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Blind Concert: The World and Its Transformation through Music

Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of a Blind Concert held in Belgrade. In a Blind Concert performance, the concept of “space” transforms not for the sake of transformation itself, but because of the effect it strives to achieve. This eliminates the predominance of an institution of art dictating how a musical work should be approached. Accompanying the interpretation of piano compositions, the vocalist let out screams, voices, and noises, which, one may say, could not be summoned inside us, because they have yet to be articulated. I will articulate the effects of the desired transitional forms that have remained trapped and unrepresented in social standardization in terms of Badiou’s inaesthetics.

Keywords: performing art, *Blind Concert*, affirming resistance, institution of art, inaesthetics

Introduction

This paper examines how Badiou’s conception of the subject might be used to actualize the consideration of a contemporary artistic performance. Following an interpretation of his theorization of the subject, I discuss a Blind Concert performance in Belgrade¹ and analyze how this kind of performance pushes the boundaries in the academic performance of music and revives its active importance.

Being a Subject and Affirmative Resistance

I will start from the postmodern revision of the notion of free subject, whereby it consists of *actions made*, recognized by an individual as active within the situations wherein s/he exists.

¹ For more information on the concert, see: <http://www.kcb.org.rs/OProgramima/Muzi%C4%8Dkiprogram/Muzickinajave/tabid/1089/AnnID/2903/language/sr-Latn-CS/Default.aspx>, acc. February 9, 2015.

I believe that the agency of a subject and her/his active participation are confirmed by *perseverance* in the transformation of the (ideologically imposed) logics of the situations in which s/he finds her/himself as s/he acts. One of Badiou's interpretations recognizes *actions* that are indiscernible inside a system, which cannot be perceived by the state, ideology, or knowledge, and thus cannot be prohibited by the law.² I would like to develop them further, not as a sort of loophole exploited by those who would engage in fraudulent practices, but as a potential for deriving the subject's freedom and finding opportunities for resistance. I believe that in this kind of setting, the scepticism of the postmodern era is already awoken; for it is then that it becomes clear that free acts are easily co-opted and translated into an emptied ideological plane, where it becomes imperative to reaffirm them over and over again. Likewise, this argument also extends to the effort to overcome the illusion that the space of freedom can be dominated and conquered, and finally inhabited. What characterizes the "indiscernible" is that, although it can be conquered by *actions*, it is not governed by principles that are describable and repetitive the way knowledge is. It always depends on the "situation in which the subject intervenes", and the thinking subject does not exist without precisely that process of subjectivization that generates it and makes it create something. The notion of resistance theorized and advocated by Badiou is always affirmative.³ To decide actually means to accept transformations happening anew. A living subject is one who implements this process and the first to be directly affected by deciding, a risk s/he takes upon her/himself. The only principal support in the implementation of such a process is the ethics of perseverance, which, comprehending the changing situation as a true necessity, finds it important that one persevere in it. In this manner, one would overcome the temporary comfort that could follow an act of ignoring or camouflaging, which would serve to maintain the existing relations with the world. Hence, the point of affirming these actions lies not only in confrontation, but also in the comprehension and confirmation of those ways that are not trapped by regulations and that *concern all of us* in an (ideologically) disinterested, oriented, and predetermined manner. These actions thus bear inherent traces of the universal,⁴ the true, whose surge offers an opportunity to re-examine, restructure, transform, and change and the engrained attitude towards the world and test it again.

Inaesthetics – Artistic Performance as a Thinking Artefact (An Essay/Blind Concert)

I take Alain Badiou's inaesthetics as suitable for a philosophical articulation of the effects produced by a work of art, because it does not approach a work of art as an isolated phenomenon, valuating its aesthetic qualities, but as an initiator for a deeper and more relevant reflection on the social situation and ways of intervening in it.

As an example, I will presently discuss a Belgrade Blind Concert performance in Belgrade in an attempt to highlight the ways in which this kind of performance first and foremost

² Vladimir Tasić, *Svetovi Alena Badijua: matematika, poetika, politika*, Novi Sad, Adresa, 2011, 98.

³ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009, 167.

Badiou uses the contrast between Antigone and Aeschylus as an allegory, to describe two types of twists – the first characterized by anxiety and the second by courage. Both processes involve a model of negation, but Antigone's total resistance and open transgression are her self-sacrifice, although that sacrifice vanishes as soon as it is destroyed, leaving the reigning social order intact. On the other hand, in the case of Aeschylus, there is a twist that allows the appearance of a new law, which results in the reinstatement of the previous order.

