

Peter Ablinger

Music is more than saying

I wouldn't mind if the title of my little interjection was changed to: Music is less than saying. The only thing that matters is that music is not fulfilled or satisfied by saying. 'Less than saying' is even better: it points out to us that music does not reach the saying, and instead a realm lurks below (or perhaps above?) this unattained, which is located in the unsaid. And although this realm cannot say itself, something can be said about it. To say something about which nothing can be said is not mysticism, but philosophy - the best of it.

But first of all, why - in a nutshell - music falls short of saying something, and why a telling music can at best be assigned a limited historical period. Have we not become so accustomed to the idea that music should tell us something and not be meaningless? Do we not demand that it should be appealing, that it should have a content and be able to express it?

A bit of music history is needed here. Most of my contemporaries in the field seem to be of the opinion that the Baroque was the real rhetorical age of music. Nothing could be more wrong. It is true that rhetoric was 'the' fashionable theme of the music of this era. But as is the case with fashions, it is a surface phenomenon that stands out from a completely different kind of ground. A gigue, a menuet are first and foremost dances that have as much to do with rhetoric as a techno beat. The rhetorical figures are embedded in this ground as special moments. They interrupt its flow and usually derive their effect from not even appearing too often, as an expected exception, so to speak. The situation is quite different now that the last of the rhetoric tomes has become obsolete at the end of the age and instrumental music is preparing to take over. The transition to music without sung language was, as we know, not uncontroversial, but the triumph of the sonatas and symphonies could only be achieved by music itself becoming language, i.e. precisely what it had not been up to this point.

Since then, the idea of music as expression has become so engrained in the synapses of the relevant thinking and listening habits that it is still difficult to recognize today that the idea of music as language was, on the one hand, a historically limited one that developed in the late 18th century, and that this historical phase is, on the other hand, already passé again - except in the minds of the makers and operators of a Central European mainstream New Music of the

post-symphonic kind, i.e. what is predominantly performed at the well-known relevant festivals.

What can be deduced from this analysis - which has also turned out to be much more differentiated elsewhere¹ - is that the speaking of music only tells half the truth. But there is certainly no whole truth. For that in music which is not based on the language model does not accept the difference between true and false. But it does know the richest differentiation of the concepts, materials, forms of production, practices and ways of listening that are used.

The starting point for this brief overview of music as language and the speaking about music was Nikolaus Brass' formulation that "music is conceptless saying". As has perhaps become clear, saying seems to me to be a commonplace whose dimension has not yet been sufficiently recognized and worked through. It marks a limitation, a blind spot that needs to be made visible in order to be transcended, or at least supplemented. But the tenor of my criticism is by no means directed against Brass: on the contrary, I appreciate the way in which he himself develops the aspect of the non-conceptual and describes composing as the path "towards the non-conceptual, towards a movement that draws you away and takes you with it, that takes place in order to show itself." For me, it is precisely this 'showing' that is one of the most promising alternatives to the saying of music. Quite unlike what Wittgenstein imagined, music can do or show something that no words can reach. Nevertheless, we are dependent on the oscillation between music and words, between the concept and the unconceived. Only in the change from one to the other does something become apparent: for example, the contours of the respective boundary. Words cannot measure what music does. But without the words, we cannot even measure this inability.

(english un-edited)

¹ Instead of going into detail here, I refer to a number of different texts in which I have dealt in detail with rhetoric, with saying, with expression and with existing alternatives to it; in addition, to texts that not only put music as language but also speaking about music up for discussion: "Expression / Sonata", "Saying and Showing. Variations on a Difference", "A Music That Withdraws", all three in: "Now - Writings 1982-2021", MusikTexte Köln 2022; also: "Musik ist nicht wahr - oder: Warum es keine Philosophie der Musik geben kann", MusikTexte, 2017, Heft155; "Das Ungesagte. Über Psychoanalyse und Zahlensymbolik", Positionen, 2018, issuel15