“Un mystère de présence totale”: Jankélévitch, Debussy and the mystery of music

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Abstract

This essay investigates some issues of the Twentieth Century French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch’s Musical Aesthetics and Philosophy of Music, particularly referring to his original interpretation of the French musical Impressionism, with emphasis to some composers such as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Gabriel Fauré. Specifically, the paper pays attention to the aesthetical and musical criticism of the author towards Debussy’s music. Which are the features and the characteristics of the Jankélévitch’s philosophical musicology? How much the purely theoretical and ontological theories and ideas of the philosopher act on his view of Debussy’s work, of Impressionism and of music in general as an art and a human experience? Which is - consequently - the original and eccentric approach used by Jankélévitch in his musical writings and which are the final ideas expressed on debussysme? As a result of this study, it will appear a surprisingly nihilistic view of the life and of the reality, a totally unique, unusual, innovative and imaginative interpretation of Claude Debussy’s compositions, where music and sound become a “magical” phenomenon through which giving a deeply philosophical interpretation of the world and of the human life.

Keywords: Jankélévitch. Debussy. Music. Aesthetics. Ontology.

“Un mystère de présence totale”: Jankélévitch, Debussy e o mistério da música

Resumo

Este ensaio investiga algumas questões da Estética musical e da Filosofia da música do filósofo e musicólogo francês Vladimir Jankélévitch, referindo-se particularmente a sua interpretação original do impressionismo musical francês, com ênfase em compositores como Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel e Gabriel Fauré. Como objetivo específico, avalia a crítica estética e musical de Jankélévitch sobre a música de Debussy. Quais são as características da musicologia filosófica de Jankélévitch? De que modo as ideias puramente teóricas e ontológicas do filósofo influenciam seu visão da obra de Debussy, do Impressionismo e da música em geral como arte e experiência humana? Quais são as características da abordagem original e excêntrica de Jankélévitch em seus escritos musicais e quais são as ideias definitivas expressas no debussysmo? Como resultado deste estudo, descobriremos uma visão surpreendentemente nihilista da vida e da realidade, além de uma interpretação singular, incomum, inovadora e imaginativa das composições de Claude Debussy, de modo que música e som se tornam um fenômeno “mágico” através do qual temos uma interpretação profundamente filosófica do mundo e da vida humana.


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Introduction

This essay will focus on Vladimir Jankélévitch’s analysis of some features of the French musical Impressionism, paying attention specifically to the aesthetical and musical criticism of the philosopher towards Claude Debussy’s musical work.

The work is born from philosophical and aesthetical assumptions, analysing the writings of a philosopher, who was only to a lesser extent something close to a musicologist. Consequently, it is not possible focus on technical, specific, musicological features of Debussy’s compositions: there are on the contrary, as a starting point, some aesthetical structures of the Jankélévitch’s critical prose towards Debussy’s comprehensive musical work and his aesthetical and poetical attitude as a composer, as an artist.

The idea is to try here to show not only the general view of musical Impressionism and of Debussyan music emerging from some of Jankélévitch’s writings, but also and mostly how and how much his musicological work on Debussy is inextricably related to his natural theoretical, aesthetical and philosophical attitude. It seems in fact that in his musical texts Jankélévitch the musicologist leaves continuously the place to the philosopher, and the same in the opposite way. It would seem impossible to decide in an ultimate, univocal, unambiguous way if his writings on music belong to pure philosophy or to the field of musicology. Clearly, one may suggest the first option, since Jankélévitch is historically and unquestionably a philosopher, a thinker, not a real and scientific musicologist. However, it is also clear, at the same time, analysing these eccentric philosophical-and-musical writings, that they may have some features in common with traditional canons and working habits of musicological analysis.

Jankélévitch’s thought on the French composer is mainly expressed in some works of musical criticism from the first half of the Twentieth Century. The philosopher starts to work on Debussy in the 40s. The first writing is *En blanc et noir* (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1946), an article about both Debussy and Ravel; the title is clearly

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2 Nevertheless, Jankélévitch devoted many essays to music and composers, such as Debussy himself, Ravel, Fauré, Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Satie, Bartók, Stravinskij, Albéniz, De Falla, De Séverac, Mompou, Skrjabin, Rimskij-Korsakov.
inspired by the homonymous Debussyan two-pianos-suite. The first extensive book on the musician of Saint-Germain-en-Laye is *Debussy et le mystère* (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1949). Jankélévitch returns to work on him after the mid-turn of the century, with a second book, *La vie et la mort dans la musique de Debussy* (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968). These two works will converge and will be unified in the last, ultimate Debussyan work, *Debussy et le mystère de l’instant* (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1976), belonging to the musical cycle *De la musique au silence*. References and allusions to Debussy’s music are also situated all throughout Jankélévitch’s musical writings, as for example in *Maurice Ravel* (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1939), where Jankélévitch offers a comparison between Debussy’s and Ravel’s musical aesthetics.

