

# REFLECTIONS ON MUSICAL COMPOSITION

## AN INTEGRATIVE TECHNICAL, AESTHETICAL AND SPIRITUAL APPROACH

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The following dissertation is presented as an academic reflection on the art of musical composition. It is an attempt to offer a description and an analysis of various intellectual, technical, aesthetical, and spiritual considerations implied in the complex process of composition. They reflect the primary interests and concerns that I, as a student of composition finishing a BA degree at the Iceland Academy of the Arts (LHÍ – Listaháskóli Íslands), had to face and resolve during a three-year period of musical studies.

The paper starts by posing some overall preliminary remarks about musical creativity in the globalised multicultural society at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is followed by a study of the process of musical composition from three different perspectives as ascribed to three renowned composers from the Western musical tradition of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely: a technical perspective advocated by the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971); an aesthetical approach ascribed to the French composer Pierre Boulez (b.1931); and a spiritually oriented stance characteristic of the British composer Jonathan Harvey (b.1939). The objective with this analysis is to observe how these three composers approach the craft of musical composition from one predominant point of view (although not necessarily disregarding the other ones), and to elucidate the reasons for which these composers approach musical composition from their particular perspective as well as the effects they expect to reach and the meaning they want to convey by doing so.

After presenting this analysis of musical composition within the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western classical tradition, a short survey will follow in which the stance of two Eastern thinkers and spiritual figures towards musical creation is presented, namely those of Indians Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Sri Chinmoy (1931-2007, this latter being also an active composer and performer). Here the main differences between the Western and Eastern traditions will be observed.

The final chapter of conclusions will summarise all the various aspects touched upon in the previous sections of the essay, with the objective of reconciling any confronting ideas or perspectives that might have arisen in the discussion.

## 2. PRELIMINARY REMARKS:

### MUSICAL COMPOSITION AND MUSIC WRITING IN A GLOBALISED MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY AT THE TURN OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Creative musicians and composers at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century face conditions that are unprecedented in musical history. These conditions are both advantageous as well as challenging, one of its most predominant characteristics being the frame of an ever increasingly globalised world-community which is conscious both of the vastness and diversity of its cultural tradition and heritage and, more than ever, is aware of its historical inheritance and development.

Musicians and composers of our day have almost unlimited access to listen to and study music from all over the world and from past epochs. This availability has been increasing at an accelerated pace during the last two decades due to the technological development of mass media, of recording techniques, and of musical scholarship and education worldwide. Creative musicians are therefore in a position to seek inspiration and allow themselves to be influenced by the most diverse musical languages and styles, ranging from Gregorian chants from the European middle ages, to millenary Indian ragas and rhythms, Native American melodies and instrumentations and other ethnic music, and avant-garde symphonic or electronic compositions, just to mention a few examples from an endless list of world musical idioms and epochs available to all. This eclectic trend has been regarded as the polystylism characteristic of our post-modern society<sup>1</sup>.

It is thus that the musical panorama in our days can be divided into a huge range of stylistic musical subgroups or subcultures from which listeners of all backgrounds and interests can find something to satisfy their tastes. Some of the most easily identifiable subgroups are the academic circle of university-based and intellectually-oriented music makers<sup>2</sup> somehow continuing the Western classical tradition; ethnic musicians committed to transmitting their national culture whether it be in an almost unpolluted manner or adopting influences from other styles and

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<sup>1</sup> See *A History of Western Music*, p. 959.

<sup>2</sup> This can be clearly seen in the intellectual circles of many American and German universities where composers write mainly for intellectual audiences and do not necessarily aspire to reach the general public.

languages; improvisational musicians somehow related to the jazz tradition; and popular musicians who can be related to the pop, rock or electric traditions. These four categories can at the same time be divided into countless subcategories according to the main differential traits of their musical language, giving the overall musical scene an immense variety that it had never had before to such an elevated extent.

An aspect of paramount importance within the discussion of musical composition in modern times has therefore become the awareness of musical tradition, cultural context and motive of expression and meaning. It is unquestionable that the cultural bridges between nations, epochs and styles will continue to flourish, giving the most diverse languages and styles a platform for dialogue, interrelationship and mutual growth. This of course does not exclude the reality that musicians wanting to follow a particular language or style in a more pure way, without mixing it with others, will continue doing so or will find an audience for whom to compose.

Nevertheless, post-modern trends of musical composition have become ever more inclusive of all sorts of musical idioms, styles, epochs and regions. This eclecticism and polystylism is reflected in the work of composers that go as far back as the French composers Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), and the Russian composer Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), who during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century consciously sought inspiration from world folk music, Eastern music and American jazz music<sup>3</sup>. Composers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show even stronger traits of this eclecticism, as in the case of the Argentineans Alberto Ginastera (1913-1983) and Astor Piazzolla (1921-1991), the Italian Luciano Berio (1925-2003), the Brazilians Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) and Egberto Gismonti (b. 1947), and the North American Keith Jarrett (b.1945).

There is however a latent danger implied in an eclectic and polystylistic approach to music making which all of the afore mentioned composers seem to felicitously deal with in their compositions, and that is the risk of creating incoherent or inarticulate mixtures of diverse musical elements in which composers might lose track of the message they want to convey or of the sincerity of their purpose whilst pretending to master a wide range of diverse elements. It can be argued that these composers' success lies not only on their technical mastery, but also on the way how the aesthetical influences from which they nourish themselves and which they aspire

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<sup>3</sup> See Debussy's use of pentatonic scales and musical colours reminiscent of the Orient, the inspiration drawn from ethnic music as in Ravel's *Bolero* (1928), and the influence of jazz music as in Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* (1930) and Shostakovich's *Jazz Orchestral Suites* (1910-1915).

to reflect in their creations is centred around a strong will of communication and a clear purpose of artistry. The message is thus articulated through sound academic knowledge and technical proficiency, as well as through humane sincerity, a purity of cause and a loyalty of expression so inherent to musical language, without hampering the use of diverse influences and styles.

The aspiration of adopting a polystylistic language that reflects a wide range of musical influences and that is at the same time coherent within itself, clear as a means of expression, and consistent in its degree of technique and artistry was one of the main challenges that I had to face and resolve during my three-year period of compositional studies at LHÍ. This aspiration arose the need to maintain an elevated degree of historical and cultural awareness and clarity of communicational purpose and stylistic choice throughout my studies. At the same time, this challenge made it indispensable to exert a deep reflection on the process of composition from three of its main creational levels, namely the technical, the aesthetical and the spiritual. For the purpose of delving into these three perspectives of musical composition in the present dissertation, the choice was adopted to analyse the work of three different composers who are highly recognised within the Western European tradition for their musical artistry, for the polystylistic traits revealed in their compositions, and also for the felicitous way in which they articulate their thoughts through academic prose. Thus, the technical, aesthetical and spiritual perspectives towards musical composition have been analysed as reflected in the works Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez and Jonathan Harvey, who have all written thorough academic papers on the topic. As stated earlier in this paper, these three composers do not represent each of the perspectives in question in an exclusively manner – they somehow touch aspects of all those perspectives, but lay particular emphasis on one of them. It will however be seen that in all three cases, although to a different extent, the technical, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual elements of musical creation go hand in hand.

### 3. A TECHNICAL APPROACH TO MUSICAL COMPOSITION:

#### IGOR STRAVINSKY<sup>4</sup>

One of the first aspects that had to be dealt with during the initial stages of the three-year period of studies at LHI was that of musical composition as an intellectual and technical endeavour. The discussion was significantly nurtured by Igor Stravinsky's views and attitudes towards musical composition and artistic endeavour as an intellectual labour, as exposed in his work *Poetics of Music*.

