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## Musical Gesture as a Means of Composition in Recent Music: Some Observations

### ABSTRACT

According to Albrecht Schneider (Schneider 2010, 70), ‘motional and gestural qualities of music have been known since antiquity’, but in the sphere of contemporary classical composition musical gesture has been discussed by composers since 1963 (first by L. Berio). Further, this concept was employed by P. Boulez, B. Ferneyhough, M. Feldman and many other composers including Russian authors (A. Schnittke, S. Gubaidulina). Using R. Hatten’s definition of gesture as ‘energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant’ (Hatten 2006, 1) and taking into account that such energetic shaping may be ‘translated’ into music in different forms and through different mediums I propose a classification of such mediums for musical gestures based on corporeality factors: tactility, eyesight, muscle tension. Although Hatten mentioned that ‘gesture [...] may entail any sensory perception, motor action or their combination’ (Hatten 2006, 1), the difference between the sources of gestures is significant for understanding the intentions of a composer. Combining composers’ statements, their own understanding of musical gesture with compositional analysis makes possible to question the nature of musical gesture in contemporary music and track its compositional possibilities.

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Musical gesture has become a popular topic during the last decades. International conferences — the last one was held in 2016 in Porto —, gave a strong impulse for a lively discussion about gestuality in different aspects, from performance gesture to composer’s gesture, from historical music gestures to contemporary. For the present research the main impulse for studying musical gesture came not as a purely academic idea but as a result of a perplexity tightly connected to the problem of translation. The special problem of recent Russian terminology is the absence of such a notion as ‘musical gesture’ so seeking for an adequate word has been problematic. So my research first went into hermeneutic direction: how can the notion of musical gesture be interpreted and what did outstanding contemporary composers think of it?

In the texts and music by composers of the second half of the 20th century there is a lot of evidence concerning musical gesture including authors who speak about gesture directly or indirectly. Most explicitly ideas on musical gesture were expressed by Berio, Boulez, Feldman, Helmut Lachenmann, Ferneyhough, Schnittke.

Hatten’s definition of gesture as ‘any energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant’ (Hatten 2006, 1) sounds as most relevant to the subject. So the old ‘energetic’ paradigm continues to be influential. Musical gesture should also be considered as a metaphor: ‘Metaphor is involved when gestures work as concepts that project physical movement, sound, or other

types of perception to cultural topics’ (Jensenius *et al.* 2010, 12). But these metaphors are not additional as in case when it comes to language but essential when it comes to reflection of musical expression: ‘Where the physical gestures that accompany speech are closely linked to language, the sonic analogues of music are largely independent of the language. [...] While it is generally recognized that the gestures that accompany speech do not have a grammar, I would like to propose that sonic analogues are *basic* to musical grammar’ (Zbikowski 2011, 84).

Analyzing the pieces by Berio — *Sequenza* No. 5 for trombone and No. 3 for voice —, Boulez’s scores of *Incises* for piano and *Sur Incises* for ensemble; Helmut Lachenmann’s Second String Quartet and *Pression* for cello solo, Ferneyhough’s flute pieces such as *Cassandra* for flute solo, Feldman’s early piano compositions, Schnittke Fourth Violin Concerto one can answer the question: how did composers interpret musical gesture in the domain of recent musical composition and what notions did they apply to it?

So my aim was to project the descriptions and definitions of musical gesture onto musical composition, to extract the key features of gesture as a compositional device and to summarize different types of gesture which were found in musical works listed above.

Musical gesture certainly wasn’t invented in the 20th century. As Schneider outlined, the genesis of musical gesture can be traced through all the human history especially through the Barock period with its *Affektenlehre* and opera developments. Though musical gestures played a significant part in European musical styles and genres, research into motion and aspects of dynamism as well as energeticism in music was accelerated over the course of the 20th century.

An approach to gestuality in 20th-century music can be obviously divided into three significant periods: the first is the beginning of the century with its attention to rhythm and dynamism; the second followed the Darmstadt structuralist movement with its cerebral intentions. The turn to corporeality and new dynamism happened at the end of 1950s in the work of different composers but the most significant figure in this respect was Berio.