Undoubtedly, most of the critical material comes from the 40s, from the first of Jankélévitch’s Debussyan works, particularly because several large sections of the 1949 work have been repeated, rewritten and proposed again in the 1968 work. In this analysis, I have considered mainly material referring to *Debussy et le mystère*, but of course I also had to refer to its 1968 reworking *La vie et la mort dans la musique de Debussy*, because some concepts found a fuller and clearer expression.

**The mystery of music**

Jankélévitch’s interpretation of Debussy is developed in a double direction. On one hand, there is the emerging musical event in itself, its technical structure and its sound texture, its meanings and its aesthetic effects. On the other hand, there are the philosophical categories of the author, through which Jankélévitch organizes his ideas on debussysme. This proceeding could be considered as a general trend in Jankélévitch’s musical analysis, which means that Jankélévitch’s musical research is totally permeated by this duplex instance, the musicological one and the philosophical one. The musicological approach on composers and musical works should maybe be separated from the philosophical one, which is the more theoretical capability to reflect on musical art and its meanings for the humankind. Nevertheless, both of them are completely unified in a combination that is impossible to divide following the previous

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3 In the first idea of the author, *De la musique au silence* should have been a long cycle of seven books, with all the musicological essays written by Jankélévitch. Finally he wrote only three works, the aforementioned essay on Debussy, *Fauré et l’inexprimable* and *Liszt et la rhapsodie. Essai sur la virtuosité*, with the publisher Plon.
distinction. This *doppelbewegung* can be seen as one of the most important peculiarities of Jankélévitch’s music-writings-style: a double register, the first consisting of his basic philosophical background, the second consisting of aesthetical features and musical reflections based - in this case - on Debussy’s musical works.

Jankélévitch’s aesthetical view of Debussy can be better understood when considering the contrast with his idea of Fauré’s music. In his writings on music, he very often underlines comparisons and differences between Debussy’s, Ravel’s and Fauré’s musical works. Fauré’s act of composing is situated, in the philosopher’s opinion, between the unperceivable and the supernatural, between the immaterial and the metaphysical, while Debussyan musical art is devoted to describe and to understand even the lightest sensorial vibrations and to reproduce the “things themselves”. Fauré’s music, on the contrary, tries to sublimate pluralism of reality in a high emotional level, even spiritual. Debussy does not arrive never at this elevated dimension, because his poetic is a poetic of objectivism, a way to describe the reality in itself through musical impressions, through “les degrés infinitésimaux de la nuance” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 30). Debussy’s sounds are connected to material gravity, to natural phenomena, while Fauré’s musical aesthetics is a poetic of desire and dream, a desire expressed by music through its indetermination and its freedom from material and natural shapes.

The reason for which Jankélévitch’s aesthetical-musicological writings are impossible to catalogue under a univocal definition, to put together under the canons of a unique style and the rules of a single methodology can be explained as follows: Jankélévitch is not a music historian, nor a simple critic, nor a music journalist, nor a real musicologist. He is a philosopher, and - concerning the musical field - he approaches musical phenomenon through methodologies and procedures of Musical Aesthetics and Philosophy of Music: he directly interrogates the universe of sounds, he directly works with musical matter in itself. His approach is purely theoretical. More, it is totally unsystematic. His aesthetics, his musical thought is devoted completely to the music in itself, avoiding to give substance to every possible extra-musical factor. No history, no technicality, no formalism, no rules: his musicological writings are something that is beyond standard musicology. This refuse of traditionalism and conventions brings Jankélévitch to affirm the concept of *ineffable*: music is nothing
completely “real” to analyse, to study, to vivisect any more. Music is only a possibility to catch a glimpse of the essence of things, of reality. Essential value of the Whole, of the philosophical Totality is *ineffable*, it is the so-called *Je-ne-sais-quoi*.