Stravinsky's work was originally delivered in the form of six lessons as part of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University in 1939. Although the six lectures deal with various subjects, the leading thread throughout is the concept of *poetics*, which Stravinsky explains from its Greek root, *poiein*, as the process of *doing* or *making*<sup>5</sup> when applied to the field of music in an orderly and disciplined manner. It is also important to mention that although for the purpose of this paper it is Stravinsky's intellectual stance to musical composition that is mainly being quoted, he regularly infuses his six lectures with profound convictions regarding aesthetical views and artistic creation, and includes insights of great aesthetical and spiritual value. As an example the "Epilogue" is worth mentioning, in which he acknowledges the deep meaning that music can convey and its essential aim as the promoting of a "communion, a union of man with his fellow-man and with the Supreme Being."<sup>6</sup>

Out of the six lectures, it is particularly the first four lectures that are of most value for the present discussion. In the first lecture, "Getting Acquainted", Stravinsky exposes general ideas on music based on his personal experience and emphasises the importance of discipline in a creative process, particularly an artistic one, whose purpose is to create *order* out of *chaos*. In Stravinsky's own words:

"We cannot observe the creative phenomenon independently of the form in which it is made manifest. Every formal process proceeds from a principle, and the study of this principle requires precisely what we call dogma. In other words, the need that we feel to bring order out of chaos, to extricate the straight line of our operation from the tangle of possibilities

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<sup>4</sup> Stravinsky is recognised as one of the most influential composers in the Western tradition during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1882, he became renowned for his pioneering, revolutionary experimentations in works such as the ballets *Petrushka* (1911) and *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913). He died in New York in 1971. See: Schonberg, Harold: *The Lives of the Great Composers*, p. 550-564.

<sup>5</sup> See Stravinsky, Igor: *Poetics of Music*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Stravinsky, p. 18.

and from the indecision of vague thoughts presupposes the necessity of some sort of dogmatism. I use the words *dogma* and *dogmatic*, then, only insofar as they designate and element essential to safeguarding the integrity of art and mind (...) Throughout my course and on every hand I shall call upon your feeling and your taste for order and discipline. For they – fed, informed, and sustained by positive concepts – form the basis of what is called dogma.”<sup>7</sup>

The second lecture, “The Phenomenon of Music”, deals with the dialectics of the creative process and with musical creation as a “form of speculation in terms of sound and time”<sup>8</sup>, taking into particular consideration the aspects of *similarity* and *contrast* and other morphological elements in music. After establishing in the first lecture the importance of discipline, order and dogma as means to safeguard the integrity of art in general, Stravinsky poses in the second lecture aspects that are specific to the phenomenon of music. He addresses musical craft as a process of organisation that requires speculative volition, the conscious human act of a willing mind that establishes hierarchies, orders elements, enlivens and creates according to certain adopted methods, and makes something concrete out of the abstract with the use of elements such as harmony and melody, consonance and dissonance, and metre and tempo in the flow of time. According to Stravinsky, musical discourse is an interplay of tones in time which create attraction and repulsion, impulse and repose, consonance and dissonance, similarity and contrast, variety and unity, richness and solidity, a discourse that reflects the search for *variety* within *unity* around a harmonious centre and the fulfilling coexistence between the Many with the ONE.<sup>9</sup>

“The Composition of Music” is the third chapter, and deals with elemental issues as the nature of music; the figure of the composer; the composer as a creator; the formal elements of musical craft; concepts such as invention, imagination and inspiration; culture, tradition and personal taste; rule, law and order; and the realms of necessity and freedom. Stravinsky restates his regard of music as a process of free speculation regulated by balance and calculation and exerted due to a desire for creation, a desire for discovery that involves a search for emotion and inspiration and the effort of discipline of hard work. The creator achieves artistic freedom once having narrowed and limited his field of action. This process requires a high degree of introspection and self-awareness or self-consciousness and is therefore of a

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<sup>7</sup> Stravinsky, p. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Stravinsky, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> See Stravinsky, p. 24-40.

spiritual, psychological and physical character and, in its zenith, creates a spiral ascent of love and understanding. In Stravinsky's own words:

“The very act of putting my work on paper, of, as we say, kneading the dough, is for me inseparable from the pleasure of creation. So far as I am concerned, I cannot separate the spiritual effort from the psychological and physical effort; they confront me on the same.”<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, Stravinsky likewise acknowledges the importance of academic instruction and intellectual formation as valuable means to cultivate taste:

“As for culture, it is a sort of upbringing which, in the social sphere, confers polish upon education, sustains and rounds out academic instruction. This upbringing is just as important in the sphere of taste and is essential to the creator who must ceaselessly refine his taste or run the risk of losing his perspicacity. Our mind, as well as our body, requires continual exercise. It atrophies if we do not cultivate it.”<sup>11</sup>

The fourth chapter is entitled “Musical Typology” and deals with the various differences of musical types and styles, treating style as the “particular way in which a composer organises his conceptions and speaks the language of his craft”.<sup>12</sup> He addresses art as a creative work of selection and discrimination of materials and methods through which the craftsman looks for order and coherence rather than dissimilarity and chaos and recognises how important it is to be acquainted with culture and tradition as a means to establish parameters of what is of value and endures the pass of time. In this way, Stravinsky poses the influence that cultural values have on the individual:

“The attire that fashion prescribes for men of the same generation imposes upon its wearers a particular kind of gesture, common carriage and bearing, that are conditioned by the cut of the clothes. In a like manner the musical apparel worn by an epoch leaves its stamp upon the language, and, so to speak, upon the gestures of its music, as well as upon the composer's attitudes towards tonal materials.”<sup>13</sup>

At the end of the chapter, after posing all the previous considerations on culture, intellectual formation and typology, Stravinsky concludes by praising the composer or listener who, begin conscious of the importance of personal self-

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<sup>10</sup> Stravinsky, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Stravinsky, p.56.

<sup>12</sup> See Stravinsky, p. 70

<sup>13</sup> Stravinsky, p. 70.



awareness, cultural formation and discipline in his methods, “champions the incontestable rights of sentiment, defends the primacy of emotion, gives evidence of concern for the noble, on occasion yields to adventure or oriental picturesqueness.”<sup>14</sup>

### PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

As Stravinsky explained at the beginning of his lectures, his main approach to the craft of musical composition is the study of the *poetics of music*, being this understood as the *making* or *doing* of music. Stravinsky thus offers comments and insights on what he himself considers to be valuable practices in the process of musical composition, and mentions above all a need to establish *order* and *discipline* and to search for *unity* and *coherence*. This search is however to be based on the use of dissimilar elements as attraction and repulsion, impulse and repose, consonance and dissonance, similarity and contrast, richness and solidity. The author likewise intends to make the reader conscious of the historical and cultural conditioning to which music, composers and musicians are subject and thus mentions the importance for the composer to have a sound academic formation in music history and styles.

Besides the merely technical and stylistic aspects of musical composition, Stravinsky likewise touches on a wide range of other implications, including philosophical, historical, sociological, aesthetical and spiritual ones. In this manner, in spite of the fact that Stravinsky’s main emphasis is that of *musical craft* or *musical labour* (hence offering a predominantly technical approach to musical composition based on an intellectual analysis and understanding of the subject matter), he repeatedly throughout his discourse reminds his readers to have in mind not only the technical aspects involved in musical composition, but also the psychological, emotional and spiritual ones that are involved in this complex process.

Stravinsky’s discourse however does not deal in a sufficiently profound way, or a manner that might be satisfactory for the purpose of the present dissertation, with the aesthetical and spiritual aspects of musical composition. His words on these two aspects seem scant, particularly for a composer whose music reflects a conscious and ambitious aesthetical scope by virtue of its variety of styles. It is therefore advisable to see in which way Boulez’s and Harvey’s opinions can contribute to this discussion.

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<sup>14</sup> Stravinsky, p. 89.

#### 4. AN AESTHETICAL APPROACH TO MUSICAL COMPOSITION:

##### PIERRE BOULEZ<sup>15</sup>

In his book *Orientations*, which gathers a series of lectures, essays, interviews and reflections, Pierre Boulez addresses several topics that deal with the world of music from various standpoints, either as a conductor, as a composer, or a thinker and philosopher. From the 68 individual texts included in the book, eight have been chosen with the purpose of studying Boulez's opinions regarding the social and aesthetical role of music, and even deeper aspects as meaning and communicational value that music can have in our lives.

