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## Two Contingencies, a Pair of Paradoxes and a Sketch of a Portrait

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“People often complain that music is too ambiguous, that what they should think when they hear it is so unclear, whereas everyone seems to understand words. With me, it is exactly the opposite...”

Felix Mendelssohn

On March 9 in Zurich the Remix Ensemble gave the premiere performance of “Deux portraits imaginaires” by Pedro Amaral, a work commissioned to the composer by the Casa da Música. Soon after, on March 12, the ensemble performed the piece in the institution’s headquarters.

As a perfect example of the crooked lines with which the creation and diffusion of a work is often straightly traced, I would like to mention two setbacks, which at the end revealed themselves as fruitful.

At the time being Pedro Amaral is involved in an opera project, based on a considerable Faustian fragment, and other texts, by Fernando Pessoa; this one is, by the way, a welcomed prolongation of such score as “The Dream” (2010), also inspired by Pessoa, and which has revealed its notable dramatic qualities. The infamous economic contention led to a hopefully provisional suspension of the project. Therefore, the composer decided to use some of the material in the work, now presented in response to the request of the Remix Ensemble.

Despite the work’s origin, it is not in any way neither an “opera suite” in the 19th century manner, nor any merely sketched prolegomenon. It is a beautiful score of immense sonorous seduction, in which the portraits of Faust and Maria (Pessoa’s Margaret) alternate antiphonally, yet always with renovated interest. Perhaps the most outstanding feature is revealed in the *solí*, close to declaiming a text, here absent, and involved in magical heterophonies. In the composition

these phrases have a detail of phrasing, which makes them extremely alive. An intercalated commentary, in form of the *cadenza* for piano and the final lament, constitute another two opposite poles as well as two strong moments of the score. The composer says that the work gains a programmatic dimension, but actually one perceives more the contours of an imaginary opera, to use the expression of Adorno with regard to Berg’s “Lyric Suite”.

The programme should have included two works by Giacinto Scelsi and Hanspeter Kuburz. Unfortunately the invited soloist, the excellent saxophonist Marcus Weiss, was retained on a German airport due to adverse weather conditions. As a result of this drastic reduction in the programme the organization decided, rightly so, to have Pedro Amaral’s work performed two times, with the executions separated with the composer’s commentaries – the gift of words and clarity are certainly his attributes. By the way, one should emphasise that this practice should be repeated whenever possible. In this case this experience was particularly interesting, since due to the fact that the programme notes were only available online and not in the printed programme, I think that a considerable part of the public would have heard the



available online and not in the printed programme, I think that a considerable part of the public would have heard the work as “pure” music at first, and the second time already in full possession of its extra-musical connotations. Although not having, as a principle request, anything against this kind of connotations, independently of their level, sometimes I share the suspicion of those who fear the incapacity of many, even music lovers, to conceive and enjoy the autonomy of musical language. Despite being aware of the author’s intentions I tried to submit myself to a kind of *Gedankenexperiment* through applying different modes of listening. “Deux portraits imaginaires” as any well-achieved work, reveals an organic nature and polysemy; as in the algebra of infinity the programmatic is summoned, being added without adding. In the second audition one gains, without losing in the first one.

In times of vaguely defined postmodernism and globalization, which is not only geographical but also historical, the problem of assimilating tradition would deserve a more profound treatment, which on its part should be based more on a rigorous analysis of works than on the discourse woven around them. The paradox of originality (quoting an expression of Emmanuel Nunes) has changeable multi-modes. The connection, more or less obvious, of a work with the tradition does not imply judging its value; this connection has diverse levels, from quoting (which the composer uses brilliantly for the first time) to more subterranean aspects, which are only discerned through a long frequentation of the artistic object.

Apart from the beauty, coherence and dramatic sense of the work now heard, it also reveals something profoundly interesting about the career of Pedro Amaral. He is, in the most noble sense of the term, a man of culture or, if we prefer, and recurring to a terminology somewhat *Ancien Régime*, a “*honnête homme*”. His culture does not harm the dramatic sense, but rather irrigates it; it does not crystalize the writing in more or less skilful copies, but rather vivifies it. Signs such as the timbre of Wagnerian tuba, the inclusion of Froberger’s *allemande* or other more subliminal connotations are experienced as open symbols and not as weak and thoughtless allegories, by means of which other artists try to make up the lack of interest in the actual musical material.

Although the conducting of Eno Poppe could have had more dynamic contrasts, the interpretation of the Remix Ensemble highlighted all the subtleties of the writing, as well as the refinement of the instrumental *solí*.

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