In 1961 Berio begins his article ‘Du geste et de Piazzza Carità’ with a quotation from James Joyce about gesture as the most universal language — ‘gesture, not music, not odours would be a universal language’ — and introduces thereafter the notion of ‘musical gesture’ into the realm of musical composition (Berio 2013, 30). The article itself can be viewed as an extension of Berio’s involvement with Bertholt Brecht’s idea on Gestus. In winter of 1956, Brecht visited Milan to take part in final rehearsals of Giorgio Strehler’s production of *Die Dreigroschen Oper* and Berio with the help of Bruno Maderna attended these rehearsals.

After that two Brecht's concepts became crucial for Berio: the idea of *Verfremdung* — usually translated as 'alienation' — and the idea of *Gestus*, that is of gesture. Brecht's ideas revealed for Berio possibilities of expression, which were far from evident during the 1950s. His understanding of gesture was one of social gesture (*Gestus*) and referred not to a single movement but to the overall attitude which had to explain the essence of a character. Berio tried to employ *Gestus* in music and the way to reveal it was the gesture of a performer as a source of inspiration for the composer. Berio's position soon became opposite to Stockhausen's at the time: while Stockhausen was insisting on the total novelty of contemporary compositional devices and thus breaking the tradition, Berio proved a new look on historicism and especially on corporeality. According to Berio, the performer's body movement is loaded with an overall historical experience of composer's and performer's interaction, which is embodied in a musical composition. In his author's notes the composer reflects on *Sequenza* No. 5 as 'a musical commentary between the virtuoso and his instrument, by disassociating various types of behaviour and then putting them together again, transformed, as musical unities. Thus *Sequenza V* can also be heard and seen as a theatre of vocal and instrumental gesture'.<sup>1</sup> Thus in Berio's understanding musical gesture is a sort of *musical figure* capturing artistic energy, forming indissoluble link with an instrument and embracing all the plurality of historical styles that express themselves through the performer's activity. If we listen and look at the beginning of *Sequenza* No. 5, we will discover several layers of meaning: the first is the image which is described by Berio in his note to the score: 'performer [...] strikes the poses of a variety showman about to sing an old favorite' (score, 2). The second layer is the succession of artistic sound gestures. And if 'what is seen' is quite natural for theatrical performance — that's why Berio's *Sequenza* is often treated as 'instrumental theatre' —, what is heard is more subtle but nevertheless explainable in terms of trombone instrumental gestures: single shouts, questioning motives, half-sung, half-played improvisatory succession. In spite of Berio's remark on 'variety showman' the performers mostly use the clown's image addressing to Berio's dedication of this piece to the memory of the great artist clown Grock. Berio in his music reflects the historical gestuality of trombone whose traditional role was to play outdoors and in the streets. All this correlates with circus artists and hence again with Grock. Musical eccentricity is expressed by this trombone monologue and supported by the performer's image. We would call Berio's gesture an *artistic gesture* because it's inseparable from the artist's behavior and image. We can also interpret its genesis as motor muscle gesture moved by initial image — the clown. Almost the same ideas fertilize other Sequences by the composer: *Sequenza* No. 2 is a portrait of Carlos Salcedo, famous harpist and is built on the techniques of harp playing characteristic of Salcedo, etc. Dedications of Sequences reveal the sources of inspiration.

Berio fixed the concept of gesture in his writings and it was developed by Boulez during the 1990s. The concept of musical gesture becomes important for Boulez. He explains it

in one of his last books, *Leçons de musique*, which accumulates his experience as a lecturer at Collège de France. Gesture becomes the leading principle of Boulez's musical system. His link to Berio was evident to Célestin Deliège who was the first to comment on a parallel between Boulez and L. Berio's essay 'Du geste et de Piazza Carità'. Boulez himself pointed to Berio later showing his understanding of musical gesture at the public lecture on *Sur incises*. This lecture is the best illustration to Boulez's ideas and compositional means. The composer first talks about a piece, which preceded *Sur incises* — it was *Incises* — commissioned by Berio and Mauricio Pollini for a piano competition. Then he shows musical gesture in *Sur incises*.

