

Thesis of PhD Dissertation

**THE CRITICAL TURN OF THE
20TH CENTURY'S MUSIC**

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1.1 Object of the dissertation, delimitation of the theme

„Before long, writings about painting will be more interesting than the painting itself. The situation is similar in the music as well. Our age has to be mentioned as the age of commentaries by Guénon, in the sense that we aren't able to create authentic texts. Our strength is interpretation. The modern painting and music are excellent examples of that the commentary is generally better than the work of art” – wrote Béla Hamvas in his essay about Bartók, which I regard the main inspiration of this dissertation. Not because I think that a commentary about the 20th century music is more interesting than the music itself – although a philosopher admittedly can expect more success at the analysis of composer's confessions and self-interpretations – but primarily because the majority of music lovers not just beware but completely ignore special musical inventions of 20'th century.

The situation consists almost a hundred years ago, and the duty of music philosophy and of music critic is to change this state. The only way is to initiate the audience into the world of historical and music cultural context. Because presenting avant-garde works is doomed to failure without this step.

In Hungary, it would be a serious risk for a program manager of a large town's concert hall to extend the repertoire with an opus from one of the experimental composer. If an atonal or bruitist concert is organized somewhere, a fun of classical music does not go just for joy, does not try to get the sheet music to study at home – neither with a music graduate. Although aversions can also be found against modern art today, the denial of traditional presentment is rather resented in music culture. As if our music culture and our philosophical inquiry would be typified by a „sonophob” attitude. – At least until the 20th century. Let's add: if we approach the exploding amount of musical dissonances in the 20th century from an arithmetical point of view, we may discover similar cultural „taste-orientation” not just in the western culture, but also in the history of other cultures: as if the dissymmetrical ideologies had been demonized everywhere until the 20th century.

Thus an intercultural evidence and its psycho-physical challenge are waiting for the researcher of the 20th century music, who if has a different musical and philosophical background can face this multi-headed, often monster-like contemporary music only with proper theoretical knowledge. The broadest goals of my thesis: to understand the

genealogy of the aesthetic problem behind the phenomena of contemporary music, or (if the problem has too many mosaic for a human life) at least to explore the philosophical fundamentals of certain paradigms within the framework of a syncretic vision. During my investigations, considering the tradition of the two and half thousand years of western philosophy- and music history, I analyse ideas of that authors, who forms philosophical and cultural paradigm and being a dominant person in his time, and those who have contributed to understand the systemic context of the history of musical dissonance and noise.

1.2 Thesis list of results

According to the first thesis of my dissertation, the history of western music was the history of the musical catharsis, namely, the history of „healing” and “recovering” technics by the music. So the western music is the story of the psycho-physical influence of musical sound perception, which primarily aims something out of music in the sense of my thesis. Since the invention of its noetic, as we are going to see, the purpose of music – whether it is about the civil entertainment or the subject of sacred art –, is to make the listeners being able to change their certain aspects in such a way that they are not able to control or don’t want to control. So if we looking back from the second decade of 21’rd century, the history of western music was not just about the liberation of noises. In the treatises of composers and philosophers, we can find struggles between abstract concepts of reflection affecting all levels of abstraction in music culture (from the classical music composer to the dancer of folk music), so we can conclude directly or indirectly that they are reflections of a social and aesthetic discourse. From this perspective, the story of „healing-recovering” by the western music is an efficient way to integrate them into the western culture.

According to my hypothesis, the suppression of the „innocent sounds” definitely serve this purpose, because just a culture saturated sound perception can represent a dual musical world view, which based on the following reflection concepts: musical sound – noise; harmony – disharmony; anthropomorphic – not anthropomorphic; instrumental – vocal; pleasant – unpleasant; consonance – dissonance; catharsis – crisis; fine – ugly;

ethos – affect; tragically – comical; good – evil; divine – demonic; sacred – profane; artistic – entertaining; mercy – punishment; integrated – isolated; imaginative – sensualist; world-like – one-dimensional; human completeness – alienation; music as language – music as a gradual process; divine – human; timeless, endless – present; inevitable – accidental; genius – naive; masculine – feminine; intellectual – sensual.