⁴ Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, 47.

questions the boundaries of academic music performance. Then, I will examine the wider consequences of this.

The Blind Concert phenomenon was conceptualized in 2013, and one such performance took place in Belgrade in 2014 (October 13). Instead of analyzing the works performed in the Belgrade concert, I will reflectively try to reconstruct the transformation of the structure of space-language and discourse of the institution of art that facilitates the performance of these works, as well as the very transformation of a work in reverse, starting from the structure that is modified in this way.

Blind Concert

Transformation of Space

In a Blind Concert performance, the concept of “space” transforms not for the sake of transformation itself, but because of the effect it strives to achieve. Such conditions – darkness and the fact that the concert program is received only *ex post facto* (after the concert is over) – serve as a constant reminder of, and keep the focus on, the very reason why the institution of public concert-going exists in the first place. So, the darkness is there to cancel or minimize all other factors, since the only thing that matters is the sense of hearing. The Belgrade concert took place at the Artget Gallery of the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, it was free, and many in the audience had to sit on the floor, because there were not enough chairs to accommodate all of them. Therefore, this is a critique of the very institution of the academic concert, which has for a long time imposed a strict etiquette on its audiences, a set of unwritten rules that require applauding at predefined times, a dress code, announcing the programme beforehand, and so on. All of this is learnt through conditioning, which resulted from the predominance of the institution of art, which dictates how a musical work may be approached. These conditions contribute to a universally applicable *a priori* perception of an artwork and performance as an isolated phenomenon, thus depriving them from their active ability to influence the current social situation, because perception is reduced to a well-rehearsed social practice that remains enclosed inside the institution of art. And typically, the media coverage of musical events is based on an isolated realm of the music world, which is understood as excluded from the social reality and served at the pleasure of the “lovers” of a specific genre.

Eliminating the Cult of the Performer

Apart from this transformation of the concept of space, the Blind Concert also tends to eliminate the cult of the music performer. In it, the performers are secondary to the work they perform, their contribution lies in the act of interpretation, as well as in how, where, and before whom they interpret. Interpretation does not merely serve to remind the audience of the great works from the musical canon (which are also performed in Blind Concerts); rather, in a way, one may argue that with their manner of performance and the transformation of the concept of space, Blind Concerts strive to incorporate the works performed into a contemporary context. In fact, these are not hegemonic but targeted, “controlled” conditions of listening, in which the audience is treated as a participant in the event itself. Announcing the programme

after the concert is in fact an invitation to further explore the featured compositions,⁵ which aims to encourage the audience to approach those pieces largely on the basis of what they experienced in the concert. This is not a case of “pre-existing knowledge that qualifies us” to attend a performance; rather, it is an effort to awaken the essence of a work of art in the audience, which should subsequently, through the revitalizing feeling of live and present art, renounce cultural philistinism. Discouraging applauding during the concert is yet another way to abolish the distance that the institution of art establishes between the cult of the performer and the audience. In *Blind Concerts*, their shared participation in the performance of compositions is emphasized, for this is how the event assumes the essential properties of a musical ritual.

The Body and Discipline

We can say that given the need for more subtle levels of human articulation, bodies need music. However, considering the conditions of a “Blind Concert” performance, we can also say that music needs bodies that are not hegemonically disciplined for academic music listening, *i.*, not required to act in a specific manner by the performance.

Accompanying the pianist’s interpretation of piano compositions,⁶ the vocalist⁷ let out a wide variety of screams, voices, and noises, which, one may say, could not be summoned inside us, for they have yet to be articulated. As such, they actually awaken those associations that we did not fix inside ourselves in advance and expose us to an encounter with the “unknown”, in which we need to create and explore ourselves, as well as to establish ways of encountering the “unknown”. Somewhere along the way, we start perceiving the body as a void filled only with voices. Or as a sort of resonator or instrument, which does not have a defined or limited number of keys or strings, in which expression is indirectly articulated. Rather, it (the body) establishes in the most direct way a materially live relationship of sounds, voices, associations “with a structure of sensibility”, and in this way it strives to move from the socially constructed frames, in which knowledge and feelings are produced and acquired. In this way, we seek transitional forms that have remained trapped and unrepresented in social standardization. So, during a concert performance, we actually let ourselves be filled by all those voices we still haven’t summoned or managed to grasp, and put ourselves in a situation that requires activating the process of subjectivity in order to encounter this kind of experience.

