

The Creature's Sign and Musical Note Jakob Ullmann's View of Western Music

Albert Breier

Review of Jakob Ullmann's *Logos Agraphos: Die Entdeckung des Tones in der Musik* (Berlin: Edition Kontext, 2006), 640 pages.

What would music be without speaking about music? Only noise, or a world comprehensible in itself? The answers that have been given to this question of music's relation to its linguistic and conceptual understanding are as numerous as they are divergent. That this question seems today more urgent than ever is certainly largely due to the oft-lamented "incomprehensibility" of new music. All composers today are under pressure to articulate themselves verbally. In this they are seconded by an army of exegetes from musicology, science and other neighboring fields. It can hardly be denied that many of the ways, some of them quite astute or poetic, in which music is discussed today nonetheless contribute little to the solution of the fundamental problems concerning the relation of music and language.

The Berlin composer Jakob Ullmann begins his monumental study *Logos Agraphos* with a lengthy discussion of "music as a precarious object of scholarly discourse." This is an appropriate introduction to a work that undertakes nothing less than an investigation of the foundations of what we know as Western music of the modern age. In order to show this music as a unity, it is necessary to see it from a certain distance. For Ullmann, the experience of Byzantine music offers just such a position. The relation of Byzantine music to that of the West is marked by that simultaneity of vicinity and distance that makes it possible to speak meaningfully of one in terms of the other. Vicinity, since both Byzantine and Western music arose from a common origin. Distance, since their paths then radically diverged from each other. (Too great a distance would make a meaningful comparison impossible, while too great a proximity would either mean bias or make any discussion simply superfluous.)

Byzantine music cannot be adequately represented by means of Western notation. This simple fact does not designate a random deficit, for the implications of this impossibility are so far-reaching that their proper discussion requires an all-encompassing look into the most varied domains of art and science. For this, Ullmann has an astonishing erudition at his disposal, which he does not however merely display for its own sake, but rather deploys very deliberately while maintaining great conceptual precision. He proves himself as well-versed in discussing Antique and medieval music theory as he is with the entire tradition of classical European philosophy (all Greek and Latin quotes are given in the original). He is also cognizant of twentieth century theories of signs and semiotics. All of these areas form the frame for his argument and are worked out in detail and with authoritative brilliance. Despite his scholarly and methodological discipline, it is clear on every page that this book was written by a *composer*. For both style and the sequence of thought attain a degree of tension that betrays the author as unmistakably being an artist.

A marked role is given in Ullmann's argumentation to theology. (According to Benjamin, theology is in modernity—despite its decisive significance, then as now—

"small and ugly," and must therefore make itself scarce. Recently, however, this invisibility, officially prescribed by academia, seems to stand theology in good stead. At least in the case of Ullmann's book, the care and length with which theological matters are treated is nothing short of remarkable and its theological demonstrations irrefutably stringent.) Ullmann quotes none other than Theodor W. Adorno, who claimed that "one might say that there is only so much music in the world as there is Christianity, and that all forces of music communicate with those of Christendom" (p. 65). Ullmann devotes some of the most impressive and certainly also the most controversial passages of his book to this origin of post-Antique Western and Eastern music in the practice of the Christian liturgy. The significance of the liturgy for the development of all developed forms of language and music can, according to him, hardly be overestimated. The particular character of the Christian liturgy as witness to the presence of the savior assigned to music a clear role. Christian musical practice had therefore to sever itself both from Jewish and Antique pagan traditions. Christian music was and is once and for all *attestation (Bezeugung)*: neither a sounding cosmos nor merely a formal language to be filled with varying contents. (This testimonial character stamps still many a work from the avantgarde of the 20th and 21st centuries and gives them an artistic unity beyond all significant differences in form and technique, and one which is independent of the content of their messages.)

In the areas of the Roman Empire, an essential shift of accent regarding the understanding of what music is occurred with the separate development of Occidental music after the political and religious separation of East and West after the schism of 1054. Only in the West did what Ullmann calls "the discovery of the note [*Ton*]" occur. Music began gradually to loosen its ties to the forms and manner of existence that had been prescribed by the liturgy; it occupied increasingly a domain of its own. Its technical aspects began to become autonomous, and it developed its own system and rules, which although they never became completely independent of verbal language, nonetheless opened to music a previously unknown terrain. The foundation of the newly arising musical architecture was precisely the "note" or "tone" as something defined and unambiguously fixed. It may seem surprising at first that Ullmann views Western music, in cultural comparison, as unique in its insistence on the centrality of the note. His proof here shows itself however to be well-founded, and too well fitted to parallel findings in the area of Western cultural history to be easily dismissed. It is a question here of a fundamental conclusion in cultural history which permits one to view the millennium of Western music—from Perotin to John Cage—as a unity.

