

François-Bernard Mâche

Phonurgia Universalis: Universals in Music

Numanities - Arts and Humanities in Progress

Volume 28

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François-Bernard Mâche

Phonurgia Universalis: Universals in Music

 Springer

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Musique au singulier, 2011 by Odile Jacob, ISBN 978-2-7381-1028-2

Translation from the French language edition: “Musique au singulier” by François-Bernard Mâche,
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ISSN 2510-442X ISSN 2510-4438 (electronic)
Numanities - Arts and Humanities in Progress
ISBN 978-3-031-58508-1 ISBN 978-3-031-58509-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58509-8>

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Notice (2024)

This translation of my book *Musique au singulier*, twenty years after its publication, seemed appropriate at a time when many of the positions it defended have become more readily acceptable. The initial plan attempted to apply to the text the practice familiar to Internet users of “zapping”, which I thought would offer the reader an opportunity to relive the zigzagging approach to which the author had often been led in his search for universals. I have now abandoned the signposting suggesting these excursions, in favour of a new ordering of the chapters, grouped together in a more coherent way. Without acquiring the rigour of a demonstration, they attempt to make clearer the approach of a composer anxious to define, and if possible legitimise, the foundations of his aesthetic choices.

Preface (2001)

In our individualistic culture, composers are more concerned with their own works than with general musicology. I cannot claim that this rule does not apply to me altogether, but the subject of this investigation into the universal features of sound structures happens to be profoundly linked to my aesthetic choices and research. I belong to the generation that first practiced these hybridisations and that continues to explore their resources. At the concert of June 1st, 1959, where my *Prélude* was premiered in the Salle Gaveau, Pierre Schaeffer, in the midst of the militant “modernity”, also gave the premier of his *Simultané camerounais* in which he remixed various African musics. And on June 30th he did it again with a collage of music from the Philippines and the Indochinese highlands. He thus inaugurated thirty years in advance the work of disc jockeys and the putting on display of all musics in the anonymous and worldwide supermarket, where the marooning of their native cultures has left them in a state of wreckage.

Without at first approving of what seemed to me to be colonial plundering, I very quickly increased my exposure to other musical cultures whose fascination I felt. Even before the 1960s, Messiaen had taught me to listen to rare records from Bali, Japan and Tibet, and my first electroacoustic works incorporated the sounds of African *sanza* and Japanese *mokushyos*. At the *Musée de l’Homme*, Gilbert Rouget generously opened his collections to the very few composers who were curious to explore them, and let them hear music from Africa or the Solomon Islands that was almost alien to our ears. During the few months when I was in charge of the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (GRM), at the end of 1962 and beginning of 1963, I sometimes welcomed ethnomusicologists who offered us Indian or Persian recordings. I myself included references that were openly foreign to European culture in my own works from the 1960s onwards, without being content with pastiches or quotations, but without claiming any theoretical justification at the time.

Then came a time, towards the end of that decade, when this activity, which was judged very unfavourably, appeared to me as a stimulating enigma: why could I be moved by works from musical systems of which I knew almost nothing? Was it a profound misunderstanding due to “exotic” illusions, or was it necessary to admit, contrary to the culturalist doctrine that was dominant everywhere, that music, under

its apparent diversity, shared a certain number of spontaneously and universally recognised traits?

In 1969, I integrated into *Rituel d'oubli* recordings of Amerindian languages kindly provided by Pierre Clastres and Anne Chapman, together with animal sounds and the sounds of war. Their musical potential appeared sufficiently convincing to me that I crossed the barriers of the usual categories and treated them on the same level as the orchestra. The following year, I took advantage of the premiere in Persepolis of my work *Danae* (itself reflecting the music of Kashmir) to discover in Shiraz the *Tazieh* (a Shiite religious theatre) and Persian classical music for the *santur*. In the same year, I spent many months transcribing a superb Nubian improvisation for *darboukka*, which I published under the title *Kemit*. In 1971, among the reviews I wrote for the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, I began to report on records that had come from elsewhere thanks to the *Musée de l'Homme* and the *Ocora* record collection. Thus, little by little, as my intuitive familiarity with certain foreign systems grew, I began to think about the reasons for this spontaneous adhesion. The year 1972 was the year of a long study trip to South-East Asia, from which I brought back the material for a record subsequently published by the Musée de l'Homme under the title of *Musiques anciennes de Bali*. With Melanesian titles such as *Korwar* and *Naluan*, I started a work in which not only did heterogeneous sound sources coexist, but also an aesthetic approach was consciously asserted for which I had found no closer references.

