

Giovanni Piana

**Philosophy of Music and its Aims.  
A Brief Account**

1998

Published in «Axiomathes», n. 1-2 1998.



### 1. Explanatory part

There are some advantages in the limited time given to a speaker during meetings and conferences. In this way, one is forced either to debate a specialized topic or, alternatively, to present a synthesis of a very general approach, through simplifying arguments and explanatory examples.

The latter is rather a risky path, as one is open to criticism that could be pinned on the oversimplified structure of the arguments and their results. On the other hand, the advantages are that one can let his thoughts focused on the crucial theoretical issues, in order to let the listeners evaluate the consistency of the guidelines.

An important part of the philosophical meditation on music today has to be developed, I believe, in a close connection with music theory: but obviously such declaration cannot claim to have a clear meaning if we don't make clear the sense in which we are going to use the term «music theory».

The first perplexity has to be addressed on the use of the *singular* form. Couldn't it be that, as it is suggested by many, to say «*The music*» is improper and that the plural form should substitute it? By accepting the multiplicity of musical languages, there should be a corresponding variety of theoretical formulations.

On the contrary, I would like to underline as clear as possible and without ambiguity this point: the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of music languages, and so, maybe, of corresponding theories – into a more or less strong meaning of the term – doesn't interfere in any way with a discussion which

poses the problem of building a «music theory» from scratch.

At least, this acknowledgement does not prevent a discussion at the level of *general concepts*.

Certainly, such a question would require a wide debate. Nonetheless – once we have decided to go straight to the point, this task could be circumscribed and restricted using fewer examples.

Things may be presented as a simple matter of terminology, and in this way perhaps we can reach not too obvious and usual conclusions.

### **First example**

Within the tonal language, we know that the word «tonic» has a clear and fixed meaning: it is a note that has «major importance» inside a musical excerpt and it's this main importance that confers a structuring role to it.

However, we also know that, if we limit ourselves to a similar characterisation, we certainly could not expect to have defined in a suitable way the concept of «tonic» in the tonal language: we haven't specified important conditions that concern both the means by which this «importance» is put into emphasis and the specific way, according to which it can absolve a decisive role in conferring unity and articulation.

To state it briefly, the tonic is nothing without the triad, and without well-defined ways of how to treat the triad. At least, consonance and dissonance relations are here involved, following a complex plan of rules.

There is more than one reason to reflect on this observation.

At first sight, in fact, it would appear that we limit ourselves to ascertain how vague is the characterisation of the proposed concept of tonic – bringing up at the same time the importance of a more precise characterisation.

But it is not difficult to acknowledge that our first characterisation could be considered, not just as a mere weakening of the meaningful and relevant concept of «tonic», but as a characterisation, that, thanks to its weakness, shows the

problem of a more general use of the term and, therefore, of the corresponding concept.

The point is that we can imagine different alternatives that can be used in order to assert the importance of a note and to give it a structuring role. We could ask whether, in presence of an elementary lullaby or of an singsong of three or four notes, in which the importance of a note is brought to attention through pure and simple repetition, we may speak of a «tonic» or we must reject this term as a *pure projection* of a framework of ideas that is completely unrelated to this musical object.

I believe that the answer to this question is, so to speak, in our own hands. In fact, no one prevents us from using the term in a more general meaning, not connected to the tonal language. One could speak of a misunderstanding projection (or of an unjustifiable interpolation), only if there would be an evidence of their presence in our description.

In my opinion, after about a century in which musicology itself has made a thorough criticism of «prejudice» and «projective attitudes», it seems to be the case to worry about this risk less than before, and, at same time, to start seeing reason for an «extended» use of terms.

### **Second example**

As a second example, we could call attention to the following point: certain relations, which have a special musical significance when integrated into a complex of additional conditions, do have a significance even out of these conditions.

For instance, one speaks of a harmonic link between two triads when they have at least one note in common.

