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Overtured Stepladders (*Escabeaux*)

[A Short Essay of Decryption About Music]

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“I should sometime — I don’t know if I’ll ever have the time — speak of music, in the margins.”[1] So let’s linger on these margins, where musical writing can make a rim to silence, to what, of the real, makes a hole.

In his speech introducing the theme of the next WAP Congress in Rio, Jacques-Alain Miller asks “whether music, painting, the fine arts, have their Joyce”[2]. He proposes that, in the register of music, it is perhaps Schoenberg, with his atonal music, who occupies this place. Joyce, he continues, was able to make of his symptom “the stepladder (*escabeau*) of his art”[3], an art object elevated, via this stepladder, “to the dignity of the Thing”[4].

For music, the stepladder is part of how it is used: the conductor climbs it in order to coordinate the *all* of the instruments in the *One* of the piece, which must be in unison. The composition, which is often more sophisticated, is completed by a stepladder-bis (*escabeau-bis*) with a stand and a baton. This is all made visible in order to invite the audience to listen.

**From “Escabeau” to “S.K.Beau”**

The stepladder is a discovery of Lacan’s that serves to indicate that which the *parlêtre* rests on, the pedestal by which he may raise himself up, sublimate. Everyone has had to construct his own stepladder, has climbed it to the place whence he would be visible for others. Often, it holds together in any way it can, through an always provisional bricolage.

In “Joyce le symptôme,” Lacan invents a singular writing to designate the stepladder (*escabeau*): *S.K.Beau*! He defines it like this: “The *S.K.Beau* is that which conditions in man the fact that he lives off of being (= that he empties being) [*qu’il vit de l’être (=qu’il vide l’être)*] so far as he has — his body: he only has it, for that matter, due to this. Whence my expression of the *parlêtre*, which is substituted for Freud’s Ucs”[5]. In his book, which bears the title of the Lacanian invention *S.K.Beau*, Hervé Castanet “summons” creators. “Some create words, others images, still others utopic fictions. Images make us see — they show, in particular; the word designates — it is the bearer of the universal. The concept attempts to think differently about the world — it ruptures.”[6] Castanet continues by indicating that it is from the gaze — from this hole — that the artist finds himself impelled to show this visible *Not-all*. The writer also lacks the words to say everything. Words, despite their more or less stylized assemblages, can only make a trace, an edge of the hole. Faced with “this encounter with the real called S.K.Beau, every artist unties and reties the image, or the word, or the concept, in order to treat it”[7]. Where it was a question of a treatment of the real through sublimation, with the *sinthome* it is a modality of knotting that allows us to make do with the incurable of the real.

Castanet's clarification indicates the trajectory in Lacan's writing from the *escabeau* to the S.K.Beau: "The word *S.K.Beau* is reemployed here in my essay, with its surprising typography, in order to denude this *real* that the artist confronts, and that possible sublimations veil: at the heart of the Beautiful [ *du Beau*] (of truth, the good, the perfect, the sublime...) there is always this enigmatic *S.K.*, outside meaning [*hors sens*]." [8]

### **From the Orgy to the Tightening of the Real**

When dealing with the scopic relationship to a painting, a photograph, a sculpture, or, in the case of writing, to the letter, it is very natural to ask: *but where is the real?* And what can be said about music? Music does not have voice — that of sensoriality; it has neither intonation nor harmony — the path of sentiment. Let us make the distinction between hearing — what soothes or irritates the senses — and listening, which falls under reading. Relative to the real, music can be understood as the writing of a sound chain: *musical writing* around this hole, this central emptiness, which is silence.

Let us point out that in certain countries music is not written in notes, as it is in France, Italy and Spain "*do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si*", but rather, as is the case in Germany and England, with the first seven letters of the alphabet: *A, B, C, D, E, F, G*. Musical writing also has its wefts, its plaits, its knottings, its intersections, its impasses, its blanks, its repetitions, and so on. *Structure*, in its sonata form, dominated musical composition for two centuries, roughly from Joseph Haydn until Arnold Schoenberg. Interpretation, just as much that of musicians as that of the listener, is adequate for this music: the echo in the auditor from the creation of an Other, of something that resonates in him or her and that he doesn't know. Nothing specific to music, but to that which makes an encounter with a creation: a painting, a text, a play, etc.

The encounter with a work of music can have different impacts on a subject, whether it is sublimation of an impossibility of love, bodily *jouissance* or transcended mysticism. In one by one, a singular link to creation and its interpretation is established, pushing the interminability of commentary to infinity. This music is that of semblances, cleverly arranged according to the recognizable style of each composer and according to his choices, and his fitting in with a style. This choice is called musical taste, and is named this way by default and without knowing how to define the ineffability of the intimacy of a recourse to *jouissance* and the supplementation of the non-rapport.

In his Seminar *Encore*, evoking baroque painting after traveling in Italy — this "orgy of churches" [9] — Lacan speaks of a "runoff of representations of martyrs," [10] of an exaltation of bodies, of a sublimatory *jouissance*. On this point it is not risky to make the link between classical painting and music — but *not-All*. For example, with Schoenberg, who questioned the sonata structure and form, the composition becomes more and more undone from the subjective effects that are limited by atonal writing. Music is thus no longer to be interpreted, but rather to be deciphered.