The main point can be found in some words by the philosopher, from a long interview with Béatrice Berlowitz, published as *Quelque part dans l’inachevé* (JANKÉLÉVITCH, BERLOWITZ, 1978). Jankélévitch says that it should be important to find a “musical way” to write on music. He admits that sometimes he has been criticized for abusing metaphors, analogies and correspondences in his writing style, borrowed and stolen by other languages and other arts. His argument is that everyone should write not “on the music”, but “with the music”, in a “musical manner”, “musically”, remaining an accomplice of musical mystery (JANKÉLÉVITCH, BERLOWITZ, 1978, p. 248, LISCIANI-PETRINI, 2012, p. 135). What he wants to do is simply taking the music in itself, in its pure essence.

**The Ineffable, or the Je-ne-sais-quoi**

Jankélévitch’s style is analogic. It proceeds with images, juxtapositions, metaphors, enchantments, *impressions fugitives*, *visions passagères*. His writing style is very metaphoric: he uses poetical and ambiguous metaphors as the *not-being*, the *not-said*, the *silence*, the *secret*, the *mystery*. Mystery of music is its essence, its capability to express everything that would be otherwise inexpressible, as Schopenhauer’s Philosophy of Music too. Jankélévitch often talks about the philosophical concepts of Inexpressible, Unspeakable, Elusive, Ineffable. All these concepts, in different shapes, are actually the same concept: the idea of *ineffable* is the mysterious *Je-ne-sais-quoi* by which everyone interrogates himself and his human sensibility. Musical phenomenon is perfectly suited to express this *Je-ne-sais-quoi*, this *ineffable*, this mystery (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1961). However, since it is impossible to express it with words, in a rational way, Jankélévitch uses these eccentric, unusual, imaginative expressions, which could seem non-technical from a musical point of view. It is possible to express the inexpressible only in an artistic and musical way, in a metaphorical and irrational manner. One may consider his philosophical and aesthetic definitions to be weird and inappropriate exactly because there is no logic and no rationality in them. Jankélévitch is sure that it is impossible to find rational, logic and totalizing definitions to explain.
music, otherwise there would not be mystery. One can only use irrational expressions to indicate the same irrational concept of the ineffable expressed by the music. To be clearer: it is possible to say that, ontologically, the ineffable is expressed in the real world by music, in a not rational but irrational modality (similarly to Schopenhauer’s musical thought); consequently, one may express with words - and Jankélévitch does it - this musical mystery, this highest value of reality, this essence of the world, only in a similar irrational way (and never rationally). Irrationality through which musical phenomenon expresses the ineffable is the same through which, with words, we could be close to express or at least suggesting the Je-ne-sais-quoi. This is the theoretical reason for which Jankélévitch avoids using technical musical expressions, preferring his philosophical categories.

It could be interesting to underline a philosophical similarity between Nineteenth Century Schopenhauer’s Philosophy of Music and Twentieth Century Jankélévitch’s Philosophy of Music. In fact, there seems to exist an analogy between Schopenhauer’s concept of Wille and Jankélévitch’s concept of ineffable, or Je-ne-sais-quoi. Both these concepts are in their authors’ view the Primary Principle of the reality, similarly to ingenuous originating principles of the first Ancient Greek Pre-Socratic philosophers (Water in Thales’ philosophy, Air in Anaximenes’, Apeiron or Unlimited or Infinite in Anaximander’s, Fire in Heraclitus’, and so on). The specific similarity is apparent in the fact that the most fundamental value of Totality, the first ontological element of the universe can be found also in the musical phenomenon. Both in Schopenhauer’s (SCHOPENHAUER, 1819, § 52) and Jankélévitch’s view, music has the power to express this value, this principle, this idea. The expression of the Principle takes place through musical art not in a metaphysical and transcendental way, but in an immanent and realistic sense: music expresses the supreme mystery, the mysterious secret of life and death, of the world itself, of the human finitude.

The total presence

How could we connect this theoretical idea with Debussyan music? In Jankélévitch’s view, Debussy’s music is so enchanting, mysterious, intriguing exactly because it has the power to allude and to refer to this ontological and eschatological mystery. That is the reason why Debussyan musical art is impressionistic. Debussy’s
musical mythology is full of suggestions, images, connections, references to the extramusical context. His music is a continuous and uninterrupted magic. “L’évocation de la réalité, chez Debussy, a toujours quelque chose d’imperceptiblement évasif et allusif” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 110). Impressionistically, its enchanting power and sound matter in itself create a new reality in which it is possible to discover sudden and unexpected meanings. According to Jankélévitch, we could say that these poetical and philosophical meanings are findable not in the rational and formalistic structure of the music, not in the notes themselves, but around the sounds, in between the accords, in between the harmonic vibrations of the sounds, that so often flow in the silence. This is an important point, the issue of the silence: Debussy’s musical architectures very often dissolve into the absolute Nothing. “Mille nuances différencielles, échelonnées entre l’audible et l’inaudible” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 122). Metaphorically, this alternation between sound and silence is the same between light and shade, life and death, being and non-being. Some Debussyan sounds are so faint and tenuous that they fluctuate between the being and the non-being: “Debussy retient l’être sur le bord aigu du non-être…” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 115).

