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Modernism, Nature and Music Analysis

ABSTRACT

Background

The emergence of a significant variety of studies on the relationship between nature and music has prompted attempts to formalise this concern as a specific sub-discipline within musicology, namely: ‘Ecomusicology’. The relationship between music and nature, however, is not a new concern for music scholars. Alexander Rehding and Suzannah Clark (2001), Emily Doolittle (2008), and Brooks Toliver’s (2004) surveys have shown that, from sixteenth century to postmodernity, terms from beyond the musical field, like animals’ calls, nature or landscape, have been applied in composers, music philosophers and theorists’ works. In this sense, a diverse range of approaches appears throughout history: composers have either imitated or transformed nature, or rejected any manifestations of it in their music.

During the nineteenth century, Eduard Hanslick (1986) argued that natural sounds do not constitute music. For Hanslick, nature offered only raw material for humans, which was no match for musical aesthetics. Musicians, he argued, must transform the rough sounding world into art. But the paradigm has changed and nowadays composers not only pay homage to nature but also, thanks to technology, use environmental sounds. For instance, Doolittle notices that, by the late twentieth century, composers ‘interact with animal song — manipulating it, mixing it with non-animal music, using human musical techniques to explore it more deeply, or figuring out the best ways to present it to a human audience — but these are only ways of making the animals song more accessible to humans’ (Doolittle 2008, 18–19). The inclusion of natural sounds — and its representations —, nonetheless, is a response to many contemporary factors: new philosophical postures, the environmental crisis, the technological revolution and aesthetical perspectives.

From a historical standpoint, the beginning of the twentieth century galvanise different views on musical representation of nature. Modernist tendencies such as primitivism or folkloristic movements have favoured different sorts of environmental representation. On the other hand, more idealistic movements, as German post-tonal modernism, intended to avoid representations and perpetuate the privileged hierarchical position of absolute music.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper aims to study tendencies of modernism that have environmental references and how music engages with them. Manuel de Falla’s *El amor brujo*, on the one hand, is a theatrical play that champions the use of some folkloric elements, among them the plot. *El amor brujo* is based on the story of a gipsy named Candelas. Her purpose is to recover her former

lover, who has abandoned her for a different woman; and in order to do so, Candela will use sorcery. The uncanny, however, is presented by environmental factors as the river or fire — Will-o’-the-wisp. Hence, Manuel de Falla chose singular musical features to represent natural phenomena: the pastoral topic for the river (Monelle 2006) and chromatic harmony for the fire (Gallego 1990).

The second work surveyed is Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*. This opera narrates the well-known biblical passage that includes fire as a theophany — this is, the burning bush. Nevertheless, there is no particular musical representation of the igniting plant; instead, the burning bush scene adopts the twelve-tone row that corresponds to the original, unique and creative idea: God itself (Cherlin 2007). In this way, despite fire is a recurrent element of biblical literature, Schoenberg forbids it to appear with musical shape and constraints its mention to God’s presence.

Therefore, Falla’s line of thought enables the agency of environmental elements while Schoenberg immures their presence to a reference to the non-material idealistic sphere.

Methods

The two different postures — representational and non-representational — are categorised, using Robert Schwartz’s (2006) framework of environmental thinking, as ecocentric and anthropocentric respectively. Falla’s ecocentrism, nonetheless, does not consider nature isolated from the human world but amalgams both realities. Thus, giving fire both human and non-human characteristics. In order to support this, the argument will draw upon Cheryl Foster’s (1998) narrative dimension of environmental aesthetics experiences, which acknowledge that nature can be represented with its own biological and wild features but also through human ones. Along with revision of primary sources and biographical scrutiny, music analysis of specific passages corroborates the two postures towards nature. Consequently, topic theory and exotic-individualised chromatic harmony is used to explain Falla’s music; while brief twelve-tone theory observations are done for Schoenberg’s music.

Implications

In *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*, Theodor W. Adorno posits that Schoenberg’s music is capable of liberating the spirit of the listener through its avant-garde forms and language evolved from the German tradition. Similarly, Schoenberg also followed German idealism and propose a new musical language to defend his ideal world, the spiritual one; a realm that also was to be praised by his religious beliefs. Not surprisingly, there are various writings in which Schoenberg rejected the use of conventionally meaningful — and certainly pre-set — musical devices that are full of affordances and folkloric sources. But on the other hand, Falla responded positively to engage his

music with earthly matters such as survival on the earth or natural phenomena. And to do so, Falla has incorporated in his music devices that have either an aural familiarity for the audiences (as with folkloric melodies) or music features that afford movement. Composer's considerations on nature may give us a new insight about their music and themselves, which is relevant for music scholarship. But in a wider sense, understanding cultural expressions that relate to nature is intended to enhance our relations in the world's ecosystems.

Keywords

Fire Representations, Programmatic and Referential Music, Word Painting, Ecocriticism in Music.

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