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The Thinking Machine

Instruments: String Sextet
2008

The present work was conceived and written as a concert piece with multiple possible readings ($8! = 8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 40,320$). Heavily influenced by the writings of J.L. Borges and by Ramón Llull's artefact *The Thinking Machine* (13th century) this piece could/should be played in any ordering apart from the printed one, thus breaking the syntactical ordering of the musical discourse and generating a different meaning for each possible reading.

The Thinking Machine is, thus, a syntactic exercise in meta-linear narrative that tries to push Henri Dutilleux's structural findings and conception of time one step further into Post-Modernity by combining the Medieval thinkers' love for combinatory and mechanic artefacts and the contemporary digital culture of Mp3 readers, PC music libraries and shuffle modes; all as a way of breaking away from the Modern linear conception of time and moving towards a digital, fluid one.

Those different readings of the work are so not because the musical syntagms themselves, the sextet's movements, are changed in any way, but because the different ordering of those same musical syntagms creates a new meaning purely through the combinations of those same syntagms, very much as spoken and written language does.

Effectively, before defining the musical material I had generated a very sophisticated syntagmatic and semantic modular structure. The only thing left to do was to fill the structure with musical content –to compose the materials that were going to be developed, presented, modified, when and how that modular structure dictated, forcing me to take very unusual decisions in the process. One cannot but quote Italo Calvino when he writes 'And so the author vanishes – that spoiled child of ignorance – to give place to a more thoughtful person, a person who will know that the author is a machine, and will know how this machine works'.

Following on these considerations, I decided that 'The Thinking Machine' should be mono-thematic, having a unified thematic and harmonic material to tie all the complexities together. I also undertook to use *pivot chords* in the style of Dutilleux to anchor certain points in the narrative and draw the listeners directly back to precise emotional areas, while exploring discontinuities in the treatment of the material within the movements by using various transformations in what the semioticians call the syntagmatic (discursive) and the paradigmatic (semantic) axis: above/below, front/behind, close/distant, left/right, inside/outside, up/down, foreground/background and addition, deletion, substitution, transposition, metonymy (substituting whole through a connection) and synecdoche (substituting whole by part).

The use of memory in the structure is two-fold. Memory is built in by inter-movement quotations, variations and developments that when these movements are syntactically reordered change meaning : what was a premonition of a main event in one reading could become a memory of it in a different sequence; thus generating multiple narratives by the reordering of the same original group of musical syntagms.

Furthermore, I am interested in the exploration of cultural memory and cultural *Topoi*. Hence the choice of titles and forms for each of the movements of the sextet were done keeping this in mind and with a clear intention of binding the audiences through the shared into the more unusual, specially as I believe that the compositional exploration of certain Borgesian techniques (creation as translation, memory, cultural Topoi), which emphasise the shared as much as the individual, could be a very powerful tool of communication with audiences and could definitely help re-build the divide between Contemporary Composition and Society, and indeed reinforce the continuity of Europe as a Social, Artistic, and Historical Collective.

Printed order of movements:

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| 1.Motto Perpetuo | 5.Nocturne I |
| 2.Nocturne III | 6.Nocturne II |
| 3.Dance I | 7. Dance II |
| 4.Waltz | 8.Contrapunctus |