"The two most important qualities that the 'note' in its modern sense must have [are] (...): it has a principally elemental and discrete character and is the foundation of all musical theory" (p. 552). Thus far, this holds true for Ullmann also for the music of Antiquity. However, *only* in Western Europe does the following also hold true: "Firstly, the 'note' must become the foundation not only of theory, but also of musical praxis; secondly, the relation between the 'note' and its 'location' [*Tonort*] must be bijective [*eineindeutig*]¹ and the concept of 'note' must be generally applicable to these bijective relations. This last condition is not only the prerequisite for the representation of the 'note' through signs which may graphically fix this bijective relationship without being linked

¹Translator's note: "bijective" in mathematics is an exact, one-to-one mapping between sets, both one-to-one (injective) and onto (surjective).

via this graphic shape [*Gestalt*] to a definite 'tone,'² but it is also the prerequisite for the arising of an independent syntax for these 'notes' (*ibid*). It is both the limitation and the greatness of Western music that it is composed with *notes*. That Ullmann makes precisely this quality of consisting of *notes* into the decisive trait of Western music, and not for instance polyphony, corresponds to his notion of the attesting [*bezeugenden*] character of music; whether it is mono- or polyphonic does not affect this essence.

A decisive catalyzing function in the development of music from notes fell to the organ. Ullmann correctly devotes a lengthy discussion to historical reports of the gift of an organ to Charlemagne by a Byzantine ambassador. The instrument was already used in antiquity, but acquired a completely new significance in the West. "The organ, a keyboard instrument, has until quite recently the effective character of a 'Turing-Machine' of Western musical praxis: this instrument generates the code that regulates the transcription and untransgressable limits of Western music" (p. 609). In many ways, the organ is in its principle a kind of universal machine (in Turing's sense) of *all* Western culture. In the age of computers, everyone with mastery of the keyboard becomes an organist.

Western music had to pay a high price for its growing autonomy. For the more grandly it expanded, the less clear became the nature of this background upon which its self-conscious constructions were so sovereignly raised. The play with notes, occupied only with itself, appeared to exclude any contact with external reality. Ullmann puts this into a context which is at first surprising. He quotes a text from the French writer Pascal Quignard as follows: "However different people, civilizations, epochs, languages and works may be, a kind of general and frightful plaint seems to arise from them, unto the edge of hallucination, and which seems always denuded and new, like a backdrop of noise [*Geräuschkulisse*] or a sonorous ground which deprives one of all reflection" (p. 175). This sigh of the creature cannot be concealed by music and consigned to oblivion. It finds a way into even the most remote and recondite works. "However the clearest musical statements, all formal art and articulation may seek to exorcise this murky background of sound [*Klangdüsternis*], still horror can be heard from within them" (p. 178).

In the most significant musical works, this horror has become clearly palpable since at least Mahler, so that a defensive attitude has formed in the public toward everything called New Music. The harmful polarization that has thereby arisen between the generally accepted music of the 18th and 19th century, felt to be "classical" or "listener-friendly," and the "ear-insulting" products of the avant-garde, seriously threatens the continuity of Western musical tradition. The stubborn adherence to the eternally unchanged reproduction of the masterpieces of classical music blocks understanding for the fact that in the West, living traditions (as opposed to those understood only historically) have been determined less by conventionalism than constant change, however paradoxical that may appear. In the case of music, this has had the effect that precisely the most progressive composers are to be seen as the true protectors of tradition. The best example of this is Arnold Schönberg, whom Willi Reich called a "conservative revolutionary." (This concept of tradition implies, by the way, that a development may in

²Translator's note: Ullmann seems to be using *Ton* in two senses in this sentence: firstly to refer to bijective mapping of note to location, i.e., pitch and register, secondly to 'tone' in the sense of expressive or agogic nuance; I have translated the first occurrence as 'note,' the second as 'tone.'

certain conditions direct itself against its own earlier manifestations without one's having necessarily to speak of a 'break.')

For Western music, which develops in time, it is true that its tradition *is* its significance. There can be no "note" in the Western sense without its signification. Speaking about music "asks and receives a new answer. It remains discursive and nonetheless challenges music. But it can only do all this if it reaches a status which is not to be attained in the retreats of mere history and phenomenology. It is not to be discounted that music, too, needs a linguistic conscience" (p. 616 ff.). Ullmann's work proves to be a broadly conceived attempt to awaken consciousness of such a "linguistic conscience." It provides with this an important contribution to saving our living musical tradition at the moment of its highest endangerment. Ullmann's book gains its particular weight in light of his estimation of Western music as perhaps the most distinguished and preservation-worthy product of a civilization that has otherwise given the world more curses than blessings.

Although the care for classical music in Germany is, now as then, pursued on a high level even in internationally comparative terms, one can hardly avoid the sense of a loss of argumentative precision in most of this domain—both as regards how this music is played, and the way it is discussed. One may conclude from the marginalization of new music, which is accepted even by many of its defenders with indifference, that music is simply not felt to be important to life anymore. For composers who work in this tradition, this situation means a desperate state of emergency. In this respect, Ullmann's very detailed work is a symptom: no composer writes such an extensive history without some urgency. One might hope that Ullmann's book might not only be read by his composer colleagues and by the music-loving public—not only by 'specialists'—but also taken up as a challenge and taken seriously. For a way out of our state of emergency can only be found by common effort.

In the humanities, one cannot operate with models that distinguish too rigidly between subject and object, and this constitutes both its vitality and its fragility (which today is again strongly felt). As a rule, subjectively experienced truth and objectively communicated facts simply coincide here. Thus it is less interesting whether Ullmann's account (which for this reviewer is not in doubt) will be followed in every detail by academic teaching manuals. More essential is that its kernel of truth has sufficient force to nourish both music and writing or speaking about music for more than a short time.

Translated by Larson Powell