### **Schoenberg's Overturned S.K.Beau**

In the search for new musical languages there can be a passage from a so-called "intuitive" writing, which leaves interpretation open to contingency, and a musical composition that is dictated by chance from some general indications on the part of the composer - to a writing of the smallest detail that leaves the performer no possibility of introducing any space of subjectivity.

To go against serial music, which is very strict in its composition and its performance, supposes introducing random variables that leave a part of the creation to chance in

the encounter between the performer and the piece. This is the case for John Cage and his concept of *absolute non-intentionality*.<sup>[11]</sup> Iannis Xenakis, for his part, turns towards mathematical writing and computer programming in order to approach an absolute randomness.

Pierre Boulez rebels against “haunting of chance” and stigmatizes these “elementary forms of transmutation of chance” but, especially, he considers that these ways of writing music reveal a weakness on the part of the composer.<sup>[12]</sup> It is not music that is undone, but rather creativity that is at fault.

The objective is to find a writing that privileges neither durations, nor intensities, nor timbre, to go constantly further in the degree of abstraction. De-subjectivising music for another encounter of musical language with listening. Noise, scream, saw: it is from the unity of spare parts that this music speaks and is received.

The invention of atonal music and dodecaphonic music is attributed to Arnold Schoenberg, the iconoclast whose works were at first whistled or booed, who firmly rejected all proposals to compose for Hollywood cinema. Born in Vienna in 1874 to a Jewish family that had converted to Protestantism, he fled the rise of Nazism by leaving Berlin, which had just begun promulgating anti-Jewish laws. He questioned what, up until then, had been his position with regards to his origins. Marked by the violence and hate displayed towards him, he felt he had to support “his place as a Jew” for all to see. In 1933, he returned to France, where he only stayed long enough to re-convert to Judaism at the rue Copernic synagogue. He then arrived in the United States where he settled down definitively. From then on he felt very committed to his Jewishness and thought about a plan to save European Jews, which failed. His compositions would become very influenced by references to the Old Testament, such as *Jacob's Ladder* (1917) — the stepladder towards Abraham's God! — or his opera *Moses and Aaron* (1930-32), which I will come back to. In 1947, at the age of 73, he wrote, in twelve days, a vibrant homage to the Jewish victims of Nazi Germany: *A Survivor from Warsaw*, opus 46. A poignant piece of seven minutes, twenty-nine seconds, a chilling dodecaphonic piece: beyond words, the cold, implacable real is there in its notes, in those words that scream the inhuman and plummet like blocks of real which they crush. It is a monumental homage, in music, after that inhuman earthquake, that rip, that tearing of history from humans.<sup>[13]</sup>

Like Joyce, Schoenberg situates his work not in a temporality, but rather as something to be deciphered, to be understood. This abrupt sentence is attributed to him: “My music is neither modern nor ancient. It is poorly played.”<sup>[14]</sup> And also this very Joycean prophecy: “I made a discovery [dodecaphonic music] that will assure the preponderance of German music for one hundred years...”<sup>[15]</sup>

Schoenberg died in the solitude of his opera *Moses and Aaron*, which he left unfinished, torn apart between the mutism of Moses, bearer of God's strict word, and the eloquence of Aaron, the maker of the Golden Calf. The bewilderment concerning the message of this part of the Old Testament is resolved in a singular choice in the musical treatment of the main protagonists: a refined chorus and a few notes of a wind instrument for the Word of the Burning Bush, a *spoken* declaration for Moses, and a tenor voice for Aaron. Schoenberg wrote all three acts, but only composed music for the first two. He could not go beyond the words that Moses speaks at the end of the second act: “Oh word, word that I lack!” (*O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt!*)<sup>[16]</sup> Thus, he leaves the composition of this piece at the point of its failure to call up the *unknowable*. The reference is not religious, but rather caught in an introspection that, from the doubt that inhabits it, leads it towards the search for truth. On this point, Lucien Rebatet states that “Schoenberg, by confining his grave and profound Moses

to outside of music, remains in an aesthetic of refusal”.[17] He would have had to find a musical language comparable with no other in order to free himself from the shackles by which he saw music as limited. This work, which traversed twenty years of his life, remained unfinished. Schoenberg was left with this impossibility to write the end; there are no notes.

### **Transgression, S.K.Beau, Music, and Pass**

Diego Masson has explored two different paths of the evolution of the de-subjectivised writing of music.[18] One, with Xenakis, who composed starting from mathematics, and who pushed the procedure so far that he produced a law of the so-called *positive random variable*, a law that determined a note in duration and in height. He pushed this writing to a cusp that seemed marked by an absolute solitude, and he decided to find a way to address an audience by choosing that which, in that writing, produced subjective effects in him. The other path was the one pursued by Boulez, who wrote more and more atonal kinds of music and pieces of a cold brilliance, up until the point where he himself withdrew from publication a piece that he deemed inaudible. So, unlike what we said of Schoenberg, neither Xenakis nor Boulez remained in that absolute solitude. They sought, once again, to link themselves with the Other, to others with a still possible listening. Nevertheless, it is true also, in a certain sense, that Xenakis and Boulez made their stepladder from rejection, from the incomprehension of their music.

