

Notation and Transcendence in 21st Century Music

This is a slightly changed version of the talk I gave at the IMR Conference on "Notation for Improvisers" at Senate House, University of London, on Feb 9th 2019. I have put back in some paragraphs that I had to cut owing to lack of time...

I first came across recordings of Romanian spectral music around 1996, following which I was able to get Ed Baxter of the London Musicians' Collective to invite Iancu Dumitrescu's Hyperion group to play in London the following year. I then interviewed him and his wife, composer Ana-Maria Avram, for Resonance magazine, we became friends, and I eventually began to play bass clarinet regularly with this ensemble and to write pieces for it, and this has continued more or less up until now.

The Romanian school centred around Ana-Maria Avram and Iancu Dumitrescu differs markedly from the French spectral school. Rather than abstracting structure from spectra as the atemporal basis for compositional structure, the Romanians work directly with spectrally interesting sound material. This means focussing on sound that is dynamic and unstable, and seeking out the vectors of its inner transformation: these vectors eventually become the guiding principles for a sustained work. But how to notate this? Their solution was to develop a hybrid notation in a dialectical relation with the interpretative skills of musicians. So far as musicians went, they used an ensemble formed specially to play their music, and capable of growing an interpretative tradition that would be inherited by incoming new members. So far as notation went, given that classical notation is already hybrid, and dependent on cultures of interpretation, the most salient aspect of Avram and Dumitrescu's notation is not its hybridity but that it constitutes a rupture not only with other interpretative cultures but also with any kind of habitual deployment of skill in response to familiar components of a text. It is this aspect - which appears to have some relation to improvisation - that I'm going to focus on.

1) This is a fragment of Dumitrescu's score for the piece "Collision of Galaxies". What I want to pick out here is, first, **the quality of the space separating the elements on the page**. Essentially this space does not integrate the elements on the page as in a traditional music score. The elements constitute different kinds of information. So at the bottom you have a graphic representation of a continuous computer-generated "tape" part that has its own fixed autonomous timing and obviously does not respond to the conductor. Above that you have a couple of systems that refer more closely to standard notation but which also include graphic signs. Important here is the instruction, not written in the score, but understood as part of an oral culture of interpretation, to define numbered groups above all by the quality of the pause that follows them - a pause that should be lived rather than calculated. Above that is a system containing graphic images, but this time not of a wave-shape but of a group of darker core sounds haloed by some more diffuse sound material. No indication of pitch is given. Above this is a system for cellos and basses that shows attacks and glissandi and sustained tones with accenting. We can imagine that a gap in the staff lines within a box indicates a pause but with no change of approach, whereas movement from one box to another would require a change of approach, from *legno battuto* to *glissando sul pont*, for example. Any box is potentially extendable by the conductor - a factor that starts to make sense when we consider that the timings marked below the computer part are running slower than what we would intuit to be the durations of the boxes. **What I want to draw out from all this is that the total appearance of the score is essentially diagrammatic**, in the sense that the kind of white space between the represented elements does not provide a medium of ready-made integration, but on the contrary calls for the viewer's active participation in drawing connections between unresolved differences in informational type.



Benard Fecit

Fromage de Gruieres et de Gerardmer.

Cheese-Making plate from Encyclopédie: this plate shows very clearly the difference between the integrated visual representation of a scene, in the upper part, and the diagrammatic space of the lower part in which elements present in the scene are now separated by white space to be freely connected by the viewer.

2) The second point to make is that the notation is often of a **statistical** kind. It suggests a way of thinking the global behaviour of a group of elements that are not defined exactly individually. We might say that the notation is a diagram for what could be played but not a codification of an exact set of sounds or actions. Systems are often notated for groups of players, and, by their superimposed individual interpretations of the same notation, the individual players contribute to a total sound. To nullify any tendency to synchronisation, parts are often marked with the instruction to play irregularly. This aspect draws on the traditions of heterophony in Romanian folk musics. But it also refers us to the behaviour of physical matter in its fluid or gaseous forms where the overall characteristic is the outcome of probability, and the individual molecules are moving in ways undetermined by Newtonian physics. The above example is from Ana-Maria's "In Nomine Lucis" and shows clearly her global thinking on how the order of entry of the winds shapes the texture, followed by the rising pitch of the strings, the whole forming a definite but statistical sound-shape.

3) The third point is that in general all musicians play from the score. The conductor and the musicians are seeing the same thing. The score is a performance score for the conductor as much as for the musicians. The presence of the composer as conductor means that the composer's role in interpreting the score is potentially vastly expanded. The corporeal, visual, gestural language of the conductor channels the score towards **a unique sonorous outcome**, and this outcome is not and cannot be determined from the notation. A musical performance is seen as a performance of the unfolding of sound within a totality of circumstances that includes instruments, players, acoustics, time of day, and so on. The subjective centre through which the experience is organised is the conductor-composer. This is where timing and dynamics are most often decided. All attention remains fixed on and channeled through this centre. The musicians are closely held to it. So there is a fundamental difference between this kind of organisation of the attention and what happens in a context of free improvisation. In group improvisation, sound is conceived as dialogical, and the accent is on the direct interactions between the musicians as directly forming the development of the music: in Dumitrescu and Avram's music, sound is conceived as unified and in a state of permanent transition; the accent is on the relation of each musician to the total sound which is being formed through the agency of the conductor and the written score. Every performance aims to register the unique conflux of energies occurring in its time and place: paradoxically it is only through this attention that it can hope to transcend its circumstance.

