case in front of the composer in the grip of a compositional tradition, they are ordered in a language - a expression which alludes to history and culture. But this problem, which someone could raise polemically against the position that I am exposing, is indeed a problem, not a matter of fact significant as such.

Any musical construction can be conceived as a stratified object, according to layers that are at different levels of depth and accessibility. But we must not conceive the stratification as a simple horizontal juxtaposition of planes.

Instead, many people regard musical construction as if it were simply a layer of pure sound on which is superimposed a layer of musical meaning, which also tends to erode and to dissolve the layer on which it leans. According to this opinion, these senses are in music through and through a contribution of historical and cultural dimension, and consequently listening should be a

"historical" listening. But this means that listening should grasp every moment of the musical development as a stylistic feature recognizably belonging to a language that is familiar to the listener with all its rules. This historicity of listening, this apprehension of musical structure as a linguistic structure, should be therefore a prerequisite of understanding itself.

When you thought it over, such an idea is put forward to account for the difficulty of approach to more recent music - for example, when we appeal to a habit not yet acquired in respect of the new timbres and syntaxes. Even in this case the "historicity" of listening become a condition of comprehension - a condition that, evidently, is not yet satisfied.

Against this, we may venture to say that a diminished seventh chord is first of all a sound with a certain quality, which can be performed here and now as if it were without history and without a name, and yet as such we may find it musically interesting. Exactly the same thing we say, closer to our times, about the violin played behind the bridge or with the wood of the bow, or about the sounds obtained with new various instrumental techniques that have by now history, name, tradition and notation in twentieth-century music.

Obviously we are trying here to erode the ground for another false opposition that is part of current opinions: music and sound are often fixed as rigidly opposite poles each other, in order to remove as much as possible sound from the horizon of music.

Even in regard to this new opposition, we tend instead to assert the idea of much more complex plots, as well as the idea of possible shifts, of complicated intersections between the "linguistic" and "prelinguistic" level.

It must be noted that the phenomenological laws are not just before the musical construction, but they interact in various ways in the perception precisely because it is a perception of musical construction. There is not on one side the sound object - purely perceived, with its typical perceptual structures - and on the other side the musical object as a cultural object. But there is an interaction between the different layers of meaning and purely perceptual layer that flows throughout.

Needless to say, this also shows how simplistic is to speak of a mere historicity of listening in the meaning we mentioned earlier. The process of listening fluctuates between the historical tradition and its margins; it ambiguously oscillates between traditional element and perception as such. Removing this oscillation would abolish the internal vitality, the charm of the song. In general

there is no genuine musical listening that is a pure listening of stylistic formulas, and no sound may be attractive only as expressive convention, as a pure linguistic fact, and naturally also as pure perception.

At the same time, grasping the presence of stylistic forms, the knowledge of their evolution as belonging to the history of a language is a prerequisite for penetrating the musical work in complexity of its meaningful layers.

We find useful such a reflection which requires a rethinking of music's problem as language and thus also of its historical character, perhaps even more clearly, in the other direction of our problem.

We can say that there is a normal language of music - this implies a prevailing language, the existence of rules recognized as valid, which all together are the norm in a sense of the word that certainly alludes to a prescriptive aspect. This assertion essentially means that many decisions and many choices have already been taken, among different possibilities proposed by sound-space according to its phenomenological eminent characters. And they were based on thoughts that guide the musical imagination when it is activated towards a meaningful project. Of course there may be other reasons, other thoughts, other imaginative guidelines. Many decisions have already been taken, but we could take a new decision. This seems to be the structure of the situation - therefore we are far away from the idea of an act of the spirit that infuses into the matter the soul that it needs; so much we are far away from a conception of the artistic decision as a purely psychological detail which disappears facing to the necessary trends of a going-on-temporality.

But if the situation has this structure, we can see even from the side of decisions the salience of the fact that the phenomenological field does not disappear at all behind the linguistic forms and conventions: on the contrary it remains always in the background, and it gets closer or further away, depending on the position we take up on to the language itself.

We could even say that it is particularly close when we change the rules, when instead of adhering to decisions already taken, we take new decisions.

It is of utmost importance understanding that you do not go from an old rule to a new rule as if you switched between chapters of an ongoing grammar of music. This were nothing but a way of assuming the past as model for historicity.

Instead we must say that in changes of rules we use the opportunity to move

towards the fringes of language, that are also the fringes of its historicity, to revive the field of phenomenological possibilities, proposing alternatives that are contained therein.

I think that this has a significant illustration just in the trends of twentieth-century music. Among these trends, we can perhaps include a tendency to deprive the musical material of its historical connotation, or at least it seems interesting to take a point of view from which the recurred praise to innovation, the overcoming of the rules of the previous music, the search of new sound-materials - all this can be interpreted as a radical questioning of the historical-linguistic component and as an explicit and radical re-enactment of the phenomenological possibilities which are the background of any change in the rules.

But if we can take a such a point of view, it is clear that we must exert a criticism of what I would call the most recent prejudices - those prejudices which are gradually increased in a century that has always believed to apply, in terms of theory and practice of music, a sort of permanent criticism of prejudice. But a century is long, very long. In a century of music, old habits gave way to new practices which are not recognized as new habits which soon will become old. The new music piles "conventions" and "stylistic formulas" up. Many temporary opinions become consolidated prejudices, in truth, not at all harmless from theoretical point of view, and sometimes, with the mediation of current metaphors, they become nothing other than clichés.