The first essay included in the book, "*Aesthetics and the Fetishists*", is one of the most philosophical ones, where Boulez studies the role and meaning of music as an aesthetical phenomenon, that is, as a field of human endeavour which follows certain principles and rules that are consciously or subconsciously dictated by social and historical factors. Boulez starts by defining music not merely as a 'language' or 'communicational means' but rather as "an art, a science and a craft", meaning by 'art' "a means of expression", by 'science' a labour of intellectual endeavour, and by 'craft' a subject that requires skill and expertise. For Boulez, music is as "an art that has no 'meaning' (...) given the impossibility of the musical vocabulary assuming a simply communicative function."<sup>16</sup> When comparing music to language, Boulez observes that while language can serve as a means of direct communication between two persons as well as a means for intellectual and poetic elaboration, music can only serve the latter purpose. Summing up the above considerations, Boulez concludes by saying that "music has no real existence except in direct communication", particularly because of the fact that a written score can only be judged and interpreted by a very reduced number of people.<sup>17</sup>

Boulez then delves on the traits that make music a science by approaching it from a historical point of view in which three formal aspects of music become salient: morphology, syntax and rhetoric, elements which conform a particular style. The author traces the evolution of Western Music as starting from the early polyphony of the *organum* until our days, arguing how this evolution has been the result of the

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<sup>15</sup> Boulez, born in France in 1931, is arguably one of the most influential figures in the world of contemporary music, both as a composer, conductor and lucid writer.

<sup>16</sup> Boulez, Pierre: *Orientations*, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> See Boulez, p. 32-33.

adoption of new morphological or stylistic principles through a change in the hierarchy of values that occurs in periods of mutation and stabilisation. Further on, Boulez addresses music from other cultures other than the Western European and poses as a form of conclusion that cultural and particularly musical values are relative and are determined both by the time and the place where they arise. These values are limited both in space and time:

“Comparison of our own music with that of other times and cultures must surely make us wary of talking about the ‘eternity’ or ‘supremacy’ of an of our musical laws. Their value is relative, in time as well as in space; and they may be reduced, in fact, to the best method discovered, at a given time and in given circumstances, of organising a language coherent enough to be effective and flexible enough to give maximum expression to the intellectual and emotional potential of the age concerned.”<sup>18</sup>

Following this, after exposing the above mentioned historical, morphological and temporal characteristics of the art and science of music, Boulez observes the social and historical role that the composer assumes through his craft. “Every age expresses itself through the individual most able himself to assume the historical responsibilities of the society of which he forms a part.”<sup>19</sup> In these terms, Boulez addresses the problem of the composer’s loss of contact with the public owing to excessive individualism and argues that however individualistic or original a composer may want to be, when observed from a historical perspective, he will always be a reflection of the age in which he has lived. Boulez’s conclusion in regards to the relationship between history and the individual is the following: “There is, in fact, a dialectical relationship between history and the individual, history certainly providing the individual with a challenge but the individual in his turn refashioning history, which will never be quite the same after him.”<sup>20</sup> This means that however aloof or independent an individual may want to be from his or her cultural and historical surroundings, they will always condition him or her. In the same way he or she will have an impact and an influence on them.

As way of conclusion to this discussion, Boulez restates his opinion of music being a phenomenon which is historically and culturally conditioned and which evolves as a system that aspires to respond to the needs of individual epochs and societies:

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<sup>18</sup> Boulez, p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> Boulez, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Boulez, p. 40.

“Every system is simply a working hypothesis for the solution of the problems confronting an individual epoch, a working hypothesis that will be replaced by another once the old hypothesis has proved insufficient at any given point. Of one thing we may be certain: that the creative imagination will never fail to provide ‘models’. The periods of evolution and mutation will be determined either by extrapolating from the laws of one system or by a radical revision involving the creation of a new system.”<sup>21</sup>

Another aspect of great significance which Boulez addresses is the role that “knowledge” and “technique” have within any considerations of aesthetical value, be it musical composition in particular or artistic creation in general. In his essay “*Putting the Phantoms to Flight*”, he emphasises the importance that good technique and solid knowledge of the materials and methods involved have for the composer or artist. He expands:

“Aesthetic thinking divorced from considerations of technique can lead only to bankruptcy: the musical idiom is in such a case nothing more than a kind of ingenious simulation or a banal gesturing, a question of temperament (...) No composers who have produced solid, durable works that stand up to critical examination have ever minimised the importance of technique, or ever treated style as a kind of garment that can be changed out of boredom or caprice (...) The composer’s primary consideration must be the actual technique of his musical language.”<sup>22</sup>

For Boulez, however, the importance attributed to technique is not for the sake of pure technique, but as a means to achieve the aesthetical goals established at the outset of the musical creation: “Any concern with purely technical matters would in that case deny the pure intention of realising the composer’s ideal”. What is of most value in having a thorough command of technique is that it may ensure that the composer’s aesthetic intentions be materialised in a successful musical idiom. For Boulez states clearly that, just as pure technical virtuosity, the mere fact of being “sincere” and “inspired” will not suffice in the making of a coherent and durable work: “If the composer’s sincerity in the pursuit of his aims guarantees a work’s validity, the idiom of that work and the way in which it is organised are of secondary importance (...) Any ignoring of technique and its importance brings a fearful vengeance with it, nothing less than a mortal disease inherent in the work.”<sup>23</sup> Boulez thus advocates for a balance between aesthetical and technique, and highlights the

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<sup>21</sup> Boulez, p.42.

<sup>22</sup> Boulez, p. 66.

<sup>23</sup> Boulez, p. 65.

importance of the composer being aware of both of these aspects of musical composition.

### **PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS**

In Boulez's opinion, music is not merely a language, that is, music is not merely a means of direct communication between people, but should rather be approached as an art (a way of expression), a science (a system ruled by principles and laws), and a craft (an endeavour that requires technical skill and expertise). Music is a complex process of aesthetical character that is conditioned by its historical, cultural and spatial surroundings and that aspires to respond to the needs of a particular society. Regarding the role of the composer, this latter, although being an individual, is likewise a product of his surroundings and his creative output has no meaning except within that cultural and historical context. It is therefore of great importance that the individual composer be conscious of the threefold function of music as art, science and craft in order to master his field of endeavour. This implies an understanding of music not only as a means of expression (be it emotional, poetical or intellectual), but also a knowledge of its historical evolution, an awareness of its cultural diversity, and a comprehension of the inner formal laws and principles that constitute its materials, that is, the morphology, syntax and rhetoric of music.

Boulez's discourse highlights the importance that a vindication between sincere aesthetical goals and sound technical knowledge and methods has for a composer's successful expression of his musical idiom. However, the French composer's writings do not shed sufficient light on the psychological and spiritual implications of musical composition, despite his concern and keen observations on the nature of human society and its cultural and artistic manifestations. A deeper consideration of the spiritual and more "transcendental" side of musical endeavour, indispensable for the present discussion, is lacking in his discourse. It is thus of great importance to turn now to the writings of Jonathan Harvey and later to those of the Indian thinkers Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy.