Towards the beginning of the 1980s, the isolated approach I had taken with a generalized hybridization of sound sources and forms gradually entered a context where its strangeness appeared much less. The commercial success of the most naïve forms of hybridisation was beginning, and their very principle gradually ceased to appear scandalous. But a new danger linked to this success became apparent especially in the 1990s: the very advanced standardisation of tastes and aesthetics took the form of generalised hybridisation, which rapidly erased any cultural differences that might still exist. Just as filmmakers were forbidden to make films of a length that was incompatible with the advertising standards of television, so too have pop musicians, at the very moment when they have been elevated to the status of reference artists, been forced to comply with the purely commercial standards of music videos and albums. Finally, the most unexpected hybrids are becoming common: I have heard *Irish-Bunun* music in Taiwan, which is to say, music mixing aboriginal traditions with a “Celtitude” itself subject to various American influences. I have seen on Saudi television imams chanting against a backdrop of groupies waddling along in strict Islamic garb. Should we cry “Stop the death of musics”, as Claude Hagège rightly does for the death of languages?¹ Are the musical hybrids that are invading the world vehicular idioms as impoverished as pidgin languages?

The questions raised by this rampant globalisation are usually left to the interpretation of sociologists, and certainly the field is theirs by right. But as for me, leaving aside an analysis of the causes, it is as a musician that I believe I must try to

¹ Cl. Hagège, *Halte à la mort des langues*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2000.

understand the characteristics and consequences of this tidal wave that is engulfing the “classical” traditions everywhere. It is not commercial decisions or the standardisation of the lifestyles of the younger generation that can sufficiently explain what is happening. If it were not for the fact that musicians are particularly receptive to the global standards of the music industry, and that they are inclined to adopt musical traits from all over the world, no advertising campaign could have been able to impose the use of the same electro-acoustic “crutches” or the same rhythmic clichés almost everywhere, for example. There must be human predispositions for this. These are the ones that enable marketing psychologists to promote their “products”, and they also sometimes speak more loudly to the public than their attachment to particular cultures and make them break away from their transmission. While it is true that the new material conditions brought about by the industrial revolution favoured a rapid standardisation of music, there has undoubtedly always been something common to the whole of humanity beyond the relative cultural isolation that has allowed the great traditional musical systems to mature in Europe, the Arab world, Central and West Africa, Iran, India, China, Indonesia, etc. And this is what has made it possible, if given the opportunity, to listen to and adopt the music of others. What, then, is this basic minimum, from which the worst commercial abuses can be derived as well as the most universal truths? And if we must restore the idea of human nature, how can we not take this opportunity to take stock of its limits, by listening to and observing the animal world attentively?

This book is based on the lectures that I gave at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in my seminar on universals in music. Under this term, it poses a question that is both simple and complex and made urgent in the context that I have just mentioned: what is common to the music of all times and all cultures? The answers I propose here from an anthropological perspective also inevitably concern the question of the origin of music. The essay thus sets out, some fifteen years after the first one (entitled *Music, Myth, and Nature*)² to find the minimal and universal stimuli that ensure the permanence of a natural dimension of musical activity. In short, if the previous modernist generations of the previous century dreamed of a “clean slate”, we still have to redefine and understand what they were never able to erase, namely, the natural requirements with which we have to contend, whether to indulge in the adventures of post-modern hybridization, the persistence of the modernist tradition, or the delights of historical regression.

The essay merges two musical forms: that of variations around the universal as a theme, and that of an “open form” proposing indeterminate routes between these variations of unequal scope. As was the case with the mobile forms so fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s, it is likely that one or more routes will prove more satisfactory than others for a reflection accustomed to the rigour of an essay. Moving outwards from the initial theme, each chapter presents and develops a different, or broader, or more specific view of it and the form of the book aims to give a physical

²Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1983, second ed., 1991.

image of the essential musical paradox: to abolish time by repetition, while flowing into its very movement.

Its main approach is based on references to the animal sound world, to language and to music. It will undoubtedly provoke resistance, perhaps irritation. Music lovers often compartmentalise their favourite artform, and many will find the proposed excursions beyond these limits excessive or aberrant. Those for whom language defines man are for their part often tempted to consider music as a by-product, and secondary in all respects. Finally, those for whom the privilege of culture signals and legitimises the predominance of man over other living creatures resist the idea that this cultural phenomenon, far from marking a radical break, has its own roots in nature. I understand these humanist orientations all the better because my classical training once made me share them. But another idea of man is in the making, and whatever concerns this may raise, knowledge and communication are caught up in a whirlwind from which little is likely to emerge intact, especially the very notion of music.