In the first part of the dissertation, I'm going to survey the musical filogenesis of these couples of terms, but with an unconcealed intention, that I am going to study former commentaries of sound perception from the perspective of the post-critical turn of 20th century music.

The second thesis of the dissertation is that the works of 20th century avant-garde and experimental composers can be interpreted as a dialogue with the western music, what is more, the conceptual art not just demonstrate the old aesthetic problems, but it provides new questions and answers. According to my hypothesis, the purpose of all avant-garde musical tendencies I have discussed was the relativization of the reflective concepts behind the western music by not negating, but reconsidering them. The turn of the 20th century music was a critique and also a new opportunity for the earlier composer practice and the cultural determination of general sound perception.

In the second part of the dissertation, I pondering the new challenge of musical perception from the sight of traditional music philosophy, and I am going to argues for the specific involvement of Zen Buddhism into the western music, which initiated a new discourse in the conventional (based on dual world view) music culture, especially in terms of the sound perception, the idea of nature and the genius aesthetics.

The third thesis of dissertation: among the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde cultures, the most critical reform of western music can be found in the works of the American experimental composers, especially in the works of John Cage, which makes a division reasonable in the history of music: before Cage and after Cage. According to my hypothesis, in the experimental music philosophy of Cage, an aesthetic syncretism come into being, which fundamentally affects the cultural and ontological determination of music and the problem of the mediality of sound perception. Thanks to Cage works, the old problems from inside and outside music (tragically or comically comprehended dissonance, noise, nature, artifact etc.) has to be reinterpreted, on the other hand: totally

new genres (action art, happening, mixed-media event, fluxus, environment etc.) has born.

About the theoretical and practical aspects of „critical turn” I wish to provide a coherent image in the second part of dissertation. When I prove the „turn”-thesis, I will focus on the connection between experimental and the American abstract painting art.

The fourth thesis of dissertation concerns the historical implications of the „critical turn”, which can be followed by the art of Steve Reich and the feminist music critic equally. According to my thesis, this „turn” not only had impact on the neo-avant-garde and postmodern world, but it also can be found in the work of American contemporary composers as well as in feminist music critic – with the best-known figure of Susan McClary – which is the most difficult challenge for the contemporary music science. My hypothesis declare that the 20th century musical turn is quite successful, because using dissonance and noises in music has been acceptable and interpretable both in popular (pop-rock, jazz, electronic music) and the researched high music culture. After Cage, the music culture is less and less suitable to be analysed as musical formations of social discourses even from the aspect of feminist or chauvinistic music critic, while the conservative musical practice is still waiting for new apology. After the „critical turn”, a question became more and more urgent for the music education: how much space can be allowed for the sonocentric experimental forms beside the metaphysical perception of the western music preceding Cage. The more attention we pay for the message of the critical turn, the more democratic, the more tolerant culture and democracy we are talking about. The fewer experimental music dominate in the music culture and music education, the more ideology and metaphysics we prefer.

1.3 Methodological abstract

Does a real transit exist among the history of western music and the „problems” of 20'th century avant-garde music, wich are going further than compare the facts of music historical and music theoretical debates? – The method's efficiency of my dissertation depends on this. According to my expectation if those transit are exist, the most suitable way to demonstrate them is the *phylosophical approach*.

I gave eight years for the phylosophical researches, and for the „*fraternization with a foreign music cultures*”. From the art ontological researches I had hoped to shorten the „antropologic fieldwork”, from the examination of compositions I had expected inspirations for my theoretical works. All the time I tried not to commit for a musical era, non for the questions and answers of a composer or a philosopher. For that reason the title of my dissertation already involve the „method” of the most important thesis. The sincretistic search of „intellectual history context” similar to as though we would try to organize the stars, wich are new and really exists, wich are still shining – as we sense – but died already. The same concern to the moral laws inside us: during the intellectual history researching can be detected our cultural stereotypes, which are connected to sound perception, those fantasy pictures who have responsible for „walling” our ear.

