

Alessandro Arbo, Marcello Ruta (eds.)
Ontologie musicale – Perspectives et débats
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What about ontology of art in France today? And, more especially, what is the role of ontology within contemporary musicology? These are some of the issues tackled by the conference *Ontologie musicale – Perspectives et débats* ('Ontology of Music – Perspectives and Debates') organized by Alessandro Arbo and Marcello Ruta at the University of Strasbourg in spring 2012. Since this premier event, Arbo and Ruta have strongly supported the *ontological turn* in continental musicology through articles², journal special issues³, and international conferences⁴. In 2014, with the collective volume that resulted from the original 2012 conference, the ontological turn in French musicology seems to be fully accomplished. Yet, there are compelling questions left unanswered: why an ontology of music? Do we really need an ontological revolution?

In their *Introduction* (pp. 5-10), Arbo and Ruta provide two arguments to sustain this cause. The former is not totally convincing: the actual emergence of a new ontology of music is the consequence of the present 'orientation of contemporary philosophical thought, more and more marked by the so-called *ontological turn*, after the renowned period of reflexion on language and symbolic systems' (p. 5)⁵. However, the ontological turn in musicology is not to be conceived as a simple by-product of a stylish school of thought. Indeed, as hinted by the latter argument advanced by Arbo and Ruta, the renaissance of ontology of music is an attempt to enable musicological research to deal with contemporary musical practices, informed by globalisation, cultural pluralism, and the affirmation of the Computer Age in the wake of the Digital Revolution. These deep transformations 'have not only modified our ways to thinking composition, [...] but, first of all, the ways of being of music' (p. 5). New ways of being generate new ways of experiencing music, and, as a consequence, new ways of thinking it: if the nature of music has changed, our

¹ The author would like to thank Gaja Maestri for her help in correcting this text.

² Marcello Ruta (2013), 'Is there an Ontological Musical Common Sense?', *Aisthesis* 6 (special issue); Alessandro Arbo (2014), 'Jugement esthétique et ontologie musicale', *IRASM* 45/1.

³ Alessandro Arbo – Alessandro Bertinetto (eds.) (2013), 'Ontologie musicali', *Aisthesis* 6 (special issue), Firenze University Press.

⁴ *Philosophie de la musique: acte, objet, œuvre*, University of Udine, 2013; *L'œuvre musicale à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme de Lorraine – Nancy, 2014; *L'opera musicale nell'era dell'iPad: un rompicapo ontologico*, University of Palermo, 2014.

⁵ My translation – as will be the case for all quotes that follows.

ontological assumptions must be revised (the so-called revisionist approach) or, at least, reformulated according to the new common sense (descriptivism). In fact, once our eyes adjust to the dazzling flash of newness, we realise that the Digital Revolution has not changed the essence of music, but in many cases it has simply laid bare some transformations already emerged in 20th-century Western culture (namely sound recording, popular music, and music industry). Furthermore, other late 20th-century achievements in aesthetics of music, such as the debate concerning improvisation, have already a long-lasting tradition in musical practice (e.g. jazz) and remote origins (which are testified to, for instance, by the improvised cadenzas of classical soloist concertos).

‘Only when the dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly’. Even if the old adage of Hegel is still truthful, Arbo and Ruta’s *Ontologie musicale* mainly draws on analytical philosophy. The inescapable reference of all essays is Nelson Goodman’s thought: especially *Languages of Art* (1968) and *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978). As a result, it is not a coincidence that the second section of the four-part volume – metaphorically speaking, its kernel – constitutes both an homage to some classics of analytical ontology of music and an attempt to update French music culture. This part contains the French translations of three articles by Peter Kivy, Jerrold Levinson, and Stephen Davies, three of the most important figures of contemporary aesthetics of music. Kivy’s 1987 article *Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defence* (pp. 119-136) and Levinson’s essay *Indication, Abstraction and Individualisation* (pp. 137-155)⁶ are openly counterposed and represent the continuation of a classic *querelle* started already in the early 1980s⁷. On the one hand, Kivy stands up for the so-called Platonism: humankind does not create artworks. They are merely discovered, for they are timeless. As a result, Kivy defends the duality *type/tokens*: a musical work is the sound structure indicated by its notation (*type*) and presented by its performance (*token*). On the other hand, Levinson safeguards the composer’s creativity and the insuppressible value of social and cultural contexts – ‘works of art, [...] surely are created, by specific artists working in specific historical contexts’ (p. 138). He defines a musical work as an impure indicated structure, i.e. a structure historically conditioned (*impure*) resulting from an interaction between a pure structure and a concrete individual human (*indication*).

⁶ Cf. Peter Kivy (1987), ‘Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defence’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24/3. There are several versions of Levinson’s paper: the version that appears translated in the book is the latest one.