Indeed, music, which has become a less clear-cut artform after the disclosure of ethnomusicological discoveries and aesthetic utopias, seeks new bases, far beyond aesthetic options. The reflections that follow reflect more the concern of a composer than leisurely intellectual speculation. They therefore have a self-interested meaning. This does not mean, however, that nature should be elevated to the rank of a criterion or standard, and that after measuring all music according to the standard of originality we should come to evaluate it in terms of naturalness. For at present this can only designate a few benchmarks that are certainly universal,³ but always limited. Nature is not called upon to rescue a failing or excessive modernity. Nor is it a pretext for reducing man to his biological dimension. Rather, it is what allows us to understand, at least partially, why man experiences such intense emotions when listening to and handling sounds. Musical play is natural; culture itself is originally natural, since it is sketched out in the animal world, where invention and transmission⁴ already appear. As for the consequences that the composer can draw from this, he or she retains all their freedom, even that of disregarding them, at their own risk, in fact.

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François-Bernard Mâche

³By distinguishing between the primary universality of archetypes and the worldwide triviality of clichés.

⁴Elisabeth de Fontenay writes: "...the animal, like the man, is not a being of nature...it is only that more than the man". *Le silence des bêtes*, Fayard 1998, p.24. One can embroider a variation on this theme by saying that the man, like the animal, but clearly more than him, is a being of culture. The two formulations imply a deep reworking of the idea that the humanity makes of itself."

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Part I
SEARCHING FOR UNIVERSALS

Theme



The Search for the Universal

Many composers are legitimately suspicious of musicologists, who for their part sometimes think they know the works better than the composers themselves. As I happen to carry out both activities, it is understandable that I am doubly suspicious of myself. As a musicologist, I can probably never be impartial; as a composer, I have reason to fear the paralysing weight of theoretical speculation. But for centuries other composers have also felt the need to alternate singing and speaking or writing notes and letters. Rameau, Berlioz, Schumann, Wagner, Debussy and others have not found it so difficult to exercise a double talent as essayists and musicians. I shall place this attempt under their authority.

In any case, composers who have left nothing in the way of theoretical writings have thought no less. And among these thoughts, the concern for the universal was undoubtedly very present in the best of them. A true musician is always a philosopher of sound, and their aesthetic conceptions always look beyond mere considerations of craft or emotion. In music, to ask what is universal is to ask what is true, or important, to all. Any musician who looks beyond their own ego and their audience is concerned about this, even if they keep their questions and conclusions to themselves.

From Rameau until well into this century, Western music has believed in its own universality. One might imagine that this belief was based on the gradual triumph of the tempered scale and the dominant-tonic bipolarity on which the tonal system is founded. It is only too true that the model of harmonised hymns and military marches has invaded the world, even in cultures where traditional music retained a remnant of vitality. Jazz, Raï, Indian, Chinese and Japanese film music are all examples of this globalisation of tonal clichés. Acculturation is now so advanced that these cultures are no longer even aware of their degree of Europeanisation and using the word *culture* in the plural is beginning to sound like wishful thinking.

But the claim of European culture was based on a theoretical legitimisation going back to Rameau, and not only on an effective cultural colonialism. The very

approximate analogy of the harmonics of a sound with the notes composing the most common chords seemed sufficient to see their origin, and therefore their legitimacy. Almost half of tonal works remained outside this explanation, their minor third corresponding to the 19th harmonic, which no ear has ever heard; moreover, the most natural instruments, such as the hunting horn, sounded terribly out of tune from the 7th harmonic onwards; but the theory persisted in claiming the inescapable conformity of the tonal system with the laws of natural resonance. Anything that deviated from these laws was labelled exotic barbarism or arbitrary modernity.

Modernity was quick to draw radical conclusions from the awareness of the musical *other*. Just as the discovery of Japan, Oceania, Africa, etc. had changed the world of painting from Van Gogh and Gauguin to Picasso, the discovery of India, ancient Japan, Java and Bali gradually changed the world of music. The taste for exoticism was the most superficial reaction. But soon composers such as Debussy, Bartók, Milhaud, Varèse etc. intuitively or systematically applied the logic that since musical systems throughout the world were so diverse and allowed for such achievements, there was nothing to prevent the invention of new ones that were just as viable despite their rejection of traditional standards. The relativity of musical cultures could serve as a new legitimisation for the relativity of new aesthetic systems. If, by an apparent paradox, it was indeed relativity that reigned universally, then the ambition to acquire universal value could be achieved through the development of a new system, however relative.