## 5. A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO MUSICAL COMPOSITION:

JONATHAN HARVEY<sup>24</sup>

The very title of Harvey's collection of essays, thoughts and reflections, testifies to the nature of this composer's approach to musical creation and composition: *In Quest of Spirit – Thoughts on Music* is a book in which the author deals with the elements of musical composition that make it not only a demanding intellectual and aesthetic, but also a spiritual endeavour. The author himself describes his book as being a study of the "sphere where music and spirituality overlap", an attempt to tackle traits of musical composition that may help us to become more conscious of the spiritual nature of music and its mystical elements, with the hope to be "more conscious of who we are and what is important to us."<sup>25</sup>

Harvey's discourse becomes of great value in our present discussion, as it not only nurtures on sound philosophical and historical knowledge of the Western tradition, but is also importantly fed by Harvey's acquaintance with Eastern spiritual philosophy, particularly with Zen Buddhism and Vedanta philosophy<sup>26</sup>. Within the Western tradition, Harvey uses the book's *Preface* to contextualise his work and his own stance as a composer in the following manner:

"The initial spiritual idea, that music was an explanation of the divine universe, has a long and distinguished history. The symmetry of numbers presents itself as both an attractive way to account for an underlying structure in apparently chaotic nature and a fitting way to think of the beauty of God's creative mind; the important idea of music as perceptible numbers, which exemplified this symmetry, thus stretches through history from Pythagoras and his followers to Plato, Boethius, the Corpus Hermeticum, the Camerati, Vincenzo Galilei, Ficino, Fludd, Kircher, Kepler, Newton, and Freemasonry. The writings of Hindemith, Schoenberg, and Stockhausen are not far removed from it either (...) What did they [these great intellectuals] sense? It was the goal of Unity that attracted them: Unity as sensed in music (...) Universal laws: simplicity to explain complexity; harmony underlying disorder; universals that really

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<sup>24</sup> Harvey is one of the most renowned contemporary British composers. He has also gained reputation as a brilliant scholar, lecturer and writer. Of particular interest for the present dissertation is Harvey's solid knowledge of Western cultural history and his deep acquaintance with Eastern schools of thought and meditation, particularly of Vedic philosophy and Buddhist meditation.

<sup>25</sup> Harvey, Jonathan: *In Quest of Spirit – Thoughts on Music*, p. xv.

<sup>26</sup> Harvey also mentions his acquaintance with Western system of thoughts that are spiritually oriented, such as Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. On Eastern philosophy and transcendental meditation he says: "Vedic thought, though highly complex, can be understood only by experiencing deeper states of consciousness. These were mapped out in the teachings, together with lucid signposts to help one orient oneself". See Harvey, p. xvi and p. 4-5.

exist (not just as concepts) behind particulars. Unity is an archetype of profound power. it is the most fundamental concept for all mystics, theistic or atheistic.”<sup>27</sup>

Regarding his own stance as a composer of spiritual inclinations, he adds:

“I cannot conceive of spending my life in a heedlessly unethical pursuit. Composing is a part of trying to live a life “skillfully,” as Buddhists say. One can compose from many different levels of the soul, base or elevated; the decision is important (...) I aspire to a future in which the deepest level of personality known to human beings, the radiant, still point beyond words, is encouraged by music to become manifest.”<sup>28</sup>

### **5.1. THE “SPIRITUAL” IN MUSIC**

The book is divided into four chapters and addresses various topics regarding the relationship between music and spirituality, that is, the spiritual experiences that musical listening, performing and writing may induce to and the spiritual purpose it may fulfill. One of Harvey’s first rhetorical tasks is thus to tackle the meaning of the concept or category “spiritual”, acknowledging that it is rather broad and subjective. Therefore, the first step in his discourse is to analyse the concept of the “spiritual in music” and the composer’s role therein. He comments:

“Most of us would be inclined to use the word *spiritual* to describe works that we feel are profound, that touch us at some very deep, very important level. Works to which we apply such adjectives as *playful*, *ingenious*, *witty*, and *lightweight* we would not call spiritual. A lofty, *ethical* tone is not necessarily required to qualify for the spiritual category either (...) Perhaps the category of the spiritual, then, is demarcated by the feeling we have of the music having somehow reached beyond, rather than by any associations evoked by a text, “program,” or the composer’s stated intention.”<sup>29</sup>

As a way of partial conclusion to the matter of what the spiritual in music is, Harvey finally asserts that it is the response of the listener and the state of mind it creates within the listener when experiencing the sounds:

“The overriding factor [in whether spirituality is present or not] is the nature of your response, your state of mind when experiencing the sounds. We may clearly recognize when we feel ourselves to be in a spiritual, or some other, state. Equally clearly, we may experience a similar state of consciousness every time we hear certain music and so

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<sup>27</sup> Harvey, p. xiv.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey, p.xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Harvey, p. 8.

impute a given quality to the music based on the reaction that it always arouses.”<sup>30</sup>

What Harvey means by the concept of “response” is whether the music is capable of “transporting” the listener to another plane of consciousness rather than keeping him on the merely sensorial, emotional or intellectual one, thus offering a sort of “peak experience” or opening of “an inner door” pointing towards “transcendence”<sup>31</sup>. Harvey is aware of the fact that the concept “transcendent” is broad and subjective, and to demarcate it he uses a dictionary definition of that which “lies beyond the range or grasp of human experience, reason, or belief.”<sup>32</sup> On these terms Harvey addresses for the first time the concepts of “consciousness” and “transcendence” within musical creation and reception, concepts which he will use constantly throughout his discourse and elucidate ever more deeply. It will be seen in chapter 2.5. that these two concepts (“consciousness” and “transcendence”) are likewise key terms within the yogic approach to music.

## **5.2. THE ROLE OF THE COMPOSER**

After having given a definition of the “spiritual” in music and of the relationship between spirituality and music, Harvey proceeds to pose his views on the figure and role of the composer. For that purpose, he adopts two different methods which, according to his understanding, shed similar conclusions: on one hand he adopts a “deconstructive” method (such as the one proposed by Jacques Derrida in his post-modern philosophical trends and Roland Barthes with his theory of “the death of the author”), and on the other hand that of Buddhist philosophy<sup>33</sup>. The pivotal term in this discussion is that of the composer’s *personality* or the illusion thereof, in other words, whether through his work a composer is actually expressing traits of his “real persona”, of his “central self”, of his “heart or spiritual centre”, or whether his is a vehicle or channel of other forces acting through him. Advancing in this discussion, Harvey quotes views of composers of the past who all give testimony of a belief in some higher or “transcendental” force, such as faith or a sense of the mystical or the divine acting through them. Schubert is quoted talking about the belief of something

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<sup>30</sup> Harvey, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> See Harvey, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Harvey quotes here the *Oxford English Dictionary*, see p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> See Harvey, p. 14-16.



higher than mere intellect, as “intelligence [being] nothing else than analysed faith”, Liszt is quoted mentioning the importance of the “demon Thought” and the value of “natural and artistic impulses”; Ravel is quoted touching on the value of “artistic instinct, inspiration and intuition”; and Schoenberg is paraphrased as quoting Schopenhauer: “The composer reveals the inmost essence of the world and utters the most profound wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand.”<sup>34</sup>

Harvey’s conclusion at this point is that a composer is ultimately a vessel or channel of higher forces. The question that arises now is up to what extent the composer is conscious or unconscious of those influences and forces acting through him as an instrument or channel, as Harvey argues that primarily the source of inspiration is unconscious (whether it be collective or individual inspiration). In order to give a partial response to this matter, Harvey quotes an interview with Stockhausen in which the latter refers to the spiritually collective value of musical making:

“I just write the music as it comes intuitively into my mind, and I expect the musicians will begin to grasp that making music is a spiritual activity.

*(Interviewer) Yes, but it’s not only spiritual. It’s also intellectual.*

The rest is secondary because it is the technical aspect of the process. The main thing is that we create sounds so pure that they are a vessel for the cosmic forces – let’s say the cosmic force that runs through everything.

*But surely you are communicating, aren’t you?*

No, I’m not communicating anything personally. I’m just making music which makes it possible to make contact with this supra-natural world. As I said, the music is a vessel, a vehicle, which people can get tuned in to and discover their inner selves by, discover what they have forgotten about themselves.”<sup>35</sup>

Harvey ends this first chapter with a short conclusion on the spiritual nature of music and the composer’s role therein. He refers to the composer’s “creative mind” as lying within an “intuitive core” or centre that is related to another “collective centre” or “cosmic force”. In this cosmic or collective setting the “I” is shown to be “confusingly polyphonic” and characterised by great ambiguity and pairs of contrasts: “core vs. non-core, playful vs. profound, singular vs. universal”, an ambiguity that in

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<sup>34</sup> Schopenhauer quoted by Schoenberg in Harvey: p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Stockhausen, quoted by Harvey, p. 20-21.