We can say that art has that function – to enable us to encounter the unrepresentable, to feel, acquire, move us, or to invite us to get to know the “unknown” or what is old and forgotten. In this regard Badiou wrote the following: “The artist as individual is only living matter lent to a subject which, because it is a sensory subject, in the form of the work of art, needs such matter. But once the work-subject is completed, we can forget entirely his individual transitory support. Only the work is affirmative. The artist is the neutral element of this affirmation.”⁸ Perhaps in this sense should one read the incorporation of traditional works

⁵ This concert featured the following works: Georgs Pelēcis, *Sarabanda*; Kuzma Kuzmich, *My dear Igor/Moï dorogoï Igorv*; John Cage, *In a Landscape*; Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Suite in D minor, First Movement*; Georgs Pelēcis: *Death March*.

⁶ Piano: Jovan Stamatović Karić.

⁷ Vocals: Ana Sofrenović.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto of Affirmationism*, Lacanian Ink., <http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIV5.htm>, acc. February 9, 2015.

into contemporary contexts in *Blind Concerts*, for they too also are examples of lending living matter (the body) to traditional works [of art] in performance. In this way, a traditional work is not only revived and communicated in the context of a *Blind Concert*, but as Badiou puts it, “It imposes it, with a necessary small touch of terror.”⁹

This act even forces us to articulate the affirmed event. And this articulation is encouraging insofar as it carries within itself a great power that can initiate the transformation of socially established patterns on which we construct our understanding of ourselves and of the world we inhabit.

But, what else does this way of performing music reveal to us? That within artistic space intended for experimenting with various sounds, like voices and screams, a scream is articulated, which, we may say, the music lets out inside the confined frame in which it is condemned to be performed in front of bodies well-rehearsed for listening to it, which could instead use it to absorb different sensory variations from different moments in life. The work is closed for interpretation by the very approach of the listeners; their pre-formed “tastes” hinder the power of music, which cries out to communicate with a broader public beyond that frame.

Likewise, a work that occasions screams also suggests that all those bodies that are cast out of academic music listening, that do not have the privilege to enjoy the sublime spiritual content, are in fact sent back to the bodies of educated listeners who are privileged to experience such listening. This introduces into the space and makes present some other cast out bodies that may have experienced cruel exposure to sights that are only artistically presented in the concert. In this segment, we discover that performance also refers to the cyclical nature and comprehensiveness of mythical time and speech, given the reiterated performance and revival of the topics of origin, birth, decay, obstacles, pain, death, and holy space.

This kind of performance is, therefore, also a protest of artists themselves against the bureaucratic institutionalization of the idea of art. It thus re-examines the very experience of a musical work of art, exposing the boundaries established by the institutionalization of music listening itself. The performance starts before the audience enters the concert hall, and the “end” is not made official as usual; rather, the Music sees the audience out, remaining in the space even after the audience have already gone out, unassumingly aspiring to affirm itself as a constituent of life.

This kind of a performance examines the spiritual-philosophical human lack of, and longing for, a permeating social ritual and other factually suppressed aspirations for the ideal of mythical primordial unity, which contemporaneity usually evokes only as reduced to the needs of superficial ideological interests. In a special and fruitfully considered way, this musical performance keeps posing questions about collectivity, belonging, and human interconnectedness, but predicated on principles that differ from those offered by the dominant patterns.

Conclusion

I wanted to show that this could also be a way to recognize a small, yet fundamental possibility for examining and potentially restructuring the engrained social patterns that govern our approach to the world. For this reason, I believe it is important to deepen the examination of a work of art/performance with reference to ongoing social upheaval in order to, on the one hand, achieve a more effective reading of and grasp the necessary implications that a work of

⁹ Ibidem.

art could offer to social reality and, on the other hand, to revitalize its active power to participate in current social debates as a relevant thinking artefact. This reading does not suggest that one should conclude that the initial idea of all work of art is specifically to achieve these effects. What is important is when analyzing a performance, the awakening of a social situation in fact re-examines what a work of art has to offer us in a given global configuration. It is thus necessary to focus on the way in which some works of art/performances can be thought of from a point of view that prompts us to ask how they can serve us as possible proposals for changing our attitude toward the world and ourselves. In this manner it becomes possible to overcome approaching a work of art as a passive and isolated phenomenon residing inside an institution of art, as well as to restore credibility and actualize the influence of art that can, by extension, restore its active participation in redefining the problems of the modern world, as well as its power to act affirmatively.