From Schoenberg to the 1968 world crisis, one might think that this implicit relationship between the questioning of European musical supremacy and the 'anything goes' attitude permitted the most modernist adventures, even those such as serialism that claimed to be the unusual heirs of a purely local past. We moved from the implicit to the explicit, especially after the Second World War. Extreme modernity and extreme cultural relativism became overtly associated. I belong to the generation that first felt the need to emphasise this relativity. When, at the end of the 1950s, Messiaen made us listen to Balinese or Tibetan music, or music from imperial Japan, while Schaeffer included recordings from Cameroon or the Indochinese highlands in electroacoustic concerts, we experienced feelings that were undoubtedly comparable to those experienced by the rediscoverers of Angkor in the nineteenth century. In the context of the decolonisation of the world, nothing seemed more urgent and legitimate than to affirm the equal dignity of cultures, and to point out in particular those that had reached a certain level of refinement. Debussy had only his ears; Bartók had a heavy cylinder recorder; we were the first to benefit from portable tape recorders. All the sounds of the world, not just analyses and transcriptions, were hitting us with full force.

While the achievements of Persian, Indian, African, Indonesian music, for example, were proving to be as impressive as those of the European tradition, the universality that the latter had claimed was becoming more and more of an unfounded claim. Neither the polyphony of which it had long believed itself to be the inventor, nor even the writing of which it had raised the role to an unequalled level, were its exclusive privilege. It turned out that people were singing almost everywhere in two or three voices. Japanese *gagaku*, which had been passed down orally from father to

son since the ninth century, was also preserved in writing. Georgian polyphonies were found to be older than the Parisian school of Notre-Dame. It became clear that great music had been built on systems very different from ours. From then on, certain opinions which were taught in many conservatories: that resonance is the basis of tonal harmony; that “exotic” music had not yet discovered these natural laws, and that is why it is “false” with its scales, its gaudy timbres, its anarchic ignorance of the tensions and relaxations that form the basis of a discourse, and so on, all of this appeared to be a more or less guilty illusion. The whole history of music would have to be rewritten and completed from new perspectives.

From then on, the legitimacy of the idea of universal laws, of the universals of music, seemed to have been definitively shattered at the same time as that of ethnocentric claims on the tonal system. Further, a certain consensus had been established, at least among ethnomusicologists, to study musical phenomena henceforth only within a socio-historical framework in which their very specificity appeared to be highly problematic. Not only did the term “musics” have to be pluralized, but the very relevance of this term appeared increasingly doubtful.

Music had advanced at a much faster pace than musicology. At the time when tonal language had become stable enough to be the subject of a systematic grammar (from the half-century centred on the year 1800), musicology could rely on rules (with their duly identified exceptions and transgressions) and be able to legislate in good conscience. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, it had to be noted that composers refused to play the traditional game of oscillation between submission and revolt with regard to the rules, and that they claimed either to do without rules, as Debussy did, or to invent a new, complete and functioning body of them, as Schoenberg did.

Classical musicology has attempted to think through the disturbing influx of radical innovations, and in particular the appearance of atonal music at the beginning of the twentieth century, using its most tried and tested methods. It has emphasised the extent to which the phenomenon is due to a historical development dating back to Wagner and Liszt. It has, in some cases right up to the present day, tried, with the aid of its fundamental article of faith, natural resonance, to interpret these innovations as progressive generalisations of the same historical process, consisting of integrating dissonances into a harmonic consciousness taken as a norm. Hence, at the beginning of that century, the hypothetical eleventh and thirteenth chords added to the arsenal of recognised dissonances,¹ and in the inter-war period the adventurous theories on lower harmonics.² But this development in the half-closed field of European history did not take into account the awareness, earlier among artists than among theoreticians, of the relativity of aesthetics. Rodin collected African and Oceanic statues before Malraux’s reflection integrated them into an

¹J. Chailley is one of the musicologists who have shown the greatest commitment to this theoretical extension of traditional teaching.