Harvey's opinion is crucial to the spiritual nature of music and that becomes the main theme in the book's second chapter, "*The Role of Ambiguity*".<sup>36</sup>

### 5.3. AMBIGUITY, DIVERSITY AND UNITY

In this second chapter Harvey gives an exposition of his views on the role of ambiguity and its spiritual meaning in music by tracing various examples of Western culture, both musical, literary and philosophical, counterposing them with views drawn from Eastern thought. He quotes extensively on pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, Wagner and Stravinsky on the musical field, later on including examples of his own music and his experiments with spectral and electronic composition; on poets like Mallarmé, Rilke, Tagore (from the Hindu tradition) and Rumi (from the Sufi tradition) on the literary sphere; and of thinkers as Goethe, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, Jung, and Low on the philosophical plane. The leading thread in the chapter is the concept of music as an entity unifying contrasts through the use of *Unity* and *Harmony*, following thus on the same lines as Stravinsky when acknowledging music's "pursuit of the One out of the Many" (quoted previously). In Harvey's own words:

"Music has to do with two things – with ambiguity. A drive to unity is there, but it must be by way of variety. Both must coexist, be held in vibrant tension – what Goethe called "dynamic unity".

"Ambiguity is endemic in life, or rather (beyond that) there is a higher unity that contains ambiguity. It is my contention that music reveals this ambiguity and reconciles it in harmony, contains it."

Regarding the role of composer and listener within this discussion, Harvey adds:

"When I compose, I am pulling together these dark conflicts and contradictions in an intuitive drive toward the promised land of unity. When I listen, I follow these same processes in the music."<sup>37</sup>

Throughout these reflections on Unity and Diversity in music, Harvey likewise states a distinction between our human perception of music either from an intellectual or merely mental plane, and from a plane that transcends reason. For this purpose, he first gives an example drawn from Zen Buddhism that seeks to show the

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<sup>36</sup> See Harvey, p. 22-23.

<sup>37</sup> Harvey, p. 28, 25 and 29.

limitations of a merely rational mode of perception, followed by a reflection of the “transcendental” capacity of music, the capacity it has to allow the narrow human ego to transcend itself and tread other dimensions of consciousness:

“Think of the Buddhist koan “Does the ear go to the sound, or the sound to the ear?” In other words, where does the mind stop and the object start? Zen Buddhists maintain that koans are to be used to crack open normal, logical modes of thinking; because no logical answer is possible, something greater appears: an enlightened understanding – the unity in the ambiguity.”

“What is the relation of art to spiritual evolution? Of course, it is often a prerequisite of great art that it uplifts in some way. In the presence of what we respond to as “great art” we experience a loss of self, a loss of the observer. And that sort of transcendence of the narrow ego may be called, even in the case of “depressing” or tragic art, the uplift of spirit, or *participation mystique* (...) Experiencing the subtle dialectic of discourse and spirit, where one leads into and is unified with the other, is the gift of intelligent and sensitive listening [and the movement] from discourse to spirit (...) Broadly speaking, spirit *underlies* discourse.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, with these ponderings on the dualities of life and music and the role of ambiguities in life and art ends the second chapter and begins the third one, “Unity”. Supporting his arguments with a sound knowledge of the history of Western thought, and traversing the fields of psychology, linguistics, literature and philosophy, Harvey introduces the concept of “unity” by analysing the role of language as a human instrument used to reconcile, stabilise and “unify” the ambiguities that we have to face in life. He extrapolates this analysis of language to the field of music and its spiritual role, comparing to the art of meditation, in the following way:

“It seems to me as well that to understand music fully (and perhaps to begin to understand the spiritual at all), we have to understand what language has done to us, following all the arguments through modernism, deconstruction, poststructuralism, and psycholinguistics to where we stand today. The best guide in this will have to be an artist, and preferably a practitioner of meditation (...) I mention meditation because it gives insight into the crucial notion of pure awareness, in which one is aware, but aware of nothing. Eastern philosophy differs from Western in its reliance on experience of states of consciousness: one experiences the philosophy rather than thinks it (...) Pure awareness is prior to subject/object duality, or ultimately, in enlightened meditation, posterior to it. When awareness of the world around arises, the tension in the I/other ambiguity increases to the point where stability is sought through language, and the “word,” which seems to fix and order things, becomes

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<sup>38</sup> Harvey, p. 33 and p. 36-37.

paramount. In due course it divides the world up according to certain perspectives and leads on to reason, logic, and practical and scientific knowledge (...) Music, however, exposes this ambiguity within language-based consciousness. It undoes the “word” and returns to pure awareness – or at least it gives a glimpse of it.”<sup>39</sup>

Harvey thus exposes the value that music has for him as an instrument to identify and expose but also to stabilise, reconcile and unify opposites or ambiguities. His extrapolation to the field of Eastern thought and meditation is important in so far as the connecting link in between is the awareness of consciousness, or of the state of consciousness, in our perception of the world (or the music) around us. The conclusion is the great capacity that music has, just as language to a certain degree and meditation to an even higher degree, have, in helping us find understanding and stability of the very same reality in which we live. Both an enlightened understanding and a high degree of stability or tranquillity between opposites do not exclude emotion, and rather the presence of the latter can even become a sign of the spiritual character in music. As Harvey proceeds:

“[It is a mistake] to suppose that arousal is opposed to tranquillity. Music excites emotion, (...) but music is profound as an art form because it can do those things even within a tranquil framework. It is both emotionally intense and possessed of a deep sense of harmony, in the broad sense of the word. The greater the conflicts it successfully unifies, the more spiritual the music (...) Sudden perceptions of unity, or conversely, of the components of what we previously perceived as a unity, are the essence both of music and of spiritual perception.”<sup>40</sup>

Harvey finishes the chapter after giving thorough explanations of the spiritual implications of several of his own musical compositions, particularly of the electronic ones, in which his use of live human voiced or instruments combined with synthesisers, tapes and live electronic treatments intends to resemble the relationship and especially the organic unity between normal reality and a spiritual world, where the border between the two seems to be completely blurred.<sup>41</sup> In this way, argues Harvey, he intends to reconcile or at least show the common ground of apparently ambiguous concepts such as life and death, physics and metaphysics, normality and spirituality, revealing their enigmatic relationship and thus allowing those poles to be

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<sup>39</sup> Harvey, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> Harvey, p. 52 and p. 58-59.

<sup>41</sup> He mentions, among others, pieces such as *Passion and Resurrection* (1981), *Madonna of winter and Spring* (1985), *One Evening*, and *Inquest of Love* (1992). See p. 58-63.

embraced in a state of calm that should be vibrant rather than empty. Thus music is once again revealed to be “the play of the Relative on the Ground of the Absolute.”

#### **5.4. MUSIC, SILENCE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE “TRANSCENDENT”**

Harvey opens the fourth chapter, “*Stasis and Silence*”, by pondering on the relationship between music (and art in general) and the “transcendent.”<sup>42</sup> Harvey reflects on whether art and music can reveal or at least suggest or intimate the transcendent, and whether the transcendent is really beyond human experience. Harvey thus taps at the paradox between the dictionary meaning of the word transcendent, that is, which lies “beyond human experience”, and the evidence of Eastern philosophers and people (Eastern and Western) who have had any sort of mystical experience. In order to clarify the apparent error in the definition and usage of the word according to Western terms, Harvey argues that “transcendence” is perhaps something that cannot be known or grasp as a body of knowledge, but it can be experienced – an experience where knowing and being are merged into one. He then explains the two main types of transcendent or “mystical” experience recognised by people: that of a sudden, transforming opening to a new dimension which is very emotional and powerful; and that of become very still, for example through techniques of meditation – a state of emptiness full of peace and delight, a stillness which is however vivid and provides the meditator with a great sense of calmness and lightness and great creative power. Harvey affirms that to achieve this state of transcendence and to recognise its borderlands, the key is to become still. In this context, Harvey delves on the way how music becomes a spiritual dynamo through the use of ambiguities:

“There we have the two contrasting elements we’ve talked of so often before in reference to music’s ambiguity: stillness and moving vividness, emptiness and fullness, unity and variety, the One and the Many. Stillness, in “spiritual” music, could be seen as a vessel for energy. Stillness permeates energy; energy is shot through with stillness. In tantric Buddhism, this power is related to the union of emptiness and bliss.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Refer to footnote nr. 32, or see Harvey, p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> Harvey, p. 67.