4) The fourth point to make returns to what I mentioned in my preamble. Often the score does not give us, as musicians, enough information, or else it gives conflicting information. There may be rests but no bars, notes but no staves, staves without notes, numbered groups with insufficient elements, non-existent harmonics: added text may ask for techniques that don't fit the notated material. **The musician has to find what to do from their own resources**. Initially, an incoming musician may not understand this. What is required is to grasp the idea of looking within oneself, not for technical knowledge as such, but for a level of commitment that calls into question one's attitude as a human being to music-making. What is required is the elucidation of a cognitive and affective connection between oneself as an individual who has been born in a given place and time and who's life will end at a further given place and time, and oneself as the person who is present to this moment of music-making in this here and this now.

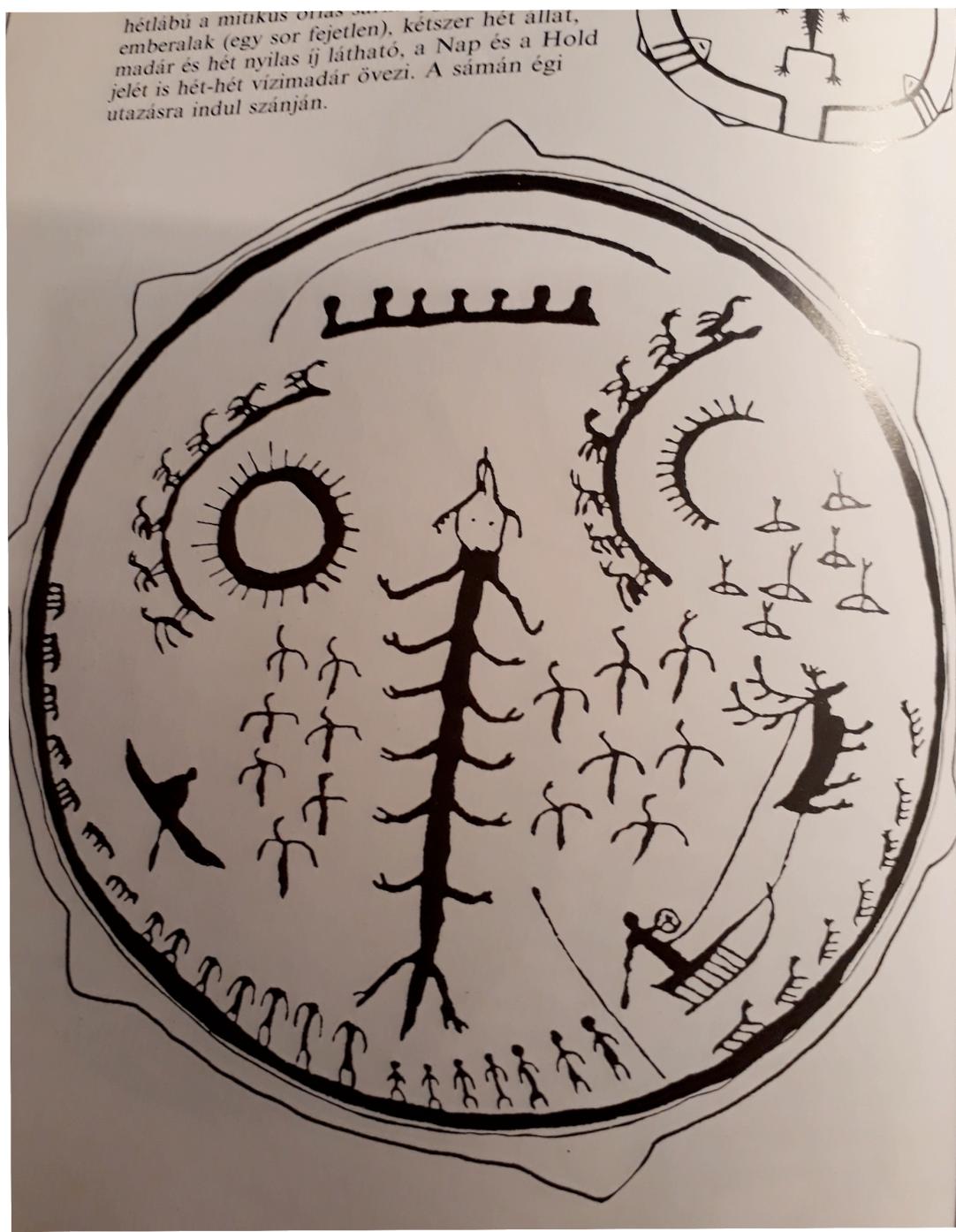
And this brings us again to the concept of transcendence that features in the title of this presentation. I mean by "transcendent" that which is unknowable, or at least beyond the limits of what can be known in a normal way. (I think of so-called "transcendent" curves in 18th century, curves that could not yet be calculated because we did not yet have differential calculus.) Music can put us into states of mind in which the kind of knowledge we have of what is happening is not the normal everyday kind of knowledge. I have argued

