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MUSIC, SILENCE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

INCIPIT V Sinfonia Beethoven

Silence, the void and the pause are all fundamental components of music: sometimes they even constitute gravitational foci for whole musical passages, as in Beethoven's famous incipit to his Fifth Symphony in which the first of four equal chords is replaced by a pause, on which, however, the beat falls. It is a passage where the centrality of rhythm and repetition in music are also synthetized.

Music was defined by Ferruccio Busoni as 'the art of sounds in the movement of time' (1922): its essential components of rhythm, melody and harmony, including silence as an original and generative element, make it a key element in the processes of somato-psychic birth and functioning.

The evolutive function of rhythm is to be found not only in the easy flow of mother–infant mutual exchanges, but in its inherent element of rupture, which opens up a space of absence and the resulting expectation, thereby originating representation. Breaks and regularities that make up rhythm provide both an experience of continuity and spaces of absence and emptiness. In music rhythm is understood as the alternation of sound and silence, or of different musical cells, in a repetition that is only partly foreseeable: it may constitute the root of the psyche as an apparatus functioning through temporal processes. The opposite of continuous is not discontinuous, but the unexpected. Both continuity and discontinuity are needed for the birth of time: permanence – as the certainty of a Winnicottian *going on being* – but also the event – the opposition of presence-absence – are needed to construct and to differentiate it (André, 2009). Within rhythm, the break becomes what heralds continuity: it is a micro-space of absence, the primal particle of emptiness that is then occupied by the expectation of repetition and therefore by its representation. It makes up a miniature, an embryo, of the process that leads from absence to symbolization.

Expectation is also the time of delay which, according to Freud (1940), allows the Ego to interpolate 'between the demand made by an instinct and the action that satisfies it, the activity of thought' (p. 199): the object absence allows thought and representational activity to emerge. Human temporality, according to psychoanalysis, is structurally rhythmic, as it is affected by unconscious timelessness and ruled by a discontinuous way of functioning that is based on two separate times and moves in opposite directions (afterwardness or *après coup*). From a specifically relational point of view, Bion (1965) introduced the capacity to tolerate the 'no-breast', as a result of the operation of the alpha function, which is started by maternal *reverie*: as a result, the infant is protected from a nameless terror. Winnicott (1966) described how the infant, confronted with an absence of the mother that exceeds the time of retaining her image, cannot use the symbol of union anymore and falls prey to unthinkable anxieties: these lead to a permanent deformation of psychic functioning and to a failure in developing transitional and symbolic processes. Here we also find a hint at the development of the sense of time and its psychic structuring in two moments, which in this context involve the other's intervention. The subject's ability to estimate time appears, therefore, to be ontologically tied to her ability to build and retain a caregiver's image together with a sense of being one, as well as to her compelling somatic needs: the whole process is included in an inescapable relational dimension.

Time is therefore a central element in the subjectivation process, which always goes together with pain and mourning: a shift is involved from primal narcissism to the capacity to be alone in the presence of the other, as well as from the excessive nature of the body and drives to phantasy production and the development of thought and language, which allow the subject to enter historical time. Music, in turn, unfolds in time and may be considered a materialization of the mourning process as it proceeds through unending transformations and the continuous creation and destruction of sounds that are replaced by subsequent ones, as well as linked and signified by the recall of the preceding ones. Music leaves behind silence and void, but also the inner transformation of the listener who, by memory and anticipation, integrates its passages so that at the end the external object is no longer there; instead, there is an internal object that enriches the subject's Ego and inner world.

Silence is the condition for music to occur, a potential space in which a generative process may spring or a sound void for the infant to negatively hallucinate its mother and initiate representational activity. Similarly in music the intervals, namely the space in between sounds, confer musical and affective meaning to the musical discourse. As Mozart is said to have stated, "the music is not in the notes, but in the silence between". Intervals link or separate the individual notes of melody and harmony, and are measured by the sounds distance in height: intervals of a second, a third, a fourth and so on, unison when there is no interval. Melodies are made of sounds that come in succession at different heights, while harmonies are made of sounds of different heights simultaneously perceived.

Since the beginning of mankind, music has been considered a powerful inducer of emotions: its inherent element of motion acts as an affective driving force, though they are feelings without an object and often even without a name. Understanding why a single piece of music or a specific musical passage is able to stir a specific emotion is a very complex problem. Intervals, indeed, have been used by composers to convey specific affective meanings. An example of this is the *lament cry*: since madrigals in the sixteenth century, moans were expressed through descendent intervals of a second, either major or minor, which we can find in very different composers, from Monteverdi to Verdi, Wagner and Bartok. The minor chord of a second, namely the most dissonant among bichords, is made of two notes at a distance of a minor second interval: thus, it becomes understandable why, when the two component notes are played in sequence, they evoke very anguished and unsettling feelings. In Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlos*, Third Act, we can hear the cellos playing broken chords that begin by descending minor seconds, while in the lower register we hear acciaccaturas of ascending minor seconds.

Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlos*, Third Act

The *lament bass* and the *chromatic fourth* are sequences of descendent notes, via minor and major seconds, which are used to represent and induce feelings of sorrow and despair. A compelling illustration of the use of the chromatic fourth is to be found in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, No. 25: here a suffering intensity is achieved through a concentration of the chromatic fourth in the higher and lower sound registers.

Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, No. 25

Tonalities are based on a hierarchy of sounds with definite distances among them, and determine the harmony of each specific piece of music. They are also associated with particular moods: the clearest occurrence is the difference between major and minor keys, which everybody can link to very different affective states. As an example, we can listen to the two first Preludes in Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, the former in C major and the latter in C minor. Bach preludes 1 and 2 Vol. I

Intervals, or gaps, therefore, perform a central role in the process of affect signification; but even silences and time extensions are crucial components of music as well as of psychic life.