For Harvey, this state of stillness can be achieved through music by using devices such as modality, tonic pedal points and repetition (which, he points out, however needs of elements of contrast in order to achieve articulation and thus unification. In this context he mentions the use of repetition in classical variations, passacaglias, chaconnes, and minimalism, and the use of tonic pedal points in works such as Strauss's *Salome* and Brahms's *Deutsches Requiem*, and in Northern Indian music. Regarding this latter form of music, Harvey adds: "I need hardly expand on the spiritual intensity, the longing for God and transcendence, associated with such music, which, in Ghandharva Veda, one of the ancient Vedic pathways, is the way to divine wisdom."<sup>44</sup> He then mentions examples of the use of modes in works ranging from Beethoven to John Tavener and Arvo Pärt. Describing Pärt's piece *Passio Domini nostri secundum Iohannem* (1982) he states: "The lengthy stasis, especially the prolongation of flattened sevenths, creates a strong sense of undisturbed timelessness. Further emphasized by extremely minor variation, great length, and pervasive silence, this work itself comes very close to mystical practice."<sup>45</sup>

Harvey then proceeds to give other examples of the Western musical tradition in which these devices are employed. He studies Webern's orchestral song "O sanftes Glühn der Berge", its brevity, its symmetrical structure, its text, and above all, the great significance of silence. In this way Harvey commences a discussion on the value of silence in music, and its relationship to the art of meditation. He observes:

"[In Webern's] final *Angesicht* there is only silence, leaving the unsayable merely implied. It is hard not to feel heavy-handed after hearing such music. It is an extraordinary fact that Webern's intense spiritual experiences in that remote, silent spot influenced a fair part of the course of twentieth-century music (...) In a typical meditation, thoughts become more and more refined, subtle, delicate – until they disappear into silence. Seen as the vanishing point of refinement, silence can be pregnant with meaning, carrying the process of refinement into the unknown, beyond thought."<sup>46</sup>

Harvey proceeds by addressing works by John Cage and Toru Takemitsu, and their use of silence in their music. In Takemitsu's case, the concept of *ma*, a profoundly important concept in Japanese culture through which "meaning is intense but nothing is expressed", is predominant. Takemitsu says: "I wish to search out that

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<sup>44</sup> Harvey, p. 69-70.

<sup>45</sup> Harvey, p.71.

<sup>46</sup> Harvey, p.76-77.

## 6. A YOGIC APPROACH TO MUSIC:

### SRI AUROBINDO<sup>52</sup> & SRI CHINMOY<sup>53</sup>

The previous chapter showed the elevated degree to which the British composer Jonathan Harvey, in order to fathom and explain the spiritual significance of music, draws elements from Eastern thought, particularly from Buddhist meditation and Vedic philosophy. The purpose with this following chapter is to deal directly with two Indian thinkers who tackle the issue of music and spirituality from a first hand experience of spiritual discipline, namely Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy, who were both deeply rooted within the Vedic Yogic tradition and were likewise prolific writers and philosophers.

#### 6.1. VEDANTA AND THE YOGIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS LIFE

Chapter 2.4. of the present dissertation showed the way in which Harvey's discourse parted from a strictly rational and academic Western tradition and progressively entered the more esoteric Eastern tradition with the objective to elucidate the spiritual nature of music. In this chapter, the journey occurs in the opposite way: it parts from the spiritual reality in which the Eastern mentality and perception of the world is immersed, and from there it reaches out to the domain of musical composition. For the basis of Eastern spiritual philosophy relies in the belief, as that of the ancient Vedic sages of India advocated, that

“behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that One Self and Spirit but divided by a certain separativity of consciousness, an ignorance of their true Self and Reality in the mind, life

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<sup>52</sup> Sri Aurobindo, born in India in 1872, is one of the most influential thinkers and writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century India. Brought up in London, he later returned to his motherland in order to fight for the independence from British rule. He progressively abandoned his separatist activities in order to concentrate on literature, philosophy and Yoga, eventually developing a revolutionary line of modern yoga, called *Integral Yoga*, whose main objective is to find the spiritual purpose in all human endeavours while leading an active outer life. As a prolific and lucid writer, his output includes philosophy, sociology, poetry and the arts, and Yoga. He died in Pondicherry in 1950, in the Ashram or spiritual community that he had founded towards 1920.

<sup>53</sup> Sri Chinmoy was an Indian multifaceted artist and thinker whose philosophical and artistic output, particularly in the field of music, was considerable. Born in Bangladesh in 1931, he moved to New York in 1961. He died there in 2007, after a prolific life dedicated to fostering unity and harmony among nations and to the spiritual progress of the individual through arts, sports and yogic spiritual discipline.

single sound which is in itself so strong that it can confront silence. It is then that my own personal insignificance will cease to trouble me.”<sup>47</sup>

The realm of silence that Takemitsu finds in the Japanese concept of *ma* is a realm that Harvey equates with the world of spiritual experience described by Rudolf Steiner <sup>48</sup> in his writings. Steiner says that the spiritual worlds to which we can have an access through meditation and a mind free of banal thoughts remind us of what our true home is, those worlds refresh and console us. Harvey extrapolates these views to the role of the composer thus:

“ ‘Inspired’ composers bring back from that spiritual homeland glimpses and intuitions, which they translate into physical, instrumental, or vocal sounds. The process is unconscious unless one is clairvoyant, but it exists nevertheless: the inspired draw on it.” <sup>49</sup>

If these spiritual realms are the worlds from which “inspired” music springs, it is consequential to suppose that the effects this music can have on its listeners is of an equally spiritual nature. It is in this guise that Harvey argues:

“Music’s connection with spirituality *can* be thought of as music acting as a trigger for the spiritual experience. Spirituality in this view resides in subjects, not objects; in people, not music. The music may be explicitly spiritual (a mass for example) or not, but the experience is necessarily subjective, and anybody is free to find any music spiritual, however likely or unlikely it may seem (...) Fundamentally, and following tradition, the “spiritual” is the experience of *unity*. The implications of such experience are enormous: they reach right across to Buddha’s “I show you suffering and I show you the release from suffering.” Where there is unity, there is compassion: sympathy and solidarity with suffering. In our arid, rigid, confrontational, dualistic age we need this experience of music as an urgent necessity; without such values we will die as a civilisation.” <sup>50</sup>

Harvey’s discourse once more highlights the importance that the individual subject, be it the composer or the listener, and their state of consciousness have on their reception of the musical experience, making it spiritual or not. Ultimately, the parameter that Harvey adopts to determine whether a musical effect is spiritual is the triggering of an experience of “unity” that can be equated to what in Buddhism is

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<sup>47</sup> Toru Takemitsu, quoted by Harvey, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> An Austrian scholar and spiritual leader who worked in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creator of Anthroposophy.

<sup>49</sup> Harvey, p.80.