One must therefore admit that, if there were a harmonic link between two triads, then this link would be there anyway, even if there did not exist something like the tonal language with its complex rules of triad succession.

Relations like these do not arise *in virtue* of a language: their existence is not due to the fact of having been subjected to a set of rules in one of the historical languages of music.

It is worth noting that a similar link is actually perceived,

it is a perceptual fact – and so it should be!

This remark opens up other problems regarding the first example. But it rejoins with our first example: both strengthen their meaning each other. In our second example, we show, as in the first, a general *possibility* that regards the *connection between groups of sounds in succession*.

Needless to say, the fact that it deals with a very elementary possibility cannot represent an objection.

Instead one could consider this «reduction to the elementary case» as a real method of argumentation: it consists in reducing a big problem to a minute case to which the interlocutor will easily and unthinkingly give his approval, given the scarcity of the case. Perhaps he doesn't realize that he is acquiring a commitment, maybe for him undesirable, regarding the chain of admissions that he could be forced to do from this modest beginning.

### **Third example**

Likewise, what we call «a neighbouring note» or «a passing note» is to be considered as simple perceived configurations before becoming meaningful concepts within a specific analytical framework.

One can also advance the idea that such structures have a richness of meaning that tend to overcome the particularity of those contexts. Perhaps, with the concept of «neighbouring note» and «passing note» we are not obliged to follow a way that infallibly takes us to tonal language, much more: to a particular way of analysing it.

It's as if one indicates, with words like these – perhaps with all the basic words of musical theory – a path that quickly changes, bifurcation to bifurcation, into an entangled maze of roads.

#### Fourth example

With the word «chord» in the framework of a tonal language theory one means unavoidably the triad. In a more ample use, *and not without any problems*, a set of thirds superimposed one on the other. At any case *in this language there are no dyads*. Only strictly following this *special* notion of chord, one can speak of «omitted notes». Here we face another concept that absolves a function whose importance is difficult to underestimate in the tonal language *theory* in order to keep its coherence. It is worth drawing attention to this point: the use of «omitted notes» is often proposed without any preliminary critical discussion. This is done to an extent that makes well-founded the suspicion that not everyone *realize how much theory is here implied*.

On the contrary, it seems as if one would expound a simple matter of fact. A note is missing here. *A note has been omitted*.

Similarly, it can sometimes not be easy to explain to a common student of music that without Rameau *there wouldn't be* any notion of «inversion» (if not in a completely different meaning, regarding only the formal structure of interval relations).

In cases like these, it can be noticed the necessity of an *epistemological* consolidation of the notions belonging to musical theory. Even if the need of a epistemology that investigates the statute of concepts in use, that is able to disentangle the components of historical order from those of a properly conceptual order, is sometimes felt when questions arise, too often it is quickly put aside.

The question of a possible generality of notions that can start even from a simple reflection on terminology has a particular importance. So we are certainly free to decide to use the word «chord» to indicate *any* grouping of simultaneous sounds.

If we pay attention to twentieth century music, this notion could appear the most appropriate, even if, obviously, further differences and possible typology will be looked for – as

Persichetti does in his *Twentieth century harmony* [1].

It would however be completely wrong to believe that we find ourselves before *another special* notion of “chord”. There is here no particularity against particularity, instead this is a use of the term in a wider meaning that leaves us free in front of possible specifications.

This need of generality occurs with a particular strength while considering musical events in our century. This circumstance is charged with meaning. It is highly significant here that these events continuously propose the invitation to think again, not only about the problem of a linguistic variety, but also about the old idea of a *general grammar*, arguably according to different viewpoints. Brought into a musical environment, this idea seems to coincide with the problem of a *syntax* of perception that is presupposed by the historical languages of music.

### **Fifth example**

Perhaps our fifth and last example can better explain our previous observation.

A dodecaphonic series is above all a series of sounds; but a series of sounds is also any of our diatonic scales, a mode in medieval ecclesiastical chant, a *murchana* or *raga* in Indian music.

