

# **Regarding Lila** **(musical and otherwise)**

**by Ricardo Iznaola**

## **I. The Tears of Euterpe**

*And monstrous error flying in the ayre,  
Hath mard the face of all that semed fayre.*  
Edmund Spenser<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Koestler represents thus the various reactions to creative experience: the ‘AHA!’ response (discovery), the ‘HAHA!’ response (humor) and the ‘AH!’ response (ecstasy and self-transcendence.)<sup>2</sup> To these we might add the ‘ARRRGH!’ response. Consider:

1. “The publishers [of Beethoven’s last piano sonata, Op. 111] warn off all pirates by announcing the Sonata as copyright. We do not think they are in much danger of having their property invaded.”<sup>3</sup>
2. “*An American in Paris* is nauseous claptrap... dull, patchy, thin, vulgar, long-winded and inane ...”<sup>4</sup>
3. “After hearing the first half of [Ivo] Pogorelich’s... recital ...and refusing to stay for the rest, Jay Nordinger, the New York Sun’s music critic, wrote: ‘I will only say this: If the people around Mr. Pogorelich have any influence at all, they should dissuade him from playing in public...’ Anthony Tommasini, a New York Times music critic, penned a similar critique: ‘His incoherent and interpretatively perverse playing defies description. The first minutes of the opening work [Op. 111, mentioned above] were weirdly fascinating. Before long the performance was just plain weird.’”<sup>5</sup>

## **II. Ground and Figure**

Our comments need remain within the scope suggested by the vitriolic quotes above:

1. Creativity that *stretches* boundaries (Beethoven)
2. Creativity that *crosses* boundaries (Gershwin)
3. Creativity that *breaks* boundaries (Pogorelich)

Hans Keller<sup>6</sup> provides an illuminating insight:

“(...) *conceptual logic depends on predictability...musical logic depends on unpredictability...* two terms...describe the two dimensions or levels along which musical meaning develops: background and foreground (...) The background ... is both the sum total of the expectations a composer raises in the course of a piece without fulfilling them, and the sum total of those unborn fulfillments. The foreground is, simply,

what he does instead – what is actually the score (...) **The background depends, of course, on terms of reference which the composer and his recipients have in common before the composition starts**” (Italics in original. Bold emphasis added.)<sup>7</sup>

A composition may, then, show (with obvious mid-way variants):

1. Conventional foreground, little contrast with background expectations. Predictable and boring (the ‘YAWN’ response?) At best, cultural pabulum (e.g. ‘elevator’ music.)
2. Highly contrasting foreground, masterful manipulation of expectations. Acclaimed masterpieces. Not infrequently, initial opposition changes to universal admiration (from ‘ARRRGH!’ through ‘AHA!’<sup>8</sup> and into ‘AH!’.)
3. Foreground content unconnected to any shared background. *Idiosyncratic background* known only to the composer or, at best, a limited number of initiates. Opacity creates unintelligibility (the ‘EH??’ response. Occasionally, ‘YUCK!’)

### III. Generative Grammars

Keller’s model ties in well with Chomskyan linguistics and its basic tenet of an innate language ‘competence’ embedded in the human mind.

This competence manifests itself through a ‘generative grammar’ governed by ‘rules’ of well-formedness and transformation.<sup>9</sup>

A parallel ‘generative’ theory of music, pioneered by Leonard Bernstein,<sup>10</sup> finds its most influential advocate in composer/theorist Fred Lerdahl (b. 1943).<sup>11</sup>

Lerdahl differentiates between a *compositional grammar* (the ‘rule system’ controlling the composition) and the *listening grammar* (the ‘rule system’ allowing the listener to ‘assign a structural description to the sequence’ of events, the ‘heard structure,’ of the listened composition).<sup>12</sup>

All is well as long as compositional and listening grammars coincide. But,

“...it becomes quite possible for the ‘compositional grammar’ to be unrelated to the other rules... If this happens, the ‘input organization’ will bear no relation to the ‘heard structure’. Here, then, lies the gap between compositional system and cognized result...”<sup>13</sup>

This explains much of the crisis in appreciation of XX century art music, as well as the initial critical response to Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*: the work breaches the diglossia<sup>14</sup> separating the languages of ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ music. Cross-over attempts of this kind have been received initially with great resistance by the guardians of musical ‘good taste.’

#### IV. Koestler's 'Bisociation'

The performer, as the indispensable mediator and *interpreter* in all musical exchanges has, so far, been ignored.