During the years – against to my will – be formed certain emphases, specially on the score of the american experimental music and music philosophy of John Cage. From the aspect of Cage the western music's sky seemed to be the most exciting, so we can observe with the telescope of experimental music the most of falling stars, and this fact in itself already sufficient for that kind of dissertation, which almost totally shun the scores analyzing. We should understand the newcomer (sound) cultur as process of understanding, like for the pioneers of the 20'th century's music – and like the cultural antropological turn – was the first and most important starting-point, so *the essence of all experiments was the critic of cultural subject, instead of the culturally inheritable music materia*.

Because the understanding in the newcomer culture context can be described only with our conceptual web of own culture, perhaps the most effective if we starts to mark our cultur as a stranger, if we are making an inventory in our cultur institute – which is now even the „institute” of art – so foremost we should ask for the ontological

foundations of our culture, our music art. In my interpretation the european avant-garde made this inventory, this explains why couldn't make such a reform, that essentially different from this cultural base.

Since this is a philosophical dissertation, I have avoided intentionally to present the correspondence between complicated music theories. So in the first part of dissertation I tried to reconstruct those philosophers thoughts – with a view of after „critical turn” – who are „milestone” as form the metaphysics of the 19'th century romantic, absolute music. The first part concerns to the speculations of before music history. After that I examine the most important locus of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Friedrich Nietzsche. I view the music-metaphysics of western philosophy, as the antecedent of the 20'th century's music problems, the avant-garde doesn't break up with, but the opposite: from this tradition the avant-garde can hope the musical understanding.

The first philosophical interpretation of New music came with unexpected side-effects. That is why I put my focus on the negative affects of T. W. Adorno's philosophy, regardless of Adorno still an inspiring thinker for the music sociology and for other researches too, still in these days. I defined the symbolic date (4'33'', 1952) of „critical turn”, because by this time the 2nd. world war already has ended, and the experimental composers has done with their most important experiments. In the second part, the chapters of „Critical turn” I tried to examine authentic works and source materials as much as was possible (selfinterprets of the componists, interviews with them, remembrances, archive video recordings, performances, documental moovies, correspondence etc.), from the aspects which I explained in the first part of dissertation. So primarilly my goal was not to search all english literature, even if I made researches in the german and english Cage's exegetics. In the music philosophical discourse as I know, we can't find similar thematic analysis. To mention Cage' philosophy with Nietzsche is not usual. I hope that I can convince the reader for this comparisons aren't just demonstrate analogies and confrontations, but they can causes valuable insights about the relevancy of dissonance and noise.

On by the side of the chosen literature I have to mention those special conditions, which affect each middle-eastern explorer, in whose homeland until 1990, the musicology and music philosophy was the serving-maid of communists „teleology”. The specialty of the situation originate from that basically the hungarian musicology has left us excellent works, which those we *have to* read, because of scientic cumulativity

and consistency. I tried to trace and recognize firstly the (not even little) hungarian literatures. Especially as I discovered in the marxist aesthetic, the best school of arguments against the „formalism”, namely the fertile and insipiring theory of „retrievable human wholeness in music”. But the books of Zoltai Dénes, Ujfalussy József, Maróthy János, Vitányi Iván, Pernye András probably would become the legitimate area for the science of philosophy, when would the connection between philosophical and ideological intension not clear, instead it would be interpret in a different way.