<sup>50</sup> Harvey, p. 82.



described as a state of meditation – a peaceful, yet vivid and dynamic experience that consequently creates a feeling of *compassion*, of solidarity and sympathy towards our fellow beings and the universe of which we are part of. In this context, the composer is simply an instrument, a vehicle or a channel through which this universal unity is expressing itself, reminding the parts of the Many their relation and oneness with the One. Harvey resumes:

“Who then, in the last analysis, *is* the composer? The composer has no *inherent* existence. All one can say is that the “composer” is focused toward wisdom, inseparable from the universe: the universe is expressing *itself*.”<sup>51</sup>

### **PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS**

Relying on a vast knowledge of Western culture and thought that spans not only the sphere of music but also of history, philosophy, linguistics, literature and psychology, Harvey exposes a thoroughly argued discourse through which he studies, explains and extols the significance that music has in our lives as an endeavour with an ultimately spiritual purpose. Parting from the stance of a Western composer and scholar, Harvey tackles several aspects of Western culture and particularly of musical composition. He first intends to elucidate the nature of what in Western thought is considered to be “spiritual”, and to determine the extent up to which musical practice and experience can fall into that category. His discourse leads him into the world of Eastern thought, particularly of Vedic (or Vedanta) philosophy and of Buddhist meditation. Progressively, Harvey finds parallelisms between Western and Eastern thought, and starts relying more and more on the Eastern approach to and understanding of spirituality, as he shows that no discipline of Western thought can respond to those matters as fully and organically as the Oriental schools do. Harvey’s final conclusion emphasises the importance that our subjective states of awareness and consciousness have in our reception of music, and acknowledges the value that music has in our lives both as an endeavour of spiritual nature (from the composer’s point of view) and as a trigger of spiritual experience (whether it be from the listener’s or the composer’s standpoint). Music, Harvey concludes, has a unique capacity to create within us a spiritual experience of unity: a feeling of compassion, solidarity and sympathy that commences with our own “inner” selves, and reaches out to our fellow beings and the universe around us.

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<sup>51</sup> Harvey, p. 85.

and body. It is possible by Yoga, a certain psychological discipline, to remove this veil of separative consciousness and become aware of the true Self, the Divinity within us and all.”<sup>54</sup>

What Sri Aurobindo refers to as the “removal of the separative consciousness” and the “awareness of the true Self and the Divinity within us and all” can be equated with what Boulez called *coherence* and *harmony*, what Stravinsky and Harvey denoted as the experience of *unity*, and what Sri Chinmoy calls *oneness*. These three thinkers subscribe to the point of view that artistic and musical creation and performance can play a catalysing effect in achieving this state of unity or oneness. It must however be noted that there is a fundamental difference between Harvey’s approach and understanding of the spiritual value of music and that of Indian spiritual figures such as Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy.

In the case of the latter two thinkers, the achievement of a state of spiritual unity with the Self and the universe is foremost to the merely physical or intellectual practice of music. That is to say, Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy part not from the stance of the Western composer whose primary objective is generally that of individual artistic expression and who may find along his creative journey an outlet for spiritual endeavour, but from the stance of the Eastern spiritual seeker, who perceives the main goal of human life to be the development of a divine attitude towards life and thus the attainment of spiritual progress, for which he can employ musical practice as one of his means of evolution. Sri Chinmoy elucidates in the following manner:

“The acceptance of life with a divine attitude is not only a lofty idea but the very ideal of life. This ideal of life is realised, revealed and manifested through God's soul-elevating inspiration and man's life-building aspiration. Acceptance of life is the divine pride of true spirituality. To live a spiritual life is our only responsibility.”<sup>55</sup>

## **6.2. A YOGIC PERCEPTION OF MUSIC**

Parting from this primarily spiritual attitude towards life, it is perfectly possible to adopt music as a means of spiritual practice and experience. For the realm of the spiritual, according to Indian Vedic lore, encompasses the entirety of creation with all its manifestations, art and music being some of them:

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<sup>54</sup> Sri Aurobindo: *The Integral Yoga*, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Sri Chinmoy: *Beyond Within*, p. 279-280.

“All the energies of the Lila<sup>56</sup> are equal in the sight from above, all are disguises of the Divine. But one hast to add that all can be turned into a first means towards the realisation of the Divine (...) Art, poetry, music, as they are in their ordinary functioning, create mental and vital, not spiritual values; but they can be turned to a higher end, and then, like all things that are capable of linking our consciousness to the Divine, they are transmuted and become spiritual and can be admitted as part of a life of Yoga. All takes new values not from itself, but from the consciousness that uses it; for there is only one thing essential, needful, indispensable, to grow conscious of the Divine Reality and live in it and live it always.”<sup>57</sup>

### **6.3. PLANES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SPIRITUAL VALUE OF MUSIC**

Another aspect of great importance in the discussion of the spiritual value of music seen from the yogic perspective is that of consciousness<sup>58</sup>. In similar terms as the ones Harvey employed when he was referring to the importance that the subjective consciousness has in the creation and reception of music, Sri Aurobindo clarifies that what ultimately gives music its true spiritual value is the state or plane of consciousness from where the music originates and is later transmitted by the composer. It is the composer’s personal effort implied in linking the individual human consciousness to the Divine that determines the spiritual character of the artistic or musical manifestation. This act of linking can occur in a conscious or unconscious way depending on the individual, but it is the purpose of yogic practice to make the effort in as conscious a way as possible. In this sense, Sri Chinmoy clarifies that the spiritually conscious composer or musician has a double responsibility, namely, that of aspiring to reach higher states of consciousness in order to tread highly spiritual realms from which he can receive the inspiration to compose, and that of becoming a vessel to transmit the music form those:

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<sup>56</sup> The term *Lila* is used in Vedic cosmogony to denote the “divine play” of the universe, considering the material manifestation of the universe to be the cosmic game of God manifesting His Self in multiple minor selves.

<sup>57</sup> Sri Aurobindo: *On Music*, p. 36-38.

<sup>58</sup> However neglected they might have become throughout the development of Western music, the tremendous spiritual implications of musical discipline are not exclusive of Indian culture and Yogic practice. Music forms an integral part in the spiritual endeavour of various ethnical groups in the world, particularly in Eastern cultures. Within the Sufi tradition, for instance, Hazrat Inayat Khan is one of the most significant exponents and researchers of the spiritual dimension of music and the effects it has on human consciousness. See his books: *The Music of Life* and *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*.

“Each type of music has access to a particular realm. Vital and intellectual music cannot be used as a vehicle for spiritual growth – it is like knocking on the wrong door. Vital music stimulates and may bring our consciousness down, whereas the soul’s music, psychic music, elevates. Present-day musicians are mostly musicians who play vital or intellectual music. They create lightning excitement for the music-lovers. But excitement is not the answer to spiritual evolution. It is the soulful awakening that is of paramount importance.”<sup>59</sup>

Being a both a philosopher and musician of a firm and deeply rooted spiritual orientation, Sri Chinmoy further elaborates from his personal experience on the role that a spiritually oriented musician or composer can and should have in order to surcharge his music with sound spirituality. He likewise explains the significant effect that such a type of spiritual or “soulful” music, as he denotes it, can have on the listeners and their overall spiritual awareness, aiding them to attain the state of universal unity that Harvey and Sri Aurobindo had previously described. He adds:

“Soulful music is the music that wants to eventually transform and divinise our consciousness. It carries us into the Universal Consciousness and makes us feel that we are in tune with the highest, with the deepest, with the farthest. It also makes us feel that God Himself is the Supreme Musician. This self-expansion is not egocentric; it is something divine, something supreme, something universal. A soulful sound is produced by the Universal in us, by the Eternal in us, by the Absolute in us.

“The supreme duty of an artist or musician is to meditate before he creates something and, while creating to be in a very contemplative, divine mood. Then, when the creation is completed, he will immediately offer his creation to the Supreme. This is the supreme duty of the spiritual musician or artist.”<sup>60</sup>

Throughout his writings, Sri Chinmoy offers thorough and profound explanations of the relationship between meditation and spiritual discipline on one hand, and musical or artistic practice on the other. Harvey had started to tap upon this issue, revealing the vivid and dynamising effect that the silence of meditation has on artistic creativity. Sri Chinmoy expands the discussion thus:

“In the spiritual world, next to meditation is music, the breath of music. Meditation is silence, energising and fulfilling. Silence is the eloquent expression of the inexpressible. Silence is the source of everything. It is the source of music and it is music itself. Silence is the deepest, most satisfying music of the Supreme.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Sri Chinmoy: *The Source of Music*, p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Sri Chinmoy: *The Source of Music*, p. 9 & 20.

<sup>61</sup> Sri Chinmoy: *The Source of Music*, p. 3.