Apparently Boulez's music gesture has an ordered structure, we see 'le gifle' — *brève-longue*, as Boulez says — and 'the tail'. The essence of the composer's concept lies in the two-fold nature of a gesture. It is the physical gesture of a conductor or an instrumentalist on his instrument and at the same time the gesture of the composer 'drawing' a musical idea onto paper, a sort of contour. Boulez's conception could be captured in his single sentence: 'The gesture penetrates every moment of composition, from the initial idea — which is subjected to writing, or *écriture* — and which forms the basis of the work, elaborated through a series of deductions and regulated by a system' (Boulez 2005, 143). So besides instrumentalist gesture the factor of *graphic* also influences the process of composition. As a result Boulez's 'musical gesture' lacks historical perspective that was so important for Berio and concentrates on the objective quality of a holistic phenomenon: the most notable features of his musical gesture are the beginning, the middle and the ending as it is evident from *Incises*. We would qualify it as a *motor action* based on the characteristics of an abstract continual-discrete object.

The new attitudes were discussed by the composer in his interview to A. B. Varga: 'Under the influence of Feldman's piece I realized that one could compose with short cells, even single chords which come from nothing and disappear into nothing' (Varga 2011, 231).

Feldman is supposed to be another representative of gestural writing. His specific feature is his deeply personal approach to *instrumental attack*. One of his friends, American writer Frank O'Hara wrote: 'In all of Feldman's recent work the paramount image is that of touch' (Feldman 2001, 215). This kind of approach takes us to another kind of musical gesture, which involves tactility. The touch, or toucher, was a significant means of expression for romantic pianists. Feldman had a chance to know about Romantic toucher from his piano teacher, Russian pianist Vera Maurina-Press, a classmate of Alexander Scriabin and Joseph Lhévinne. Feldman wrote about her: 'With Mme Press at twelve, I was in touch with Scriabin and thus with Chopin' (Feldman 2001, 120). All this led Feldman to a special understanding of a sound: 'For me at least sound was the hero, and it still is. I feel that I am subservient. I feel that I listen to my sounds, and I do what they tell me, not what I tell them' (Feldman 2006, 55). Trying to catch the sound itself, not making it a means for expressing something, making it a hero, not a servant, takes us to a situation when the touch has to be very-very soft — just enough to make the piano string vibrate. And this vibration sets into motion the whole process of sound envelope, from the beginning to the end. This type of

<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.lucianoberio.org/en/node/52>>, accessed 28/06/2023.

attack has to be very impersonal, it shouldn't respond to the own will of a performer, it is programmed by the sound qualities of an instrument. One feels the instrument as a main sound-producer. As Feldman put it: 'I wanted sounds to be a metaphor, that they could be as free as a human being might be free' (Feldman 2006, 56). This kind of seeking for resonance dictates the means of composition for piano: we hear separate moments of music — chords, intervals, tones — which constitute a succession without beginning or ending, because each sound-event is a separate world with its own beginning, middle and ending. A sort of Moment-form moulded with musical gestures appears.

Feldman's concentration on attack makes it possible to interpret his gestuality as *tactile*, connected mostly with touch. But the 'parental structure' of such an attack obviously is rooted not only in his lessons from Vera Maurina-Press but also in his obsession with the art of abstract expressionists such as Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, etc., in which the stroke of paint brush can serve as a counterpart to instrumental attack. So Feldman's gesture acquires visual-tactile basis. As Feldman put it: 'The use of the instrument must be as sensitive as the application of paint on canvas' (Feldman 2006, 56).

