

The crucible of melody, or, modern counterpoint

Incredible as it may seem, melody, the absolute essence of Western music, has long been a mere relic for the immense majority of modern composers. This observation, obvious to any self-respecting music lover, gives a fairly reliable idea of the tack taken by Contemporary Musical Art, in significant accordance with one of the darkest periods humanity can remember in reference to Art and Culture. The indisputable fact that, nowadays, melody is nothing more than a scarecrow in contemporary musical creation shows the very decadence of Contemporary Music, which judging by the latest 21st century avant-garde is striding resolutely towards self-destruction, that is, the very negation of music in favour of an unintelligible sound language, completely alien to the venerable laws of harmony and at loggerheads with the primordial aim Music has always had: to express emotions between human beings. This musical disaster, so aptly explained by the composer Antón García Abril, stems from one of the many confusions of post-modernity: mistaking experiment for work of art, when in fact they are completely different things: experimentation – always commendable and necessary – is a search, often a fruitless search for solutions of an instrumental, speculative nature (as in the case of atonality), whereas artistic creation, that is, Music based on tonal language – a system founded on the physico-harmonic phenomenon of Nature – is potentially destined to communicate, endure and even transcend, in virtue of its universal expressiveness.

Indeed, melody – understood as an autonomous musical line or idea characterized by an expressively inclined sense of rhythm and tonality -, that is, the quintessence of tonal language, has been practically “confined” to the realm – by no means marginal in sociological terms – of popular music – pop, rock, light music, traditional music, etc. – or of “decorative” music – music for films or electronic devices – and, *mutatis mutandis*, has become completely disregarded and ignored, pigeonholed in the supposedly “classical” or “highbrow” category of our times. Of course, apart from the endless source provided by jazz, there are notable exceptions – the aforementioned Antón García Abril and John Williams, to name just two great melodic composers – who have returned to the tonal tradition of the XXth century rooted in “neoclassical” composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Edward Elgar. They, however, are exceptional landmarks – and for that reason not at all representative of contemporary musical creation – who maybe confirm the rule of the self-complacent abyss that is modern “highbrow music”. Even so, in the first decades of the XXIst century healthy signs have appeared indicating that the “endemic” melodic disease which is ravaging the contemporary repertoire is reaching its end, good proof of which are the neo-classical style works of the Italian Vanni Moretto (1967), the experimental polyphony – along the lines of Arvo

Pärt - of the American, Eric Whitacre (1970) and the incipient works of a new generation of composers prepared to work with melodic material.

My idea of composing music in a baroque style did not arise as a reaction to the present-day musical panorama but as an instinctive activity stemming from my long years of musicology dedicated to the Baroque era, and particularly from the gratifying experiences I had tackling the reconstruction of several incomplete works by Antonio Vivaldi. Actually, the “temptation” to compose in the predominant style of 300 years ago (c. 1711), that is, in the “old” style, always seized me when I was at the harpsichord or the organ, playing Italian music from the XVIIIth century. In fact, few pieces escaped being arranged or reworked by me, and I soon realized how alive tonal music in general and baroque music in particular has been and will be: the ideas flow, the lines are ductile, malleable, beautiful, in a word, fresh, and invite ornamentation, variation, re-elaboration, procedures which in fact are directly linked to Baroque compositional technique. My intuition was fully confirmed by the study of bass continuo playing, where the creative freedom of the performers – derived from the broad range of harmonic and melodic possibilities afforded by the realization of the bass - is almost an intrinsic ingredient of the music. So, at the end of Summer 2009, after restoring several violin concertos by Vivaldi, I resolutely faced up to the challenge. Why not compose the music I love? Because, and this is the key, my music, *our music* is not the music of *our time* - as the worn clichés of modernity tell us - but the music we delight in, the music of *our heart*. And that, in my case, is Baroque music.