A good example is the metaphor of wearing out of a musical language: as if, with the passage of time, it wears out such as a chair on which we have been sitting too long. In this metaphor we call particular attention on objective slope of its meaning: it implies that we could to account about the musical processes only in terms of empirical or philosophical sociology. These processes are instead derived from investments and disinvestments of meaning which involve the field of the decisions and the horizon of thoughts that lead the musical imagination.

The same objective slope, moreover, occurs also in the so widespread idea that the enrichment of the tools of musical expression is a kind of necessity that is part of the inevitable progress of music. Often this enrichment is understood in terms of mere quantity, whereas it is important to emphasize that the simplicity and the relative poverty of tools are in fact consequences of decisions and they have nothing to do with a meaningful notion of progress in art. Otherwise we should consider the advent of opera as a step back with respect to the polyphonic structures, or a gothic cathedral more advanced than a

romanesque church because of the number of its pinnacles.

Perhaps many people agree that such an idea of progress is not admissible in the field of art, but often without realizing that in line with such a position must be rejected also the idea that there are, in an obvious way, regressive and progressive trends in music and that these trends can be evaluated with an elementary temporal criterion, more precisely with a criterion that suppose a too elementary conception of temporal evolution.

Just on this point I would like to conduct our final conclusions. Our critique towards the idea of the necessary trends - and towards a conception of the musical language and of its historicity which flattens the element of the decision and of the thoughts on which the decision is based - can be reformulated and summarized in an interpretation of temporality and particularly of the present. The problem that we have previously mentioned deserves to be briefly resumed.

When we say "now", this little word seems to indicate a reliable and certain time as the little word "here" clearly indicates the place where we are. But things are otherwise if the present is thought in the fullness of its historicity and not as an abstract and empty temporal dimension. Instability and indeterminacy are essential to present. It should not be conceived as a place precisely situated between two stations of a railway line. To this way of conceiving the present, which can be summarized in a railway metaphor, we are tempted to oppose an airmail metaphor: while on the moving train, we can always say we are in a clearly determinated point between two railway stations, in view from above we are dealing with an open and indeterminate space, we are at the intersection of several ways that form a network of sites; words as "forward" and "backward" lose most of their meaning, and instead of looking back and forth, we turn our eyes for looking around.

But what has this to do with the circumstances and the events of music? It is not difficult to answer this question. In one hundred years of its evolution, the music of the twentieth century offered us an extraordinarily broad horizon of creative possibilities, discoveries, inventions, projects. Nevertheless you can have a justified feeling that this breadth, this wealth of musical experience is constantly threatened by a too elementary idea of the historicity, conceived as a thread that is behind us; of this thread we must grasp the head - this must be the action that should represent the absolute rule of our decisions.

This too elementary idea claims necessary trends, main roads of evolution - indeed the term "main road" can hardly be used in the plural. The main road

is only one. The complexity of present, the fact that we are always in a tangle of streets that do not already have any direction, but the direction must be built again and again - this all cannot be seen by one blocked eye which is not able to "turn around".

It is evident that the railway-conception of music - as I would like call it - is a reductionist idea par excellence, there is no need to insist particularly on this point.

But reductionism here involved does not concern only the potential expressed by twentieth-century music: it also causes a decrease of the multi-dimensionality of musical expression. This multidimensionality is simply what I would call the humanity of music: its aptness to accompany the dreams of a child in his cradle with a lullaby, for example, but also every little or great human event: from Tafelmusik to deep meditations on the ultimate meaning of life and death. In place of this, we find a kind of one-dimensional obsession which of course can only cut off from "authentic" music anything that approaches the daily life, assigning to music only the task to express the Sublime, the Great Message, either strongly characterized in metaphysical meaning, to which music seems predestined, or in a political one. But the chain of consequences does not stop at all at this point. The idea of a Great Message is not associated with the simple composer: one who knows thoroughly the art of composing, a knowledge which in every age, including our own, requires hard work, experience and learning - one who wields mastery of this art - I would like say: the owner of music. Ambitious word! Nevertheless it now appears very weak if the composer become one who brings a Great Message. In this case he assumes in fact the figure of the Genius.

Of course: a genius can really exist, and he is a very mysterious being. Instead, the "figure of the genius" is nothing but a philosophical and imaginative construction, historically out of date: a romantic construction. In our century that has so often loved to pose as a despiser of romanticism, have we this figure forgotten? Far from it.

With this issue we recall to the beginning of our discussion. Perhaps it might seem that the figure of the genius is particularly suitable for an idea of creativity as a divine breath on materials we mentioned earlier. Instead, much deeper, we should be aware of the solidarity between this image of creativity and its reversal, between the emphasis on abstract creative freedom and the flattening of choice and decision. It would be a serious mistake to assume that in this figure of the genius the problem of the decision fulfills a significant role. The opposite is true.

The genius is in principle a passive figure, he is mere vehicle of decisions which occur elsewhere: in the anonymous depths of the unconscious, more or less enriched with the metaphysical flavors of hegelian Absolute Spirit, in the teleology of history - no matter where! However the genius is always pure vehicle, passive medium.

Therefore the examination of the concept of decision we propose from beginning, represents a kind of precondition closely connected with our results.