²Hindemith, for example, used every theoretical means to preserve the dogma of tonality as a norm, against the ‘*sheer perversity*’ of modernist innovations that sought their relative truths elsewhere.

imaginary museum. Similarly, Debussy and Varèse listened to the music of the Universal Exhibitions in a different way from even the most open-minded pedagogues.

Anthropologists, in the aftermath of the Second World War, discovering both the relativity of aesthetic values and that of the musicological vocabulary, have very often rejected both, and have prudently confined themselves to analyses and descriptions that are as free as possible from all prejudice and even from all judgement, before attempting, as they do today, to give a voice to others about their own practices. If, for example, African cultures, or Balinese music, have been able to offer both highly complex sound and social phenomena without apparently presenting any theoretical perspective on their practices, it is, according to several ethnologists, the duty of the investigator to detect in the discourses of these practitioners the implicit theory on which they rely, and to formulate it clearly in one of the languages in use in the world of scientific research.

In the field of composition, the taste for exoticism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Europe's first reaction to the revelation of a musical *elsewhere*. From Saint-Saëns to Bourgault-Ducoudray, composers learned to open their ears to the traditional music of Asia or Europe. The composer Walter Niemann, initially an heir to Schumann and Brahms, exploited Balinese exoticism in the interwar period with his opus 116, 10 piano pieces entitled *Bali*. Analysis and assimilation marked the second stage at the time of Stravinsky, Bartók, Jolivet and Messiaen. But during this time, musicological reflection outside the circle of composers was relatively timid, as a reading of certain articles in the *Encyclopédie* Lavignac shows. With the advent of recording, *musique concrète* and air travel, the influx of information gradually stirred up all the riches of the world in the magma of *world music*, which was henceforth offered as a consumer product. The generalised mixing of cultures has blurred our knowledge of local specificities. Here again, musicology is lagging behind: it is now very aware of cultural relativity. It is half a century too late, because this no longer prevents cross-borrowing that is so frequent and widespread that soon the evidence of this relativity will only be accessible in archives.

In short, it is time for musicology to take the full measure of what the clash of musical cultures entails, following the lead of composers. A new comparative musicology is being born, which attempts to integrate universal data,³ without subjecting them, as in the last century, to the sole standard of European norms, but without fearing to cross the borders of cultures either.

The first half of the twentieth century, dominated by the Berlin School (E.M. von Hornbostel, C. Sachs) and the founders of ethnomusicology (Brăiloiu, A. Schaeffner etc.), compared music according to the dominant values of Europe. The landmark book entitled *Geist und Werden der Musikinstrumente*⁴ by Curt Sachs, dates from

³A good example of this is the recent superb anthology of vocal expressions entitled *Les voix du monde*, in the CNRS-Musée de l'Homme collection (3 CD *Chant du Monde* CMX 3741010-12). It is the formal features (techniques, construction processes, etc.) that are once again subjected to universal comparisons, and not just the sociological or cultural dimensions.

⁴"*Spirit and becoming of musical instruments*"

1929. It serves as an admired reference for André Schaeffner, and the question he posed in 1956⁵ “*Ethnologie musicale ou musicologie comparée?*” accompanied the rise of musical ethnology. For some forty years it was to focus more on ethnology than on music, as Schaeffner had already observed. “*Ethnology will always be ready to catch us out, either by limiting ourselves to analysing musical facts and not trying to explain them, or by trying to explain them by bringing in factors that we do not really appreciate.*”⁶ The second half of the century, dominated by American ethnology, resolutely emphasised the social dimensions of musical practices, to the detriment of the sound forms themselves. An excess of relativism tended to exaggerate the impermeability and autonomy of cultures. However, reality is increasingly contradicting this radical ‘culturalism’, today when music is hybridising more rapidly and more deeply than ever before.

It was especially from the 1950s onwards that a radical culturalist ideology, in musicology as elsewhere, tried to cast suspicion on the idea that values could be universally shared, and particularly on the age-old problem of universals. Worn out, so to speak, by the experience of a guilty deafness that it had maintained for decades with regard to other musical value systems, musicology took it for granted that any claim to root the foundations of music in nature was an illusion that had become obsolete along with tonality. It felt itself strengthened in this relativism by the emergence of a generation of very prolific composer-theorists, who promised, provided it placed itself at their service, to carry out an unhoped-for *aggiornamento*, thanks to which it would finally succeed in thinking ‘in real time’ about the music being made. For their part, they pushed cultural relativism to the point of promoting aesthetic singularity as a guarantee of authenticity: since there were as many systems as there were cultural areas, why should there not be as many ‘languages’ as there were individual works? This radical modernity held sway for a quarter of a century, at least until the mid-1970s. It was then beset by growing doubts, which, as always, reached the composers long before the musicologists.