elsewhere that this is in fact the case for all aesthetic experience. But we can pinpoint art that seems to emphasise this aspect in particular. This art could then be described as transcendental in the original Kantian sense of concerning itself with how we know rather than what we know - accenting the subjective experience of the knowledge, rather than the knowledge itself. It is very relevant here that Dumitrescu and Avram's music operates a strangeness that is at the same time utterly simple and logical: it contains no melodies, harmonies, themes, regular pulses, figurations, or tunes: there are only sounds.

Their written notation can be seen as a provocation of the player. The player is spurred to look for the unknown, in the sense of what they do not already know how to do. This immediately addresses one of the absolutely fundamental problems for contemporary music, which is the oppressive presence of a plethora of techniques, skills and technological means, the equipment vastly outweighing any consideration as to deeper intent. And deeper intent there must be, if this music is to aspire to the aesthetic discipline and authority previously held by older music. Paradoxically, our music needs to discover and acknowledge a primitive dimension that is regarded as toxic by those in command of its cultural filters. Only the presence of a primitive dimension can free contemporary music from its own technocratic absurdity and an anxious conformity to an error-free consistency of language ultimately as dull as ditchwater.

There are perhaps many possible deeper intents in art. One description that might fit Avram and Dumitrescu's music is that it may revitalise the human ontogenetic relation to the universe. We can easily imagine that we inhabit a space-time in which certain places and certain moments are privileged, so that together they form a kind of network or figure that stands out from the ground of general experience. I personally am very familiar with this idea, as I have spent time in the shamanistic cultures of central Siberia, where the surrounding landscape is imagined in such a way that certain privileged features such as special trees, suggestively shaped rocks, or springs, or charismatic mountains, together form a kind of magical topology; it is at these spots that rituals are conducted and those more intense exchanges of energy between human and nature occur that in turn orientate and energise the daily lives of siberians.

The drawing below, taken from a siberian shaman's drum shows how a diagrammatic conception of the cosmos has been with us all along.



Developing our own diagrammatical way of thinking, we can then imagine that a piece of music can act as a portable place and a moveable moment, capable of connecting across not only to other related pieces of music on the level of the topological figure connecting all pieces, but also of synchronising and aligning to specific coordinates in actual space and time, so as to operate a real exchange of energies between human and nature. So every music listener is the potential creator of a portable magic topology connecting a series of intense musical experiences.

If technique is adequate to the point at which it is applied, then the operation is carried off smoothly and no further thought need be given. It is the disfunctionality of technique that leads to wider and deeper knowledge. This is achieved not so much by not being very good at something as by having a perspective on the situation that registers its objective problematic and the inadequacy of any structural operation to resolve that problematic. In Avram and Dumitrescu, the objective problematic is acknowledged in their fundamental stance in relation to sound, namely that sound is like the matter of the universe as conceptualised by Thales and his Pre-Socratic successors, that sound, in other words, is in a constant process of self transformation. Here is the logic of dispensing with formulae that break up the self-transformation of sound into a series of discrete structures such as pitch-cells, the self-transformation to be putatively reconstructed by Lego-style permutation. There is a rupture with the notions of identity grounded in substance, and of the law of the excluded third. The material demands to be presented as both itself and becoming not itself: the presence on the page of fixed but fragmentary and self-contradictory schemas speaks the technical failure of abstractive processes to reach the intended destination of an adequately signifying mark. The notation constitutes a diagrammatic representation of the emergence of a sound-element from a background from which it is never separated and to which it remains in constant relation and within which it will find the inherent structural inadequacy that demands a further transformation of itself into a new sound-element.

It is tempting to think of the white space of the score as what records the potential impulsions of the composer in relation to sound, this in turn triggering the approach and focussed immersion of the musician, initiating a series of sounding impulsions that leads ultimately to the dynamic pressure of the music on the listener. By bringing the unresolved into the last conceivable moment of the aesthetic process the music draws the listener into a field of energy in which every structure cohabits with what is not taken up into it, and interacts with the forces that gave rise to it and which will overtake it.

URLS for Avram-Dumitrescu talk

To hear music online:

<https://soundcloud.com/ana-maria-avram-composer-2>

Interview with Iancu Dumitrescu:

<http://www.furious.com/perfect/iancu.html>

Essay on Dumitrescu and the politics of spectralism:

<http://www.timhodgkinson.co.uk/TASKS2.pdf>

Theory of Improvisation:

<http://www.timhodgkinson.co.uk/free%20improv2018.pdf>

Performance of *Parhelion* by Ana-Maria Avram by Ensemble XY, as part of *European Extreme* Festival, London March 29th.

<http://www.ensemblexy.com/>