⁷ Cf. Jerrold Levinson (1980), ‘What a Musical Work is’, *Journal of Philosophy* 77/1; Peter Kivy (1983), ‘Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defence’, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 19/1.

Is the opposition between Kivy and Levinson really unsolvable? Both positions, in their original strictness, are outdated: for instance, Levinson's chapter seems to be below his standards. Indeed, as Kivy indicates, beyond the apparent dichotomy many continuities appear: 'the greatest nominalist of our day [Goodman] has concluded that composers and scientists [...] are both of them engaged in the same endeavour, creating, or "worldmaking", as he calls it, even though the vulgar might describe the scientist's work as "discovery". Platonism, at the opposite [...] end of the metaphysical spectrum, implies that composers and scientists [...] are both of them engaged in the same endeavour, "discovery", even though the vulgar might describe the composer's work as "creation". There is, unexpectedly, some common ground here, and a valuable insight shared.' (pp. 135-136). Effectively, the ontological plurality of artworks belonging to different traditions and practices is overtly supported by Davies's text (*Ontologies of Musical Works*, pp. 157-182).⁸

While the second part of *Ontologie musicale* is devoted to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the first one is a precious survey on French philosophy of music. Roger Pouivet's essay, written as a dialogue, addresses a fundamental question: *Do Musical Works Exist?* (pp. 13-32). Pouivet *alias* Gontran takes a realist stance. Musical works must exist: 'this is our spontaneous belief'. They are not pragmatically reducible to mere referential functions, socially and culturally conditioned. In fact, 'our practices belong to a world that is not constructed by us' (p. 31). Then, starting from a discussion of Alfred Whitehead's relational ontology, Frédéric Bisson⁹ points out the three states of musical matter: 'the *gaseous* state of music is that of eternal objects and allographic notational objects', e.g. a score transcription of Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert*; 'the *liquid* state [...] is that of events', e.g. a jazz performance; 'the *solid* state [...] is that of autographic multiple objects' (p. 62), e.g. the recording of Jarrett's *Köln Concert*. The plural nature of a single and apparently simple musical work, i.e. a song of the Italian singer-songwriter Fabrizio de André, is also highlighted by Arbo in *'La Canzone di Marinella'. A Small Test for the Ontology of Music* (pp. 71-98). Finally, at the end of the first section, Ruta¹⁰ rightly undermines the fallacious common sense of academic ontology, i.e. revisionism as theory-oriented (e.g. Goodman's nominalism) and descriptivism as practice-oriented (e.g. Levinson). According to Ruta, these simplistic reductions are based on a false postulate: the equivalence of practices and beliefs.

⁸ Cf. Stephen Davies, 'Ontologies of Musical Works', in Id. (2003), *Themes in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford University Press.

⁹ Cf. *Amphibian Music. A Sketch of a Fundamental Amphibiology*, pp. 33-70.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ontological Descriptivism and Musical Practices*, pp. 99-115.

The rest of the book focuses on present musical cultures, i.e. on the changing natures of music already discussed at the beginning of my review. More precisely, the third part is devoted to ‘the role and the nature of recordings’ (p. 6). Both Sandrine Darsel (*Music and Recording. A Goodmanian Exploration of World Music*, pp. 185-203) and Jacques Favier (*Reflections upon the Material Nature of the Phonographic Work*, pp. 205-232) underline the ontological break created by the emergence of sound recording and the evolution of recording techniques.

The ‘ontological emancipation’ of improvisation is addressed in the last part of the volume. According to Lee B. Brown’s 1996 article, *Musical Work, Improvisation and the Principle of Continuity* (translated at pages 235-278),¹¹ musical improvisation is a unique and irreversible action; its *presence* can be neither reproduced by a score nor replayed through a recording. Similarly, in the opinion of Clément Canonne,¹² an improvisation is not an entity, but, firstly, a *process* and an *event*. As one is reminded by Alessandro Bertinetto in the closing essay¹³: ‘the ontology of musical improvisation must remain faithful to the singularity and unrepeatability of improvisation. Indeed, it is well known that “Paganini non ripete”’ (p. 367).

In conclusion, this ambitious volume confirms the crucial role of ontology of music within music studies and cancels out the apparent division between ‘analytical’ and ‘continental’ philosophers. If ontological turns are recurrent in the history of Western philosophy, is it now time for a new *musicological turn* in metaphysics?

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¹¹ Cf. Lee B. Brown (1996), ‘Musical Works, Improvisation and the Principle of Continuity’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54/4.

¹² Cf. *On the Ontology of Improvisation*, pp. 279-320.

¹³ Cf. *Paganini Does Not Repeat. Musical Improvisation and the Type/Token Ontology*, pp. 321-367.