According to Busoni (1907): 'That which, within our present-day music, most nearly approaches the essential nature of the art, is the Rest and the Hold (Pause). [...] The tense silence between two movements – in itself music, in this environment – leaves wider scope for divination than the more determinate, but therefore less elastic, sound.' (p. 23). The rest, or pause, is a metered silence, an expressive and rhythmic void, all the more significant since the accent of the musical phrase may sometimes be located on it (such as in the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). The hold or *corona*, on the contrary, is the indefinite, a postponement of the time flow that lets the sound go on *ad libitum*, a musical element that amplifies the sound effect of what comes before, both keeping the meaning of what has preceded and underlining the expectation of what is to follow.

In the concluding bars of Chopin's Prelude in E minor, Op. 28, we have two coronas: the former, on a pause, prepares for the conclusion, while the latter lengthens the final chord to an undefined end, up to the performer's discretion.

Chopin's *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28

As far as psychic life is concerned, a similar idea is expressed in Aulagnier's term 'spoken shadow', used to refer to the mother's relationship with her unborn child, who needs a specific space for its Ego to be allowed to 'come into being'. Here the visual aspect is underlined in a negative form (the *shadow*), while the auditory one appears in a passive form (*spoken*): both are present long before the unfolding of the basic need of the dawning psyche to metabolize the heterogeneous through the early forms of representation. The shadow, just as the *corona* in music, stands for the spreading of the maternal subjectivity over the child's own, still in embryo: its gaps and blanks, as rhythmical and musical elements, imply expectation and are bound for convergence into a vital rhythm just centered on the subject.

Silence may also be considered contiguous to the concept of negative hallucination, as a representation of the absence of representation and a framing function for representation. Green (1993) introduced the concept of *the negative* as a specific mode of psychic work, aimed at lessening the excess of excitation and drive energies that otherwise would be unbearable: the negative becomes, therefore, the original state of psychic elaboration that, starting from the radical positivization of the drive, arrives at neurotic functioning, which, indeed, Freud defined as the negative of perversion.

The concept of the negative is of great help in conceptualizing some of the qualities that make music work just as the psyche does, due to its isomorphic nature to psychic life. If we consider music as issuing from a selection of sound elements from the totality of thunderous noise made by the uninterrupted and simultaneous production of all sounds and noises, we individuate a work of the negative at its basis: this is accomplished both diachronically, as individual sounds or chords are continuously replaced by others, and synchronically, because only a few sounds are admitted among the whole, as a result of harmonic rules and the author's creative needs. The key, for example, is born from priority bestowed to specific sounds above others, on the basis of the tonic or keynote, which is the fulcrum of the development of the musical discourse and is the note that names the key. The main notes of the key are not necessarily played, but are perceivable by the listener as the focal points of the musical development. According to Kohut and Levarie (1950), it is the Ego's work to organize and transform the totality of sounds into knowable patterns, allowing pleasure to replace anxiety.

A further illustration of the negative in music is the introduction, at the end of the eighteenth century, of the tempered scale (Andreas Werkmeister, 1691), which aimed at limiting the range of sounds by cutting down all the possible frequencies within the semitone interval: in other words, the descending semitone from a note was equalized to the ascending semitone of the lower one. In the tempered scale, mathematical ratios between different scale degrees were changed in order to conventionally remove dissonances that were problematic when playing fixed tuning

instruments (i.e. harpsichord, pipe organ) together with not fixed (i.e. string instruments): modern harmony was thereby definitively established. On the basis of this negative operation, Bach composed his *Well-Tempered Clavier*, two collections (1722, 1744) of twenty-four preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys: a deeply musical synthesis of the contrapuntal principle of imitation and of the harmonic mechanism of modulation (Mila, 1963).

Another negative phenomenon, which appears to be of an opposite nature, is the progressive dissolution of the key that, starting from musical romanticism, and going through the ultimate Wagnerian extensions, leads to atonality and even noise.

The constituent alterity of the human being matches the alterity of music, which works by a continuous appropriation and reworking of pre-existing material: through the author's style, this alterity is transformed and becomes part and parcel of her compositional and performing style, a creative outcome born from a deeply intimate relationship between two musicians through their works of music. Green's definition of identification as the response of negativity to alterity (1993) appears to be relevant to this regard: through identification the Ego becomes the object. This involves the risk of undergoing an alienation that undoes one's own subjectivity.

In music this undoing or unlinking, as an expression of the death drive, is flanked by the work of linking in time (melody) and space (harmony). Bio-anthropological research, indeed, shows that in human evolution music has always been a cohesive, coordinating, and cooperating tool among individuals and groups, before language development and with a selective advantage for surviving. Moreover, while language follows a horizontal path and needs an alternation of statements, music is endowed with two more vertical dimensions, harmony and rhythm, which facilitate emotional coordination and sharing. This particular way of functioning contributes to the birth and unfolding of feelings of intimacy between people, starting from the earliest, dual, mother–infant relationship.

Many authors have suggested that music mirrors mental life. I attempt to show that it is made up of the same mechanisms as psychic activity, and is a basic component of psychic life and unconscious functioning since the earliest sensorial experiences in utero. There are significant implications of this statement for psychoanalysis, which I can only mention now: both the word, that is the main tool of psychoanalysis, and music, as a nondiscursive and untranslatable symbolism, are deeply rooted in sensoriality, the body and the infantile. To perceive such deep and archaic levels of psychic life, a specific quality of bodily and musical listening is needed, that implicates movement, vibration, and sounds and rhythms specific of somatic functions, including the word and the voice.