Helmut Lachenmann's approach seems to be also of tactile nature but mediated by a strong wish to explore the limits of traditional orchestral instruments. His concept of 'musique concrète instrumentale' is based on unconventional playing techniques using various novel modes of attack and articulation and thus fixing the listener's attention on sound energy and sound material. In such works as his String Quartets articulation is achieved through a plurality of the performers' gestures and their exceptional variety aiming at a new hearing. Lachenmann states: 'In *Gran Torso* I exemplified one of my fundamental concepts which, rather than orientating itself on the principles of interval-rhythm-timbre, proceeded instead on the basis of turning concrete energy into sound production: a concept which I once provisionally labeled 'musique concrète instrumentale'. From the string quartet I effectively made a 16-stringed instrumental body which reacted to maltreatment with its corporeality — sounding, rustling, breathing, pressing' (Lachenmann 2007, 10). Lachenmann's gesture is a gesture of one who tries to re-work traditional tactile resources: we hear the whole range of sounds which were not only unusual — they at times appear as unmusical. Lachenmann acts as an explorer and exploder of sonic spaces limited to traditional instrumentarium. His gestures mark a sort of new instrumental 'geography': the string instrument has its 'poles' from the wood of the bridge to the down of fingerboard, and the bowing technique also has its limits: from pitchless bowing to heavy pressure bowing. As a result Pressure appears as an etude on bowing. With these new gestures traditional instruments become much more expressive and subject to the new sensitivity which Lachenmann seeks. Corporeality enters into dialog with hearing and extends the sound world beyond the limits of 'normal' sound production. As if negating Berio's intention to load sound with historical connotations, Lachenmann aspires for unfamiliar sound in order to shock his listeners by its very quality and thus to acquire a special sound content through uncomfortable aspects of listening perception. The

composer's own metaphor of music as 'Robinson Crusoe's adventure' helps to understand the roots of his intentions. In the Second Quartet the gesture of instrumentalist playing *flautando* works as a starting point and the referent gesture of the whole composition: *flautando* is a borderline between pitchless bowing and bowing with heavy pressure. Normal sound (*suono ordinario*) is almost expelled from the score. The level of tactile force defines the musical gesture. The title of the Quartet, *Reigen seliger Geister*, makes it possible to interpret the main *flautando* gesture as a metaphor of bodiless ghosts in Hades.

Similar gestures are found in Ferneyhough's music. If Lachenmann by exploring *flautando* in his Second String Quartet develops his gestures on the basis of transformation of string instruments into wind, Ferneyhough transforms flute — the wind instrument — into percussion. Cassandra — one of the popular flute pieces — begins with a series of gestures which transcend the possibilities of flute playing. These flute gestures acquire energetic 'bursts' which correspond to the composer's statements: 'The most significant pre-compositional decision I made [...] was not to work it out in terms of individual pitches — but rather in terms of hand positions' (Ferneyhough 1995, 146). And more: 'Gesture is something that has enormous developmental potential [...] in the sense of being an extremely focused musical idea, which draws attention to the piece' (Ferneyhough 1995, 286). The difference between Lachenmann and Ferneyhough's gestures could be seen as a polarity of ergonomics: Ferneyhough goes in for ergonomical musical gestures while Lachenmann has no intention for ergonomics. In general Lachenmann's gestures are more subtle and diverse though this diversity needs more refined musical hearing to be perceived which is sometimes on the border of impossible.

The notion of 'gesture' has almost no use in contemporary Russian musical terminology. Metaphor of gesture can be found in critical works of the Russian composer Nikolai Myaskovsky who applied it to the works of Prokofiev in 1923 critical review of *Visions fugitives*, a well-known set of piano pieces. Myaskovsky stated that Prokofiev moves from 'sound-gesture to sound-word' ('от звука-жеста к звуку-слову'). Obviously gestural ideas were developed by Prokofiev according to the *Zeitgeist* with its cinema and theatre findings, like ideas of the brilliant theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold and philologist Viktor Shklovsky, the founder and member of the so-called Russian formal school. Prokofiev is often praised as a master of grotesque gestures. His gestures in *Visions fugitives* remind different ballet scenes: for example, No. 10 from *Visions Fugitives* has the same gestuality as the scene of appearance of mice in the *Nutcracker* by Tchaikovsky.