Diego Masson has shown that music is indeed a kind of writing. Even so, we are little prepared to broach Schoenberg’s atonal writing, Xenakis’s mathematic writing, Boulez’s serial writing (*Structure I pour deux pianos* [1952]). One more step and we get post-serial writing, that of the last Boulez (*Dérive II* [2002]), a writing of fragments about which everyone says: “Existence — the real, and truth.” Boulez went to the end of rationality and its logic of writing, and then took, as we have seen, a side step towards a new alliance with the listeners of his works by leaving to the composer, and the conductor, an “inherent incertitude in every subjective confrontation.” In every work, “existence is at stake,” each is a “question of life and death”.[19] A “separated” real, bits of assembled real, juxtaposed, without order, “without master”, a fugue of meaning, “tormentor of solitude” a voice for speech, the chance of a harmony of spare parts. *Bourreaux de solitude* (Tormentor of Solitude), is the title that Boulez gave to the second part of one of his pieces, *Le Marteau sans maître* (Hammer Without Master).

This is what interpellates in, and refers to, the experience of the Analyst of the School concerning the moment of the decision to do the pass, time of solitude, moment of separation from the Other of transference. The de-supposition of knowledge refers to this *being-alone* that is no longer that of doubt, but rather that of the transgression of the system, that of a passage to the act: a *passage to the act to be made* [*passage à faire l’acte*] to enter into the pass through the overturning of the stepladder of transference.

Here we see what determined the content of this musical sequence that Diego Masson discussed during the Congress in Paris.

An *Impromptu* for an uncertain and contingent dialogue between a conductor and an A.E. [Analyst of the School], who considered this a singular modality for a final testimony. A dialogue between the logic of a cure, and that of the progression from musical writing towards an outside of meaning [*hors-sens*], a real. A dialogue behind *transparent stepladders*, chosen as such for the occasion. The transparent stepladder is not the without modesty of saying, nor the opaque *jouissance* of speech. It is an overturned stepladder that one uses to practice a saying well.

The enthusiasm of the listeners was not only due to what could be attributed to someone whose stepladder promoted him for everyone's satisfaction. Rather, it was one of the effects of the tightening of the contingencies of their lives, and of the consequences of this concerning the deciphering of the unconscious for one, and musical writing for the other. It was due to this that this could have produced an effect of transmission. A testimony, in the end, in the School One. An attempt to transmit one's knowing how to do with [*savoir y faire avec*] the real and to say well one's analytic trajectory with the originality of this overturned musical stepladder, with the *S.K.Beau*.

**Translated from the French by Ian Curtis**

- [1] Jacques Lacan, Encore, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998, p. 116
- [2] Jacques-Alain Miller, "The Unconscious and the Speaking Body," trans. A.R. Price, *World Association of Psychoanalysis*, n.d., web, 6 Jan 2015; see <http://wapol.org/en/articulos/Template.asp?intTipoPagina=4&intPublicacion=13&intEdicion=9&intIdiomaPublicacion=2&intArticulo=2742&intIdiomaArticulo=2>.
- [3] *Ibidem*
- [4] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, pp. 112
- [5] Jacques Lacan, "Joyce le symptôme," in *Autres écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 2001, p. 565 (not translated)
- [6] Hervé Castanet, *S.K.Beau*, Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2011, p. 9 (not translated)
- [7] *Ibidem*, p. 10
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 8
- [9] Jacques Lacan, Encore, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 113
- [10] *Ibidem*, p. 116, translation modified
- [11] Michel Chion, "Musique contemporaine : L'évolution de la musique depuis 1945," Paris: *Encyclopædia Universalis*, T. 15, 2002, p. 754 (not translated)
- [12] Emile Vuillermoz, *Histoire de la musique*, Paris: Fayard, 1973, p. 552 (not translated)
- [13] Diego Masson, « Impromptu. Les chemins du réel en musique », intervention lors du ix<sup>e</sup> Congrès de l'amp, Paris, 17 avril 2014, (unpublished) — audio in French available on [radiolacan.com](http://radiolacan.com) ; video available at [congresamp2014.com](http://congresamp2014.com). [14] Lucien Rebatet, *Une histoire de la musique*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1969, p. 728 (not translated)
- [15] *Ibidem*, p. 734
- [16] See Gustave Kobbé, *The Complete Opera Book*, 1919
- [17] Lucien Rebatet, *Une histoire de la musique*, *op. cit.*, p. 739
- [18] Diego Masson, "Impromptu: Les chemins du réel en musique," *op. cit.*
- [19] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Musiques: Une encyclopédie pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Arles: Actes sude/Cité de musique, hors collection, mars 2003 (not translated)