

THE REST, THIS MIRACLE

Music, this Miracle (De muziek dat wonder) is the title of a small volume in which, in 1958, the Dutch composer Matthijs Vermeulen published a selection of his musical reminiscences.

Music, yes, miracle of miracles. But that is only a small part of the story.

In the introduction the composer claimed he was convinced that, in view of the advances being made in psychology, it would not be long before an exact theory of 'music, this miracle' emerged. As so often, Vermeulen, the prophet of this exact theory, expressed himself in a far from exact manner. He did not explain what his theory was a theory of. I presume he meant the kind of theory that would clarify why Beethoven's Seventh is better than Vermeulen's Seventh. Or rather, why Vermeulen's Second is better than Haydn's Second or Mozart's Second, or in fact any Second Symphony by presumably any composer before Beethoven.

Better? In which way better? What does better mean?

A theory like this might be conceivable, but it would not be exact in the sense of being falsifiable.

Almost all theories about music, whether exact or not, are based on an implicit view of sound. (I put 'almost', not because I know of a theory which is *not* thus based, but because I do not wish to rule out that such a theory exists). According to this implicit view, sound is the primal state of music.

But music can, of course, be defined differently and it could be said that it is not sound which is the primal state of music, but silence. In that case music - and I quote the title of a composition by Gian Francesco Malipiero - is *Pause del silenzio*. That is all the quoting I am going to do, because no subject is able to open the floodgates of rhetoric more than 'silence'.

Pause del silenzio

The expression *pausa* is usually employed when there is no sound. It is called a rest in music, or if the rest lasts a very long time, a general pause. They exist in all shapes and sizes; from the semibreve rest to the 1/128th rest, and if needs must, the 2⁻ⁿ rest. In some languages the different values sound even more salutary, even more restful, especially as it gets shorter, such as the French *cent-vingt-huitième soupir* (1/128). This *soupir* speaks volumes. Not just rest - peace at last - or pause as in the German or Italian 'let's-have-a-break', but 'sigh'. *Le dernier soupir* would be a good title for a composition.

I do not know when it started, but I have become a collector of what I call, for clarity's sake, '*pause delle pause del silenzio*': interruptions in what in itself is an interruption of silence. A kind of silence squared. A super rest. After 'music, this miracle' the time has come for 'the rest, this miracle'. I use this title with reservation, because neither rest nor pause, let alone silence, expresses exactly what I mean. The first two terms sound too weary, the last too poetical.

The collection that is evolving is truly miraculous. In reality I may not have got very far yet, but in my mind's ear my discotheque of silence is taking increasingly fantastical shape. I have difficulty describing this discotheque, because it is both very large and very small. Each part is a whole; each whole a part.

Let me explain the way I operate.

I collect highlights. Intriguing rests. Not just a short breath, a bit of phrasing, but the eloquent silence. There is of course John Cage's famous composition 4'33". During the time indicated in the title the musician is supposed to do nothing, in order to force the listener to listen to silence, which obviously proves to be not a hundred per cent silent, at least from the point of view of physics. Such a silence is too emphatic, too didactic for me. No, I mean a silence like this:



Cantata 82 ('Ich habe genug') aria 'Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen', bar 64, fourth beat

You will agree this is an exceptional silence. A few seconds, no more, but it cannot be confused with any other silence. You may find it too literary, too much inspired by the - you've guessed it - '*schlummert ein*' which is sung by a bass preceding this rest.

But what do you make of this one:



Symphony 101 in D ('The Clock'), second movement (Andante), bar 97

I've been cherishing this one for years. Forgot to wind the clock in time. Unmistakably Haydn. Without a doubt.

As I mentioned, I collect rests. Other people collect movements, or parts of movements, or even bars - I limit myself to rests. I isolate and copy them. I would say that by doing this I will be able to condense my entire record, cassette and CD collection into something that fits onto one cassette.

At the moment I am caught up in the problem of classification. It gives me sleepless nights. I am making a classification based on composer and composition, as well as one on genre, but the real work starts with the typology, in which a functional as well as an expressive criterion can be used.

Take this rest, taken from a composition called *De Tijd*:



Louis Andriessen, *De Tijd*, bar 52 (including the tie from bar 51)

Is this counter-time or anti-time? With this rest it is as if my head is briefly being held under water. So does it come under the A of Aquatic Rest?

Or this general pause, from a work by the undisputed master of the rest:



Stravinsky, *Orpheus*, 'Pas-de-deux', bar 78

Poignant and unambiguous, this rest. Some things are simply beyond the human power of expression. Such as Orpheus' bewilderment when he turns around to look at Euridice and loses her for the second time. But how to catalogue this most eloquent of all rests? Under D for Deathly Silence, with a cross-reference to B for Bewilderment?

There is one rest I do not wish to keep to myself in this preliminary disclosure of ‘the rest, this miracle’. It is, as far as I am aware, the longest rest in musical history. It is so long, that I only dare render the beginning:



What you are hearing is rhythmicised silence. It is the beginning of the ninth movement, also the dramatic climax, of a symphony in twelve movements. This symphony is called *Stimmen... Verstummen* by the Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina. Those who have ever attended a performance of the piece will know that this movement consists of a solo cadenza for the conductor. The orchestra remains silent, but according to the composer, the carefully prescribed gestures of the conductor fill this silence with a higher meaning. And what about the recording of this movement? The composer replies: ‘When this higher meaning is truly realised, recording equipment will most certainly register and reproduce it.’



The rest is silence.

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