The same ballet gestuality often inspired Shostakovich who used rhythmic dance gestures in his Preludes, Symphonies, Concertos.

Schnittke was obviously inspired by Berio and his concept of 'historical listening' when he turned to his 'polystylistic'. We will never know whether Schnittke knew Berio's ideas on gesture or not, but in his Second Violin Sonata (*Quasi una sonata*) one could clearly discern some topical gestures of the classical sonata, such as the opening gesture with its dialogue between instruments and quickly developing theatrical atmosphere of instrumental personification — almost an

‘instrumental theatre’ —, the visual and kinetic nature of performance, the physicality of music-making. In this piece artistic gesture is prevalent, reminding Berio’s Sequences.

Another kind of musical gesture is used in the Fourth Violin Concerto. Here the composer twice writes the unusual designation ‘cadenza visuale’, which means that the soloist is not playing but only mimicking violin performance. There once again we make sure that musical gesture is a complex phenomenon which arises in between musical performance and musical composition. Performance disjunct from sound looks like instrumental theatre, a mime performance where expression remains exclusively in visual form, as in silent film. The composers’ gesture here annihilates and gives place to exclusively performance seen as a sort of ritual or ballet.

## CONCLUSION

Human body and its senses — tactility, hearing, vision, motor actions in their different aspects — form the basis of musical gestures. The nature of musical gesture in recent and contemporary composition seems to be that of quasi-spontaneous music-making which has become especially attractive for composers of postmodern epoch. And ‘if the amorphous ‘new spirit’ of contemporary music has any coherence at all, it lies in its spontaneity, immediacy, its fondness for subconscious decision-making. This is all a far cry from the rigorous intellectual control and pompous strictures of the 1950s’ (Osborne 1984). The genesis of musical gesture differs in the work of various authors: Berio starts from gesture as the essence of instrumental playing and saturates it with historical meanings, embracing different epochs and styles. Schnittke goes in the same direction. Boulez obviously uses his experience as a conductor, his gesture is not instrumental and the motor action of this conducting produces a series of energetic bursts which he calls ‘gestures’. Feldman’s gesture comes from tactility. He doesn’t play the instrument; rather the instrument plays him, demanding very soft gestures for sound production. Tactility is accompanied by visual experience of perceiving the ‘action painting’ of abstract expressionists. The same impulse guides Lachenmann’s work but at the time Feldman goes to the inner core of the instrument in search of its timbral genesis, Lachenmann explores its potential in full covering the furthest periphery of an instrument. Ferneyhough goes in the same way emphasizing the ergonomics of musical gesture, the new feelings of a dialog between performer and the instrument.

Igor Stravinsky left us the following statement in his *Chronicle of my life*:

I have always had a horror of listening to music with my eyes shut, with nothing for them to do. The sight of the gestures and movements of the various parts of the body producing the music is fundamentally necessary if it is to be grasped in all its fullness. All music created or composed demands some exteriorization for the perception of the listener. In other words, it must have an intermediary, an executant. That being an essential condition, without which music cannot wholly reach us, why wish to ignore it, or try to do so—why shut the eyes to this fact which is inherent in the very nature of musical art? (Stravinsky 2004, 59.)

Written in 1917–18, this statement leaves us with the anticipation of future developments in the sphere of musical gesture. Corporeal factor becomes more and more important and today music composition often starts from this very

energetic shaping moulded in instrumental sounds. Such composers as Kaija Saariaho and Harrison Birtwistle, Mauricio Kagel and Gyorgy Ligeti also represent different aspects of gestuality in their work. As a result different types of musical gestures begin to serve as constructive elements for recent music.

## KEYWORDS

Musical Gesture, Corporeality Factors, Energetic Shaping, Instrumental Playing, Luciano Berio, Morton Feldman, Helmut Lachenmann, Pierre Boulez, Brian Ferneyhough, Alfred Schnittke.

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