“... Performance interpretation involves more than merely sounding aloud tones or notes indicated on a music score. It entails sounding them in a particular manner, one that subtly explains them – makes them intelligible, capable of being understood.”<sup>15</sup>

To composer's and listener's, we now add the interpreter's 'grammar,' the expressive treatment of intonation and vibrato, dynamics, timing, tone colors, etc. Both compositional and interpretational grammars must, perforce, be congruent.

Back to Koestler. In defining the crux of creativity he proposes the concept of 'bisociation:'

“... there are hopeless situations in chess when the most subtle strategies won't save you – short of offering your opponent a jumbo-sized Martini. Now, in fact, there is no rule in chess preventing you from doing that. But making a person drunk while remaining sober oneself is a different sort of game with a different context. Combining the two games is a bisociation.”<sup>16</sup>

Pogorelich, in his readings of Beethoven, brings his idiosyncratic non-congruent performance grammar (his interpretative 'jumbo-sized martini') to bear upon the 'game' of playing Op. 111, as understood traditionally. His foreground performance seems to not only diverge from the (expected) revelation of the work *as composed by Beethoven* but actually seems to *destroy* it. Thus, the performance becomes 'perverse'<sup>17</sup> to some listeners.

#### V. Alexander's 'Solution'

Novelty and originality, *sine qua non* conditions of creativity, demand a boldness best represented by Alexander the Great's 'solution' to the Gordian knot: cutting it; a grand example of aggressive, deconstructive 'bisociation.'

Bisociation, then, seems to be the by-product of risk-taking improvisation, a breakthrough moment of insight from which an unexpected way-out emerges:

“The literature on creativity is full of tales of breakthrough experiences. These moments come when you let go of some impediment or fear, and *boom* – in whooshes the muse. You feel clarity, power, freedom, as something unforeseeable jumps out of you (...) There is an old Sanskrit word, *līla*, which means play.<sup>18</sup> Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Līla*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.”<sup>19</sup>

This 'playfulness,' this freedom, this love, from which the audacious bisociation erupts, is characteristic of all good improvisation, is the foundation of all creative activity,

whether in real-time (as in true improvisation) or delayed in time (as in composition, “slowed-down improvisation,” in the words of Schoenberg.)<sup>20</sup>

## VI. Creativity and the Problem of Relevance

But whether one’s creativity produces culturally acceptable outcomes has as much to do with the congruence of backgrounds of reference as with what could be called *domain relevance*. Although the jumbo-sized martini allows me to win the chess game, it does not have any intrinsic value as a creative strategy relevant to the *domain* of chess itself.

Culturally speaking, breaches in domain relevance produce ‘illicit’ outcomes that tend to be ‘criminalized’ by the society and punished with rejection and/or indifference.<sup>21</sup> Thus the case, in music, of XX century serialism and other systems based on non-musical domains, like stochastics, Markov chains, fractals, etc. Works of this ilk tend to sound, to the interested but uninitiated listener, as ‘musicalese’ rather than ‘music.’ Again, Lerdahl:

“Let us distinguish between a ‘natural’ and an ‘artificial’ compositional grammar. A natural grammar arises spontaneously in a musical culture. An artificial grammar is the conscious invention of an individual or group within a culture. The two mix fruitfully in a complex and long-lived musical culture such as that of Western tonality. A natural...grammar depends on the listening grammar as a source... The trouble starts only when the artificial grammar loses touch with the listening grammar.”<sup>22</sup>

However, the problem of domain relevance exists only in the context of the socio-cultural *situatedness* of the creative endeavor, its communicability. After all, creative experimentation is fundamentally solipsistic, consisting of esoteric explorations of self-determined ‘problems’ whose solutions become rewards in themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The ‘ivory tower’ is, in fact, the creator’s natural habitat.<sup>24</sup>

But what to make of the apodictic righteousness of statements like this?

“...the qualification ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’ makes no sense for sound, nor for the music that derives from it; the quantity of intelligence carried by the sounds must be the true criterion of the validity of a particular music.”<sup>25</sup>

True, Beauty has stopped being a ‘foreground’ goal of much contemporary art (“*and monstrous error flying in the ayre...*”).

But has it disappeared? Or has it just receded from view to become a ‘background’ reference? If so, it is still very much a part of the deep-structure ‘well-formedness’ rules of the generative grammar of music or, indeed, art in general.

In the context of the social, cultural and, yes, psychological import of music-making, is it, then, the quantity of intelligence in the sounds that validates a particular music, or, rather, the quantity of ‘music’ in the sounds that validates a particular ‘intelligence’?