But before the crisis of modernity broke out in the 1970s and 1980s, the interaction of anthropological interpretations and modernist creeds had suppressed the question of universals. Ethnomusicologists, rightly concerned with not applying categories to their fields of study that had no real relevance outside Western civilisation, emphasised everything in traditional musical practices that fell within a semantic field other than what the West understands by music, to the point of describing the sonic aspects of certain conducts as a simple component of a global behaviour, with no legitimate specificity.

One ethnomusicologist has even denied the theoretical possibility of universals, saying: “*Every anthropology student must know that somewhere, someone is making something that they call music, but to which no one else would give that name. This single exception would be enough to eliminate the possibility of a true*

⁵ *Les colloques de Wégimont*, Elsevier, 1956.

⁶ See André Schaeffner: *Ethnologie musicale ou musicologie comparée?* op. cit. p. 18–32.

*universal*⁷". Not without some naivety, some artists, apparently seduced by such ideas, have since promoted a performance practice that they consider more in line with this traditional integration of music into a total art, and have thus come to actively challenge the notions of music and even art within Western civilisation. Among composers themselves, more than at any other time, theoretical writings, particularly those by ethnomusicologists, had an influence on their work in the field of both ideas and writing.⁸

However, within the very questioning promoted by the work of ethnomusicologists, a resurgence of the problem of universals has appeared. List and Wachsmann revived it in 1971.⁹ In 1976, Dane Harwood revisited the question from the perspective of cognitive psychology.¹⁰ Gilbert Rouget was interested in repetition as a universal, in connection with a Beninese song. While in the 1960s, studies such as those of Marius Schneider and Walter Wiora¹¹ still tended to broaden the concepts derived from natural resonance, much of the research carried out since the 1970s has attempted to rely on other foundations: psychological, with the work of Imberty, and epistemological, with that of Nattiez. Comparative musicology, from which ethnomusicology had strongly distanced itself by denouncing it as illusory or out of place, is on the verge of regaining legitimacy, which would not claim to call into question anthropological achievements, but rather to reassess their scope. Just as the Chomsky school of linguistics attempted to find deep universal structures beneath the surface diversity of systems, so several current research projects aim to find universal musical foundations.

At the beginning of the 1960s, an analytical approach had already attempted, with A. Moles and P. Schaeffer, to create a universal typo-morphology for the analysis of any sound structure. Despite its interest, this body of analytical tools, collected a few years later in the *Traité des objets musicaux*,¹² had the serious flaw of taking into account neither the context nor the future of these objects, which were more sounds than music. What was presented under the name of 'solfeggio' offered little more than taxonomic virtues. I was persuaded by the study of phonology,

⁷ David Mac Allester, *Some thoughts on universals*, *World music, Ethnomusicology*, 15 (1971), p. 371.

⁸ I am thinking of works such as *Rituel d'oubli* in 1969, in which recordings of Guayaki and Selk'nam by the ethnologists Pierre Clastres and Anne Chapman respectively are integrated; or *Korwar*, *Temes Nevinbiür* and *Rambaramb, Naluan* etc. in the early 1970s, whose titles incorporate Melanesian cultural references. The composer Ligeti has also claimed this kind of influence on several occasions.

⁹ Cf. K.P. Wachsmann: *Universal perspective in music*, *Ethnomusicology*, XV, 3, 1971, 381–384, and in the same issue G. List, *On the Non-universality of musical perspectives*, 399–402 and the discussion between D.P. Mc Allester, K. Wachsmann, C. Seeger, G. List. John Blacking: *How Musical is Man*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1973.

¹⁰ Dane Harwood, *Universals in music: a perspective from cognitive psychology*, *Ethnomusicology*, sept. 1976, p. 521–533.

¹¹ W. Wiora, *Présence ou absence de la constante de quarte, de quinte et d'octave*, in *La résonance dans les échelles musicales*, CNRS 1963.

¹² P. Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux*, Paris, Seuil, 1966

which is to say functional phonetics, that this was a purely “-etic” approach according to the terminology of J-J. Nattiez. By this I mean an observation of sound features, ignoring the importance of their relationship with other features. In January 1963, I was led to submit a project which, following a different path, of the “-emic”, i.e. functional type, that attempted to apply methods inspired by structuralism to the analysis of electroacoustic and other music, but taking into account the musical contexts in order to determine the relevant units. The rejection of this project led me to resign from the position Pierre Schaeffer had entrusted me.