About the method of dissertation I have to admit, that to speak about „critical turn” from the context of 20'th century isn't a genuine idea. In the last century there were so many civilizational-technology „revolution”, we could talk about many „turns”, first of all, about the revolution of „electronic music”. In my dissertation I stand to reason that all „small and big turns” are minimal, compared to Cage's „critical turn”, because Cage's philosophy has contain all avant-garde intentions, and what's more: open a new dimension of sound perception.

For the students on my musicphilosophy courses I had adumbrated the following *metaphores*, describes which are those *preconceptions* of us, what must be transcend, or at least to fill with knowledge of deeper context, in order to understand the critical turn of the 20'th century's music and musical philosophy. The basic concept of my illustrative example is borrowed from *The Five Obstructions*, the Lars von Trier's moovie, wherein the director has created *five challange* for his mentor – who had shooted a short-film, with limited rules. The documentations about the shooting, the finished short-films and the conversations about them, at the end had created the film, in this way the borders between mentor and student, between film and reality, between definer and the defined one, are blurred. Something same happened in the music history of the 20'th century. The students of western music tested differently our behaviors, follows from this the five short-films had created a musical history „full-moovie”. Let's see, which kind of obstructions had to face the western music; what the problem is, and how can we divide that.

1) The composer in the brake of the concert delate the key signatures from the score of the orchestra. The orchestra returns to the stage and has to comply for the movements of the conductor. The scandal is breaking out. (release of dissonance; *atonality*; *dodecaphony*; *serialism*)

2) The scores remain untouched, but in the brake of the concert, the composer changes all instruments to rhythm instruments. (The revolution of *percussion music*, Edgar Varèse, John Cage; the *repetitive music*, Steve Reich, Philip Glass)

3) The conductor is the performer, the music score is or a garphic artifact, or an empty score with a single order: „do not play!” [Tacet] (The innovations of the *experimental music*; Morton Feldman, John Cage, Christian Wolf, Earle Brown; the musical reinterpretation of the silence.)

4) The conductor – to be visible or „invisible” – conducts noises and machines, with his stick or with an audio-mixer. (*Futurism, bruitism, electronic music.*)

5) The componist says goodbye to the notes of score for good. The composition will be composed by the sound engineer, from the montage of natural sounds and sonics, instead of the ordinary musical notes. (*Concrete music, musical simulacra, flux.*)

Schoenberg’s arguement is valid for all experiments: the players of this short films had started courageous journey of discovery, and they deserve to become theirs arts to public. (Similar to the results of natural science.) Despite all that, I discuss the five obstructions majorly in the coherency of John Cage and the experimental music (not to be unfocused) so that is why I didn’t speak about many important works and analysis. The same applies to the critique of the popular music works, wich searched by the *music sociology, popular music studies, ethnomusicology*, and the *cultur- and media sciences*. The reason why they are not in the dissertation, because the popular music is the „sixth obstruction” for the Western music development, and the wishes for thrashing them were behind all experiments: *be quit of casual hearing, namely of the popular music and „dictatorship” of its music indrustry.*



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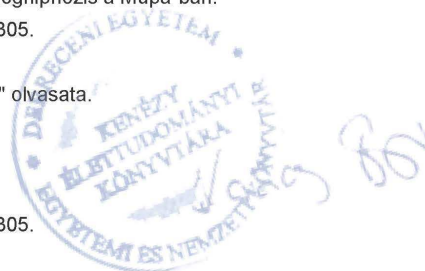
List of publications related to the dissertation

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2. **Karap Z.:** Metazene-metaesztétika?
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3. **Karap Z.:** Krízis és katarzis a "problémamenedzsment" korában.
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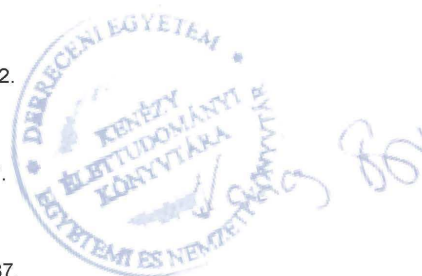


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