Once I had taken up the challenge, my first thought was a rather ingenuous one: given the mountains of extant baroque music in existence, is there a musical niche, are there themes still to be invented, “baroque” melodies still to be imagined? The answer was obvious: if the composers of the XVIIIth century were still alive, they would no doubt continue conceiving fugal figures, singable phrases, counterpoint... So all that is needed is to invent, to put the mind to work, *quaerendo invenietis*, according to J. S. Bach’s famous maxim. Invention is indeed the crucial concept in music that – being the complete opposite of atonal or abstract music– is constructed with melodies, with ideas, with horizontal lines that later, or maybe at the time of their conception, are harmonized. Hence the fundamental importance of melody, the melodic outline, whose exact equivalent in pictorial art is the sketch, the line, that is, the commitment. Harmony, texture, being also a substantial element of composition, is equivalent to the palette, the colour, the atmosphere of painting, and corresponds to the content, the line, the idea that is aimed at being expressed. In all other respects, the stylistic model of my works was *always* totally beyond doubt: the language of the late Baroque – c. 1710-1750, that is, the golden age of tonal music – whose style, as direct as it is emotive, became an unquestionable musical ideal from the first moment I heard it in my now distant infancy. And within

this *settecentesco* universe, the Italian style – with Vivaldi at the head – quickly became the reference par excellence, *my music*, as I stated earlier. Once this deliberately “retrograde” venture into neo-baroque composition was under way, I discovered that my “perverse” passion was shared by a handful of contemporary composers who, far from resigning themselves to the delights of mere *listening* or actual *performance*, undertook the same *vintage* enterprise as the author of these lines: giving life to the music of their lives. This is clearly avowed by the international society of composers *Vox Saeculorum*, several valued members of which are authorities on baroque musicology, such as Michael Talbot and Federico Maria Sardelli, along with other notable vocational creators of the *baroque revival*: Giorgio Pacchioni, Gianluca Bersanetti, Hendrik Bouman, Fernando de Luca, Matthias Maute and Grant Colburn, among others.

Counterpoint – the art of combining two or more melodic lines, that is, polyphony in its strictest sense – has, needless to say, always been the procedure *par excellence* of tonal music, the foundation of the so-called *stile osservato*, the “supreme” compositional technique by virtue of its generating the true fullness of the musical argument, hence its profusion in sacred music as a symbol of divine omnipotence. And within the polyphonic genre, the Fugue constitutes – since its origin half way through the XVIIth century – the superior form of counterpoint on account of its difficulty and complexity. Apart from being the perfect form for cultivating compositional *science* -by means of the use of mandatory imitative counterpoint-, the Fugue offers the composer a vast range of musical possibilities –structural, expressive, rhetorical, in a word, *artistic*; that is to say, the Fugue is the musical form wherein, more than in any other, *science* and *art* merge and complement each other in a contrapuntal construct based on the imitation of one or more subjects, that is, melodic themes or motifs. So, to paraphrase Johann Joseph Fux –author of what is surely the most important treatise on counterpoint in history: *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725)-, the Fugue has always represented the Mount Parnassus which every self-respecting classical composer seeks to climb.

For all these reasons, and above all because of my insatiable passion for the fugues of the late Italian baroque, it is easy to understand why the Fugue has always held pride of place in my compositional imagination, a predilection which at times, I must confess, becomes obsessive and exclusive. As mentioned above, the type of Fugue I cultivate is very specific: the Italian style (modelled on the canons of the Venetian-Bolognese school) of the period spanning 1710-1750. Therefore, the structural, harmonic and melodic characteristics adhere to that immortal style cultivated by, among others, Vivaldi, Torelli, Caldara, Albinoni, Bonporti, Dall’Abaco, Veracini and the Marcello brothers, to name just the more paradigmatic composers of this genre. Thus, the tonal structure or *itinerary* of the fugues presented on this recording is, with few exceptions, fairly concise: the three or four standard visits to the tonic’s satellite tonalities –the dominant, subdominant, mediant and