The search for the universal in music, on which this essay attempts to take stock, is not totally independent of my structuralist hopes of the 1960s. It is true that it has become difficult to believe that a ‘neutral’ level of analysis can develop autonomously; but its contribution to the very wide-ranging investigation I have undertaken is essential, in particular because it alone, or almost alone, provides a practical tool for comparing sound features belonging to all cultures, to language as well as to music, and to humanity as well as to other species.

On the other hand, however, the search for the universal must be justified according to criteria other than formal or historical. For many, it appears ideologically pronounced, whereas a traditional humanism, inherited from the Bible and Greece, would have a sort of obvious neutrality. It is no longer European imperialism that is under a certain amount of suspicion, but rather a barbarism ready to exploit ‘socio-biological’ positions. A great fear runs through the intellectual world, and not without reason: that by over-emphasising the similarities between man and other species, and the natural determinisms that act more or less secretly on cultures and individuals, man is dehumanising himself. The history of the twentieth century, and the still too present memory of the Nazi horror, explain this extreme sensitivity. “Nature” has already served as an abusive alibi for a certain reduction of man to the state of an object, so that its association with cultural phenomena does not immediately arouse distrust.

This mistrust will only be beneficial if, instead of censoring and paralysing all research, it maintains a critical vigilance. The risk of ideological misappropriation cannot be ruled out by obscuring the findings on which they might attempt to justify themselves. Obscurantism would be as great a danger as irresponsible scientism. If man is subject to certain determinisms, it is particularly important to identify their powers and limits, so as to keep control of them. This may be a bitter “reality check” for a being accustomed to seeing itself as essentially different from other species, rather than merely dominant. But we know today that this kind of Greco-Biblical humanism is not shared by the whole of humanity, and that its universality is relative. The idea that man belongs to the world has probably been even more widespread statistically than the idea that he has eternally had exclusive rights of exploitation over it.

Certain ideological consequences must inevitably accompany any research on the universal. But, fortunately, the ideology best suited to draw the first lessons from such research is not the one that claims to extrapolate evolutionary selection to cultural data. Reducing cultural phenomena to evolutionarily advantageous or detrimental functions is only possible if one has arbitrarily chosen to assert evolution as

an absolute explanatory norm. But this is to turn a scientific hypothesis, which is both useful and provisional like all others, into a binding dogma, and this scientific abuse is not scientific.

Those who seek in biological considerations a legitimisation of questionable hierarchies seem to me to fall into such an abuse. On the contrary, what interests me in the exploration of natural musical data, is the discovery, even in animals, of precursory traits of that most precious of all things, musical culture. I believe I have encountered some signs of musical thinking in animals, rather than clues leading to the submission of man to a common natural law.

But this is a view that is itself rather uncongenial in relation to age-old habits. If it is not acceptable to reduce music to the exercise of a set of biological constraints, it is not easy either to accept that the animal should put even the tip of its paw in our cultural domain. This is because the latter is always perceived as our exclusive prerogative. It is more or less in the name of this privilege that man gives himself the right to reduce the animal to the rank of an object of experience or food. If the animal manifests even the confused outline of a cultural phenomenon, man easily becomes afraid, afraid of himself and of his murderous responsibility. How, for example, can a musician, even a very unsophisticated one, be subjected to vivisection or slaughter? If cattle were better singers, people would perhaps not eat more roast beef than nightingales...

Let us allay these very hypothetical anxieties: by recognising the distant natural origins of music and culture, we reciprocally acknowledge the limits of human responsibility. The animal sometimes displays some musical traits, but this is usually in the merciless context of the "struggle for life". For his part, man must resign himself to admitting his own murderous practices as a natural servitude: like all life, his life can only be maintained by destroying others.

What appears to be specifically human is probably not culture in the most general sense (symbolisation, invention, transmission, etc.). Moral laws and articulated language are more likely to be specific features. The universality of music has always seemed more mysterious than that of language, whose practical utility is certainly more obvious. By bringing together here a fairly wide range of documents and reflections, and by proposing to read them as clues to possible universal traits, I hope at least to offer to the imagination of musicians and to the discussion of all an essay capable of stimulating both.