Now, a series of sounds, contemplated in their interval relations, *is not one of the many things that one meets by chance searching in history of music.*

A series of *sounds* is, first of all, a *series* – and relevant possibilities of sound organisation belong to series in general.

We must therefore distinguish two points of view.

On the one hand, paying attention to «history of music» – expression that I employ as a term which means music’s universal history, and not only Europe’s musical history, as it is generally implied – we can reveal in which way men used the series of sounds for expressive purposes.

On the other hand, paying attention to the notion of series as such, we can study the possibilities that are inscribed in the

notion itself of series as general notion (or, if we wish, as mathematical-formal notion). We then can consider at the same time the limitations, but also additional possibilities, that derive from the fact that the series that interest us are formed of sounds, so that we should consider the peculiar relations that the sounds generate with all their potential expressive use.

These two points of view are not in conflict, but they appeal to each other. From such considerations, arise the request to investigate expressive choices in their detailed, specifically historic context, but also to correlate such choices *in the open ground of possible sonorous constructions*.

In my opinion, a philosophy of music is called, above all, to reflect on these topics.



## 2. Polemic part

We don't expect that the idea that was here summarily outlined is really clear in its range and implications. However, more can be said on the attitude that supports it, trying to present it again, always as schematic as possible, in its implicit polemical implications.

What are the previous considerations addressed to? And also: *from what part is it correct to expect consistent criticism on the point of view we sustain?*

Previously, it has been noted the possibility of operating terminological generalisations according to different points of view, and therefore, conversely, the opportunity to reunite, under unitary title, notions that can then receive specifications inside essentially different musical languages. It is therefore possible to consider particular forms of musical expression, belonging to a historical language of music, as examples of structures that have their *phenomenological and logical possibilities* that can be investigated *as such*. This does not mean that one can take away the differences that are part of the historical peculiarity of those structures: but only that one can make use, in analysis, of criteria and conceptual categories that do not have to be necessarily dependent upon this peculiarity.

The stress placed on *possibilities* is also stress taken from *facts*.

However, one should not be too quick in concluding that a similar affirmation would put us without doubt under the

dominion of an unjustified a priori reasoning, and consequently of pure and simple prejudice.

Instead the point is, to express it with an image, that we no longer like the game of blind man's buff, and even less we like to pretend to play this game.

There are music theory books that in effect start with blindfolded eyes. «Music» – what's the meaning of this word? Who knows anything about it? We must go and question people about it, and be ready for any answer. And simply take note of it.

It seems almost certain «that is not possible to talk about music without referring, even in an implied manner, to sound,» so therefore we can accept, «without too much trouble,» that the sound is the minimal condition of the musical fact [2].

The most important passage of this sentence is the little part of it: «without too much trouble» This is, in synthesis, a *forma mentis*: We must never miss the fact that any element represented as universal is always only a hypothesis, as our knowledge of music is never achieved [3]. Even in the statement, modest by its nature, which states «that is not possible to talk about music without referring, even in an implied manner, to sound,» we must feel the presence of a «musical universal».

Anyway, since it is admitted that it is most improbable that the mentioned hypothesis is disavowed by some fact, we can allow ourselves to put aside our methodical anxiety. This is a relief. So this does not worry me «too much.»

*Exactly this point is unacceptable: pretending not to know what in fact is known, to present the most obvious, which in itself has very little significance, as if this were an extraordinary exhibit of empirical research, to believe that the thought is free only when it is suppressed – all this is very wrong, even more so when you look at it from the empirical researcher's point of view, and you want to learn from this research. An explorer, even if he knows nothing about the continent in which he landed, so, as much as it may seem strange, he has already in mind something before and he does not go around by chance, choosing any road or itinerary.*

We are not attacking empirical research. One thing is empirical research and other thing is empiricism as philoso-

phical tendency. Unfortunately, sometimes people find hard to differentiate between the two. An attack on empiricism is wrongly taken as an attack on empirical research, and this is naturally an error that generates tedious misunderstanding.