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Spenser: The Teares of the Muses (Euterpe). In *The Complete Poetical Works of Spenser*. R. E. Neil Dodge, editor. Boston : Houghton, Mifflin, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Koestler: *The Sleepwalkers* [1959], *The Act of Creation* [1964], *The Ghost in the Machine* [1967]. New York: Macmillan

<sup>3</sup> *The Harmonicon*, London, August 1823, quoted in N. Slonimsky: *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, London and New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert F. Peyser, New York *Telegram*, December 14, 1928. Quoted in Slonimsky, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Kyle MacMillan: *When he takes the stage, anything can happen*. The Denver Post, 11/10/2006.

<sup>6</sup> 1919-85. British polymath of Austrian origin.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Keller (1970): *Towards a Theory of Music*. In *Hans Keller – Essays on Music*. Christopher Wintle, editor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Keller's background/foreground model may be interpreted as a version of the so-called 'inhibition of tendency' theory of emotions. V. Leonard B. Meyer: *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956 for an early and influential application of the theory to music.

<sup>8</sup> "Appreciation depends on cognition." Fred Lerdahl: *Cognitive Constraints on Compositional Systems* (1988). In *Generative Processes in Music*, John Sloboda, editor. Oxford: Clarendon Press (Oxford University Press,) 1988.

<sup>9</sup> V. Noam Chomsky: *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1957, for an early exposition of Chomsky's theory of transformational generative grammar.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard Bernstein: *The Unanswered Question – Six Talks at Harvard*. The 1973 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1976.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff: *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983. Evidence drawn from developmental studies of music seems to support the theory. V., for instance, David J. Hargreaves: *The Developmental Psychology of Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> All quotes from Lerdahl: *Cognitive Constraints on Compositional Systems*, op. cit. An interesting precedent to Lerdahl's (and Bernstein's) linguistic-based arguments can be found in the writings of Belgian linguist and musical analyst Nicolas Ruwet (1932-2001)

<sup>13</sup> F. Lerdahl, idem.

<sup>14</sup> Diglossia is the term used in linguistics to identify the cultural phenomenon whereby either, 1) both cultured and vernacular versions of the same language, and/or 2) two often closely-related languages, one considered 'high-brow' and the other 'low-brow,' exist and function according to well-delimited social and cultural usage.

<sup>15</sup> Jane O'Dea: *Virtue or Virtuosity? – Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> All quotes from A. Koestler: *The Ghost in the Machine*. London: PAN Books Ltd., 1967.

<sup>17</sup> The qualifier is significant in that it brings a whiff of moralizing into aesthetics, a not unfamiliar state of affairs in modern times. Recall the Maplethorp/Serrano 'scandals' related to NEA funding. Of course, artistic expression has been trampled frequently by political ideology (e.g. 'Entartete Kunst' in Nazi Germany, 'bourgeois art' in the Soviet Union, etc.)

<sup>18</sup> The idea of music as a 'game' is more pronounced in some linguistic traditions than in others. For instance, in English, as well as German and French, one 'plays' (*spiel*, *jouer*) music, while in Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, etc., one either 'touches' or 'executes' (*tocar*, *ejecutar*), or 'makes sound' (*suonare*) music.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Nachmanovitch: *Free Play – The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc, 1990

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Schoenberg: *Style and Idea*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950.

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<sup>21</sup> Or worse: substitute ‘dating’ for chess in Koestler’s allegory, to see a darker side to the ‘jumbo-sized martini’ strategy...

<sup>22</sup> Lerdahl, op. cit. Contrasting viewpoints to Lerdahl’s are not hard to find. V. for instance, the works of theorists Stephen Heinemann or M. Josephine Grant.

<sup>23</sup> “...creative solutions to problems occur more often when individuals engage in an activity for its sheer pleasure than when they do so for possible external rewards.” Howard Gardner: *Creating Minds*. New York: Basic Books (HarperCollins Publishers,) 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Milton Babbitt’s famous article “Who Cares If You Listen?” (*High Fidelity*, February 1958) proudly defends this Olympian ideal. Although Babbitt has insisted on several occasions that his original title, “The Composer as Specialist,” was replaced by the publisher without his knowledge or authorization, in the article he does say the following : “And so, I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.” He, then, goes on to proclaim the university as the proper vehicle for providing the means of livelihood to contemporary composers...

<sup>25</sup> Iannis Xenakis: *Formalized Music – Thought and Mathematics in Composition*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971. To what extent this statement reflects some form of unconscious defense mechanism triggered by his own biography is up for grabs: Xenakis (1922-2001) was partially disfigured by a British shell during the Greek Civil War (1946-49.)