The Need for a Universal Musicology. Methods of Approach and Criteria of Universality: Phenotypes, Genotypes, Archetypes

An essential tension has always existed within the human sciences, and particularly anthropology: to understand the different systems of thought from the inside, avoiding the imposition of one system of representations on another; but also to safeguard the possibility of universal knowledge, against the scattering of fragmented points of view. Cultural relativism tends to multiply specialised knowledge, and thus to increase a certain myopia. Moreover, it does not allow us to understand the permanent (and increasingly prevalent) phenomena of hybridisation, crossbreeding, borrowing and translation. The search for universals, which had been abandoned when it appeared to be the expression of “Western” ethnocentrism, appears once again desirable in the face of the fragmentation of knowledge which splits the image of man into a multitude of discontinuous appearances.

Suspicion of the universal stems from two implicit assumptions that are ultimately one and the same: (1) those who are interested in the universal are suspected of cultural colonialism and would like to impose their culture as the universal norm; (2) those who, on the other hand, insist on the autonomy of each culture to the point of defining them as complete and separate universes and who do not allow for an understanding of how cultures communicate, hybridize and influence each other. By forbidding any comparison for fear that it might encourage the emergence of a hierarchy, and therefore of a possible cultural tyranny, they risk giving rise to an obscurantism that is more harmful than any claim to universality. The latter is legitimate. It is a mark of dynamism, of confidence in one’s own values. Cultural encyclopaedism, where chapters coexist without listening to or looking at each other, is more a world of compartmentalisation and paralysing scepticism than a harmonious coexistence. In the end, confidence in one’s own values is only dangerous if it implies intolerance. The whole issue comes down to those typical questions asked in philosophy classes: can you compare without prioritising? Can one hierarchise without despising those considered inferior? Is tolerance compatible with contempt?

If cultures are universes of *relative* values, we must have the courage to keep them in relation. The problem is not academic. It is also political: particularisms become all the more vigorous as universal data become established as norms: European Community regulations, human rights, World Bank standards, etc. It is therefore no longer possible to avoid comparing value systems, particularly aesthetic ones, at a time of globalisation and standardisation in the music industry. The confrontation is no longer between the universal and the particular, but between two visions of the universal. The recent successes of Celtic music and its expressions are a response to the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon music industry, but also the means of claiming a universal right to be different. In this context, “Celtitude” is both a particular value and a champion of the right of each culture to be itself. It expressly opposes the universal norm of the “laws of the market” with the no less universal aspiration not to let these laws govern all human values in a totalitarian way. The “universal” and paradoxical success of comic books like Asterix, translated into 77 languages, is also due to the hero’s phantasmatic resistance against imperialism. People who have never even heard of the Gauls or the Romans immediately recognise the allegory: a particular culture resists the multinationals with magical success.

The main currents of research are not entirely independent of the main political attitudes and beliefs. A certain universality was the ideological hallmark of the colonial era, claiming to spread civilisation; relativism was the hallmark of the post-Bandung decolonisation era; it was then necessary to clear oneself of any suspicion of conscious or unconscious cultural imperialism. The vast reshuffling of world balances after 1989 places us today in another perspective, that of a planetary culture in which hybridisation is becoming widespread, before perhaps allowing new cultural diversities to reorganise themselves through an inverse and complementary movement. Human history, which has always been made up of regroupings and splits, sometimes allowing imperial temptation and sometimes autonomist claims to dominate, today puts forward the question of what man is. The universality of music is just as striking as that of language. Can it be the subject of a form of knowledge that is also universal? In other words, if science is only general, and if the scientific idea itself is anything other than a particular aspect of European folklore, can its requirements be shared by people of all cultural origins? Can the taste for the universal that ancient Greece bequeathed to our civilisation itself be universally accepted as a norm?

The answer is fairly obvious in the field of the physical sciences: Chinese, Indian or African mathematicians or nuclear physicists speak the same language when it comes to their research. In the human sciences, the situation is more confused. Ethnopsychiatrists, for example, consider witchcraft as something other than a “pre-scientific” field. Western doctors train in “traditional” representations and practices (such as acupuncture) whose foundations correspond to a representation of the world radically different to the one in which they were educated.

As far as musicological thought is concerned, the situation is particularly unclear, firstly because this discipline has never succeeded in constituting itself as an autonomous science. However, this apparent epistemological weakness may prove to be a real asset, insofar as no approach (sociological, formalist, cognitivist, etc.) has