Our previous considerations effectively pursue the target to avoid what we could call an *empirical circle*: the *hermeneutic circle* leads from sense to sense, and one cannot see upon which facts the senses are grafted; the *empirical circle*, instead, leads from one fact to another, and one cannot see in between an effective relation of sense.

Particularly in musicology, this problem doesn't exist only by regressing to a pre-idealistic era, as the term «empiricism» might allow you to think. In reality the question is far more complex: in fact when the historicism, in his decline, renounces to the ideal support of a «philosophy of history» will rediscover the common places of empiricism.

In Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno a «philosophy of history» still supports heavily the interpretation of the facts: therefore they are swallowed up by interpretation, and the aesthetic judgement, very sure of itself, comes down like an axe on the musical production.

On the contrary, Carl Dahlhaus's position quite rightly recognizes that this intellectual orientation is untenable, but he ends up in a compromise between theory and history and what I have called «empirical circle» is here exemplary represented in all its evidence.

In this connection a few words can be said with reference to *Analyse und Werturteil* (1970), in which the author's position appears formulated with particular clarity [4].

It is clear that, hinting at the subject developed in this text, the points of view drastically change, as we leave the problem of philosophy of music, understood as a reflection on its constitutive notions, and we consider, instead, the problem of an aesthetic appraisal, that has undoubtedly a differently oriented conceptual network of references. The connecting point, in which we are here interested, is the way in which the problem of a theoretical foundation occurs in this different background.

This connecting point is the relationship between «judgement» and «theory» of judgement.

Carl Dahlhaus has indeed perfectly realized the necessity of making reference to some theoretical set-up, particularly when one wants to enter into the field of *musical aesthetics* as a place of issue of assessments: this field itself seems to impose a similar reference.

At the same time he believes not to be able to look for this set-up in an idealistic direction because this would signify falling into an apriorism having no bearing on the things. One cannot fault him on this point.

So Dahlhaus is led to formulate a number of criteria and general categories of a «judgement of value» able to supply the profile of a real theory. Examples of these criteria are: originality, resources of articulation and links, a good quality in compositional techniques, differentiation, integration, compensation and more again. The important point in any case is the following: each criterion is proposed only if he can *supply a factual documentation of its use*, indeed it is in the first place a «historical document», and nothing else. Consequently, his justification is to search only in the frequency with which it occurs within effective exercise of criticism in the past.

On the basis of considerations about frequency, Dahlhaus is even willing to recognize some generality grade that induces a vague a-temporal shade to a few of them. This happens for example for what he calls *compensation*, when he observes that the tendency to compensate the complexity in a musical dimension with simplicity in another appears to dominate in every era. This generality should also be considered as a mere circumstance of fact (some criteria are more recurrent than others). Sometimes he searches *to give an account* through biological and psychological considerations. For example, he writes that «the differentiation and integration, the multiple diversification of parts of a whole, and their functional cohesion, are two aspects of the same development that intertwine and complete themselves: it is a biological law that tends to extend itself to works of art, without however being able to establish if, in the aesthetic field, this law corresponds to an empirical rule or

a postulate, neither if its validity sphere is historically unlimited or rather included within precise limits» [5]. Above all, in this phrase there is a slip from the existence of a biological law – that is evidently felt as a good trampoline to carry out a dangerous jump to generalisation – to an expected tendency of the law itself «to extend itself to works of art», that is a pure speculative fantasy of the author.

In an authentic historical consideration these criteria receive meaning, specification and differentiation according to the philosophical context in which they are inserted. Indeed in this work – needless to say – they are used in such a way to make them as independent as possible from these historical contexts. This weakness of their historical consistency is naturally connected with the need to rely upon something similar to a theory.

But can one ever fulfil this need following such a contorted route? In reality, in our hands at the end there is nothing but a heap of *found objects*, of things picked up on the road: one should even boast about having picked them on the road.