As seen in the previous quotes, spiritual figures of the calibre of Sri Chinmoy and Sri Aurobindo give, in their unique understanding and overall approach towards musical creation and performance, paramount importance to the spiritual elements involved in the process. However, they do not neglect other aspects involved in the process of musical execution (here understood both as creation and performance), as they likewise recognise the importance that elements such as vital strength and skilful technique have therein. In Sri Aurobindo's words:

“The true value of one's creation depends on the origin of one's inspiration, on the level, the height where one finds it. But the value of the execution depends on the vital strength which expresses it. (...) In all human creations the most important thing is inspiration. Naturally, the execution must be on the same level as the inspiration; to be able to express truly well the highest things one must have a very good technique. Technique is even indispensable, but it is not the only indispensable thing, it is less important than inspiration. To complete the genius both must be there.”<sup>62</sup>

### **PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS**

Seen from the spiritual perspective of Eastern yogic philosophy as expounded by Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy, a conscious spiritual attitude based on a spiritual discipline centred around meditative practices can be of great significance for creative artists and musicians who wish to surcharge their creations with spiritual value. In this understanding, the realm or plane of consciousness from which the music originates is of foremost importance, as this is a key factor in determining whether the artistic creation is of a merely vital, intellectual or psychic (purely spiritual) character. According to the aforementioned Indian thinkers, it is possible to access and get acquainted with the various planes of consciousness in a systematic manner and pinpoint those of a higher spiritual degree through the practice of yoga and meditation. In this way, the composer or musician should be able to draw his inspiration from a spiritually surcharged realm.

It is also worth mentioning that, despite being of a highly spiritual character, the stance of these Indian thinkers is not radically dogmatic, exclusive or indifferent towards skill, proficient technique and vital strength, for they also acknowledge the importance that these other elements have for the convincing and successful transmission of the musical material, whether it be in the process of writing or execution. Both spiritual inspiration and technical proficiency must be present for a musical piece to achieve the pinnacle of its purpose.

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<sup>62</sup> Sri Aurobindo: *On Music*, p. 8 & 6.

## 7. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of the present dissertation has been to analyse various aspects involved in the complex process of musical composition. The methodological intention of the paper consisted in isolating several of the most challenging considerations that composers have to face whilst exerting their labour, namely the technical, aesthetical, stylistic and spiritual ones. In order to offer a systematic analysis of these numerous implications, the personal perspectives of various renowned composers of the Western tradition were studied, namely those of Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez and Jonathan Harvey, who have all written in-depth academic papers on the matter. To analyse the phenomenon from the point of view of Indian spiritual philosophy, the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy were employed and their views compared to those of the Western composers.

Right from the very first chapter of the essay it was quite evident that an approach to musical composition from an exclusively technical, aesthetical or spiritual perspective, which disregards the others, is not advocated by any of the aforementioned composers or spiritual philosophers. They concur in the fact that it is not possible to isolate these elements from one another, and rather fathom the art of musical composition from an integral or holistic point of view. It is thus that although they do emphasise certain aspects of composition more than others (Stravinsky the technical, Boulez the aesthetical and Harvey the spiritual ones), their views are broad and all-encompassing and give due regard to the various perspectives being discussed. Technique, aesthetics and spirit needs must go hand in hand. Boulez expresses himself in the following terms:

“Any concern with purely technical matters would deny the pure intention of realising the composer’s ideal (...) [However], aesthetic thinking divorced from considerations of technique can lead only to bankruptcy: the musical idiom is in such a case nothing more than a kind of ingenious simulation, a banal gesturing, a question of temperament”.<sup>63</sup>

In a similar way, Stravinsky states:

“The very act of putting my work on paper, of, as we say, kneading the dough, is for me inseparable from the pleasure of creation. So far as I am concerned, I cannot separate the spiritual effort from the psychological and physical effort; they confront me on the same level.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Boulez, p. 66.

<sup>64</sup> Stravinsky, p. 51.

In this passage, Stravinsky mentions the “spiritual effort” involved, an aspect that all the quoted composers touched upon – namely, the spiritual intention or aspiration implied in the process of composition. This aspect played a vital role in the discussion as it linked the predominantly intellectual point of view of the Western composers to that of the Indian spiritual philosophers Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy. And although the individual views differed to some degree, it was possible to find points of correspondence between them. For example, Boulez, although giving foremost importance to the aesthetical perspective of composition, approached music not only as a science and a craft of demanding technical, historical and cultural implications, but also as an art through which the composer can find a valid way to express his aesthetic intentions, and even his inspiration and sincerity.<sup>65</sup> Stravinsky, treading into a more spiritual field than Boulez although simultaneously emphasising technical elements, referred to the role of music as a proper means to search *variety* within *unity* and to pursue “the One out of the Many”, and as a vehicle to promote “a communion, a union of man with his fellow man and with the Supreme Being”.<sup>66</sup>

Most relevant for the purpose of the current dissertation was Harvey’s discourse, as he spanned in a remarkably academic and thorough idiom the trajectory of a highly cultivated Western mind progressively becoming conscious of the transcendental impetus implied in musical composition and searching for a more elevated degree of spirituality. Harvey started his discourse by defining terms such as “transcendent” and “spiritual” on an intellectual basis, for which he ultimately recurred to the systematic approach to spiritual wisdom that seekers from the East have crystallised in schools of thought and spiritual discipline such as Buddhism and Vedic philosophy. In similar terms as Stravinsky, Harvey’s arguments emphasised the role that music can play as a vehicle for finding *unity* out of *ambiguity*, and as a channel for enabling a communion between individuals and of individuals with forces of a more universal nature. To support his views, he quoted and paraphrased numerous composers, writers and thinkers of the Western tradition who have perceived their art and music as a means for searching “mystical”, “transcendental” or “spiritual” experiences or states of consciousness. On this, Harvey explained:

“Music excites emotion, (...) but music is profound as an art form because it can do those things even within a tranquil framework. It is both emotionally intense and possessed of a deep sense of harmony, in the

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<sup>65</sup> See Boulez, p. 65-66.

<sup>66</sup> See Stravinsky, p. 18 & 140-141.

broad sense of the word. The greater the conflicts it successfully unifies, the more spiritual the music (...) Sudden perceptions of unity, or conversely, of the components of what we previously perceived as a unity, are the essence both of music and of spiritual perception.”<sup>67</sup>

In this way, Harvey progressively delved deeper and deeper into the spiritual implications of music and drew ever more on parallels with meditation and Indian spirituality as seen in Buddhism and Vedic thought. Harvey’s elevated degree of spiritual awareness, his conviction of music’s spiritual potential, and the degree to which he aspires to surcharge his musical output with sheer spirituality is thus summarised in the following way:

“I cannot conceive of spending my life in a heedlessly unethical pursuit. Composing is a part of trying to live a life “skillfully,” as Buddhists say. One can compose from many different levels of the soul, base or elevated; the decision is important (...) I aspire to a future in which the deepest level of personality known to human beings, the radiant, still point beyond words, is encouraged by music to become manifest.”<sup>68</sup>

Harvey thus reached the conclusion that the spiritual implications of music are arguably foremost to others such as the technical, cultural and aesthetical ones, as they are “elevating” and offer access to “deeper levels of personality”. The present essay then showed how well this final stance of Harvey’s resonates with the stance of the Indian spiritual figures Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy. These latter part not from the primarily intellectual Western approach to music that eventually unleashes its spiritual value, but from the spiritual ground that perceives all worldly manifestations as being expressions of the spirit.

The writings of Sri Aurobindo and Sri Chinmoy were valuable for the present analysis as they conferred a deeper and more systematic understanding of the purely spiritual implications of musical composition and performance. They also posed the significance that the individual attitude and state of consciousness of both composer, musician and listener has in determining the spiritual essence (height or depth) that music conveys. Showing parallels existing between musical and spiritual discipline *per se* (such as meditative practices and the experience of silence), but without neglecting the importance of its technical implications, these authors emphasised the value that music has for individuals as a vehicle to expedite their personal spiritual awareness and to increase their awareness and sense of union with the universe.

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<sup>67</sup> Harvey, p. 52 and p. 58-59.

<sup>68</sup> Harvey, p. xvi.



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