relative major or minor, not necessarily in that order- once the mandatory initial exposition of the theme is completed –built on the canonic tonal order of the subject/answer at the fifth/fourth which the four voices obey in their corresponding entries. There is a notable incidence of double counterpoint –triple in the case of the *Fuga della Pietà*-, that is, the statement of two or more subjects (or countersubjects) from the very *incipit* of the fugue, as well as the use of the *stretto*, or rather, the overlapping imitation of a motif. Following the orthodox tradition of the Fugue, connecting passages or episodes, which usually modulate, quote or vary the thematic motifs of the subjects, although more or less “autonomous” episodes are not uncommon, showing the influence of the Concerto genre. With the sole exception of the *Fuga del Magnificat*, a pedal note in the bass on the dominant systematically announces the final section of the Fugues, although various works –like the *Fuga delle Stelle*- conclude with a thematic or episodic recapitulation following the pedal note, a strong influence of the *ritornello* form propagated by Vivaldi.

As is obvious, the titles of the Fugues reflect or indicate the particular character of each Fugue following the programmatic-descriptive rhetoric of the music of the XVIIIth century. In the cases where the title alludes to a person, a divinity or an animal, I have attempted to write a fugue that genuinely evokes the subject in question: for example, the fugue *Poseidon* attempts to suggest the image of the sea god emerging from the waves, the fugue *Prometheus* evokes the Titan’s harsh captivity and subsequent escape, *Mercury*, the heavenly flight of the messenger of the Gods and *Charon* –thanks to the long appoggiaturas contained in the theme-, the oars of the lugubrious ferryman; an equally suggestive rhetoric is expressed in the “conceptual” Fugues –such as the *Fuga della Pietà* and the *Fuga del Magnificat*, which form a sort of sacred dyptich- or in the purely descriptive fugues, such as the *Fuga delle Stelle* –dedicated to recreating the sparkle of shooting stars- or the *Fuga Veneta* and the *Fuga del Parnasso*, which attempt to evoke the places they refer to. Returning to the ancient tradition of paying musical homage, I have used several themes by Vivaldi as a form of tribute to one of the greatest geniuses of the Fugue in the History of Music. In some cases the Vivaldian themes are quoted almost *ad litteram* –as in the fugues *Prometheus* or *de los Cíclopes* or *del Fanciulletto*, whose themes are drawn respectively from the Violin Concerto RV 240, the Triosonata RV 74 and the aria *Tenero fanciulletto* from the Serenade *Gloria e Himeneo* RV 687- while in others I have adorned original motifs by the Red Priest of Venice, as in the aforementioned *della Pietà* and *del Magnificat*, whose main subjects are, respectively, paraphrases of the vocal theme of the first movement of the *Stabat Mater* RV 621 and of the theme of the choral movement *Et Misericordia* from the *Magnificat* RV 610/611, as well as in the appropriately named *Tributo Vivaldiano*, whose principal theme is a paraphrase in the minor key of the subject of the famous fugue from the Concerto Op. III n° 11 RV 565. In the category of genuine rewriting we have

the *Fuga del Pastor Fido*, which is, in fact, a “reconstruction” for 4 voices, of the two-part *Fuga da Capella*, from the Sonata n° 6 RV 58 (RV Anh. 95.6) from *Il Pastor Fido*, by Nicolas Chédeville (1705-1782), probably based on an original, long-lost composition by Antonio Vivaldi.

One last note about this recording by the excellent quartet, the Fisarchi Ensemble, and their rather unprecedented structure. Although the substitution of the viola –originally stipulated as the third voice in my four-part Fugues for strings- by the accordion could appear out of place, the truth is that the considered presence of this keyboard aerophone brings a sensational prominence and colour to the viola line which normally tends to be subdued or scarcely audible in the majority of orchestras and even in chamber groups. In fact, having already made the decision to record the fugues one to a part –in the interests of ensuring the total transparency of the counterpoint- using a string quartet without bass continuo, quite by chance I had the delightful experience of hearing a concert performance of one of my Fugues performed by the Fisarchi Ensemble with their accordion, and was instantly persuaded to incorporate it in the recording of the present anthology. Not only that, its unusual, *colouristic* contribution underlines the timeless dimension of the Art of the Fugue.

Pablo Queipo de Llano

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