Consequently we can put side by side criteria which are the one the opposite of the other (we can find everything on the road).

This circumstance is so insisted that it manifest itself in a characteristic mode of expression: the little phrase «this does not signify» introduces the formulation of opposed criteria. Often such expression follows one another pushing *a real range of contradictory affirmations* [6].

Obviously Dahlhaus is not at all a supporter of sceptic relativism towards «judgements of value» in field of music. This work aspires to show *a possible objective rooting of aesthetic assessment in facts* which the analysis can highlight: even if, of course, *this does not signify that...* the principles and methods of musical analyse are not already under some sort of aesthetic preconceptions, as it is admitted from the start.

A similar swinging trend is a considerable manifestation of bewilderment: historicism and empiricism have lost their way.

In the end, all is reduced, apart from the refined observa-

tions of detail, of which, as always, Dahlhaus's volume is full – to a pure and simple exhibition of the various replies that have been given to the problem of aesthetic judgement in music.

Undoubtedly: these replies really have been very various. But a similar observation could be only the beginning of a theoretical reflection, certainly not a point of arrival.

Nothing guarantees that this way of submitting the problem, being free of dogmatism, represents an authentic open attitude towards to the multitude of musical languages. At times the complete opposite can be true.

It can happen that, if documented historical relations between different cultures cannot be found, one decrees mutual inaccessibility: every ideal connection is in fact interpreted as a consequence of a idealistic philosophy of history, and refused as such. One will tend implicitly claim, that *which is foreign to our tradition can be respected and tolerated by us as something essentially «other», but it cannot be authentically understood.*

So Dahlhaus says that «between the Japanese, Indian and Occidental European cultures one cannot establish an exterior empirical link, nor conceive an interior relation on the basis of philosophy of history» [7]. This declaration seems, if correctly understood by myself, *to exclude any relation.* Inside the Italian culture that, in the course of a whole century of renewal of ideas around music experience and theory, has produced nothing of significance with regard to musical cultures outside Europe, not only from a theoretical point of view but neither too from a historical, and more simply *informative* point of view, these words sound unfortunately as a legitimization of a backwardness that I think can and must be overcome.

## Notes

[1] Persichetti 1993.

[2] Nattiez 1989, 35.

[3] Nattiez 1989, 49.

[4] Persichetti 1987.

[5] Persichetti 1987, 50.

[6] For example: originality is undoubtedly a criterion of aesthetic judgement; but nevertheless *this does not mean that* «the dependency of music works from models to reproduce or emulate» cannot be aesthetically judged as manifestation of a praiseworthy sense of tradition; besides other things, the possibility of this praise *does not mean that* this dependency «cannot be criticized as attitude of late followers that attempts to avoid the aesthetics necessity of its time» (p. 40). And again: «the material differentiation, that is the richness of musical lexicon established from rhythmic modules, chords, dissonances and melodic groups – all this is, without doubt, a superficial criterion, and *nevertheless we cannot consider it useless*. Only with this criterion we cannot establish an aesthetic judgement, *but it is not correct to underestimate it...*» (p. 51). We can multiply similar exciting quotations.

[7] Dahlhaus and Eggebrecht 1988, 11.

### References:

#### **Persichetti, 1993**

V. Persichetti, *Armonia del ventesimo secolo*, ed. by F. Jegher and Luca Cerchiarì, Guerini, Milano 1993. (Italian translation by A. Serravezza of *Twentieth century harmony*)

#### **Nattiez 1989**

J.J. Nattiez, *Musicologia generale e semiologia*, ed. by R. Dalmonte, EDT, Torino 1989.

#### **Dahlhaus 1987**

C. Dahlhaus, *Analisi musicale e giudizio estetico*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1987

#### **Dahlhaus and Eggebrecht 1988**

C. Dahlhaus and H. H. Eggebrecht, *Che cos'è la musica*, ed. by A. Bozzo, Il Mulino, Bologna 1988.