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“I would like to think that my music offers no wall”

Interview with Yoshiaki Onishi (2017)

by Charlotte Brouard-Tartarin (Programme Editor, Philharmonie Luxembourg)

Could you say a few words about your work which will be premiered at the Philharmonie and how you have written it?

Last year I received an email from Lydia Rilling, Dramaturg of the Luxembourg Philharmonie, inviting me to write a piece for Klangforum Wien, and that the work would be conducted by Emilio Pomàrico. It was the first thing I read after I woke up that morning, so I still remember the pleasant surprise. Of course, in a heartbeat I replied “yes,” and I started working on it.

For the past few years, I have been interested in the philosophical idea of *Vogelfreiheit*, the term that was re-introduced to me by my friend, colleague, and music theorist Scott Gleason. He writes of it brilliantly: “Within a home that is no home. The sky as container, cage, prison cell. Floating like a homing bird that has lost its ability to find true nest, freedom for this bird carries a double valence: free as in liberated, but also free as in without rights.” How he wrote of this historical/philosophical subject moved me, at first without quite knowing why it did. But one thing was certain to me: in this precarious world that I live in now, where the incidents born out of the social injustice abound—and some of which I have recently experienced, either directly or indirectly—it has become more urgent than ever to consider the possibility for connection between my music and its external environment, for music, at its very core of existence, is a communal act. Whether directly or not, the overarching idea of *Vogelfreiheit* touches on so many issues of today. And I have been exploring how that idea of such a double valence—an extreme situation at that—could be placed in the context of music. I thought that this ensemble piece could be part of the research.

There was an obvious compositional challenge, in that the concert program would feature Gérard Grisey’s *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*, and the instrumentation of my piece could not exceed that of Grisey’s. While I cannot control what the listeners of my piece may think, I can say that writing a companion piece to Grisey’s swan song was the last thing I wanted to do. In my opinion, no piece can follow the piece that crossed the threshold. However, just as pieces of standardized instrumentations—string quartet, woodwind quintet, and so on—continue to be written to this day, I thought that the instrumentation of even a seemingly unreachable piece as the Grisey piece could be retaken up in order to give it a different musical trajectory. That is what I attempted to do in my piece.

Vgf II is in four parts that are played with no pause in between. In the first part, entitled *Récit./trans.*, the woodwind and brass players whisper through their instruments the deconstructed text from “Homo Sacer” of *De verborum significatione* by Sextus Pompeius Festus. The title of the final part *...frage* is made intentionally vague, in that it could mean part of a French word “naufrage” (wreck or ruin), or a German word “Frage” (question).

How your work is connected to the theme of the festival « how does it feel? »?

My work is related to the theme of the festival, in a way that my work aims to foster the dialogue—in terms of between two people, and of the dialogue within a self—just how the question “How does it feel?” encourages to elicit the reaction from those who are asked this question.

This is the English version of the interview in French that was published on the program booklet of Rainy Days Festival 2017, pp. 222-224. The published booklet can be consulted online at: <https://www.philharmonie.lu/en/service/publikationen/sonderpublikationen>

What is for you the emotion in music?

A vehicle for further discussion about human nature, and one of the telling evidences that we human beings exist. I have maintained a position that music is—when understood as sounds, or a sounding object, and viewed scientifically as a series of complex physical vibrations of the air—devoid of emotion. However, we need ineluctably to factor in the aspect of “listening,” through which it is revealed that the music has particular sets of musical properties that instantly trigger certain emotions in the listeners’ minds, which are—to a certain degree, at least—formed by their upbringings in certain societal and cultural climates. So I am inclined to think that the emotions in music are constructed perceptions that listeners experience based on their preconditioned minds.

But rejecting the discussion of musical emotion is something I am skeptical about. As Lydia pointed out when she was unfolding the idea for this festival, the discussion of “emotions” in the context of postwar music has seldom occurred, and if it does, it is often within the scope of its absence, for example. I agree with Lydia that it is time that people try to talk more about it. I think that doing so would ultimately help validate the existence of music in this society. In other words, to talk about emotions in music is, at least in my opinion, to talk about human psychology, and I welcome the idea that the music opens up the discussion in ways that are beyond the realm of music. In this capacity, it is incredible to realize what the music is capable of doing to its listeners, or how a specific culture embeds certain emotional “codes” on various musical parameters. I am thinking about the musical affect of the *lamento* motif, or how the music has been used to elicit certain emotions in political propagandas. It is a fascinating topic that needs further discussion, indeed: how the effects and affects in music are so closely intertwined in multitudes of ways.

You were born in Japan, have been studying in the US, have had French teachers. Do you think that this multicultural background helps you touch/move more people hearing your works?

I must answer by stating first that I have been fortunate to see the world, having ties to different countries, cultures and their people. All such experiences touched and moved me greatly. Perhaps because of this life trajectory, I have developed a stance in my compositional approach that interrogates the human nature in general while not binding myself to a specific, preexisting culture. If anything, my multicultural background has helped me explore different source materials for my own compositions, or for me to get some inspirations from.

There are many ways of listening to music, and I cannot enforce any single one of them to anybody. As a result, I have no way of knowing, either qualitatively or quantitatively, whether my music touches and moves people. But I would like to think that my music offers no wall, and it welcomes and challenges anybody who are interested in it.

I would like to think that the act of musical listening is perhaps one of the last bastions—it is almost a utopian thought—that uphold the idea of freedom. This means that I cannot either deny or affirm if anybody hears any kind of [insert a country]-ness in my music. I have all my intention to do my job of composing my works at the highest level possible, but beyond that, and maintaining the multicultural perspectives in my own life, I can only wish that such an outlook of mine would be latently felt through listening to my music.

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Do you change your works according to the perception of the players who play them?

Yes, but on certain limited conditions. While there is a core of musical ideas that I cannot yield to alterations, when I see that there is an opportunity to genuinely improve my piece and the score, I welcome such new suggestions and often incorporate them in the revised versions of the work. For example, if the musicians supply playing instructions that are not written on the score (e.g. woodwind fingerings), I may add them in the future editions of the piece. Or if whatever I wrote had some technical difficulties or notational awkwardness that could have been improved, together with the musicians I consider different musical possibilities. I have been fortunate to work with high-caliber musicians who are open to different ideas, so this kind of collaboration yields better results.

What is for you the role of a composer today?

The most fundamental—and unchanging of all for centuries—answer to this would be “to put notes together.” But that sounds like almost a cop-out answer to me, seeing how there is the Artificial Intelligence technology developed to do this task nowadays. Centered around this fundamental role of a composer, I think it is equally the composer’s role to think *how* to put notes together, *what* notes to put together, and most perplexing of all, *why*. I think any type of creative acts, not just composing, ultimately illuminates aspects of being human. Personally, being a composer allows me to see the world through the act of composing and think about what to do next.

(Interview realized via email in September 2017)