Certainly, an important feature of the global theory is the mystère. Jankélévitch narrates passionately his theoretical idea to investigate ontological mystery of reality in Debussy’s music. In Jankélévitch’s Weltanschauung there is no causalism and no finalism in the reality, there is no transcending, there are no metaphysical and theological truths to discover (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1954). The mystère is in the “things themselves”, the same real, material, natural things that give substance to Debussyan impressionistic music. Mystery is always something intrinsic and inner to the same reality. Debussy’s music is the music of ontological mystery because there is no finalistic direction in human life, no metaphysical meaning, no transcendental sense: everything does exist ohne Warum. Moreover, Debussyan music represents so perfectly this philosophical view of the things because is devoted to instantaneisme: his compositions - as the Préludes, giving the most important example from Jankélévitch - are disarticulated sound images, apparitions without reason and without final goal, simple sound agglomerations. Every single Debussyan musical image appears to the listener as an instantaneous and fast outlook of a landscape, of a story, of a “presence”, and nothing else. This kind of pessimistic (or simply realistic) view of the world, which
remind us again the Schopenhauer’s Weltanschauung, produces a consequent idea: the mystery of the “presence” and of reality becomes the mystery of death, the antimetaphysical view of the world becomes paradoxically the scandal of annihilation, the non-teleological end. This spleen, this melancholy, this autumnal and crepuscular feeling is contained in the entire musical work of Debussy: “la region nocturne de l’existence” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 20). The idea of instantanisme returns: all that is real and “present” only for a short time, it is something that comes from nowhere and it goes towards nowhere.

Chaque ‘image’ debussyste est comme une vue instantanée et statique sur la ‘présence totle’; chacune immobilise pour ainsi une minute de la vie universelle des choses, une tranche de l’histoire du monde, et elle fixe cette coupe verticale en son aeternum Nunc, c’est-à-dire hors de tout devenir, sans relation à l’avant et à l’après (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1949, p. 32).

It is something without woher and without wohin, without past and without future, without any reason and without any hope. According to a famous German proverb, we can say: Einmal ist Keinmal. This is the ultimately real and terrible truth of an aimlessly path, without destination, with no redemption and no happy end, because of his contingency.


“Toute la musique de Debussy (...) nous dit dans la langue du mystère et de la poésie qu’il n’y a rien d’important au monde sinon le monde lui-même et son omniprésence” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 140).

**A musical philosophy**

There is something more to say about the strong metaphorical connotations of Jankélévitch’s music criticism.
Therefore, it is undoubted that music - beyond its seeming indetermination - has multiple meanings and unlimited determinations. It permits many different interpretations. Because of its powerful capability of meaning, musical art allow to write about itself only in a metaphorical and symbolic way. Musical phenomenon is highly symbolic, impressionistic in itself, polymorphic, always metaphorical; consequently, music criticism also should be metaphorical to permit underlining music features. In Jankélévitch’s opinion, as we reported, all writings about music should be “musical” themselves. We can now say that also Jankélévitch’s writings on music are “musical”. Writing musically means writing impressionistically, symbolically, metaphorically. Jankélévitch’s way of writing about music is impressionistic: it is the only solution for Jankélévitch to be able to communicate effectively what music has to say. Jarocinski writes that Debussy’s music has a kind of strong énergie suggestive, a powerful capability to enchant, a kind of force magique irrésistible. We found the same suggestive energy in both Debussy’s music and Jankélévitch’s writings on music, the same irresistible magical strength, the magical power of the words, not used in a technical, cold, aseptic, scientific way, but used in all their poetical, metaphorical, suggestive, kaleidoscopic power.

To conclude, it is possible to affirm that Jankélévitch’s attitude, his musical philosophy, at least and for sure in analysing Debussyan musical aesthetics, is not purely musicological nor scientifically analytic, not technical nor formalistic, but above all and exquisitely philosophical and metaphorical, poetic and allegoric, symbolic and impressionistic, surprisingly capable to build “merveilleux édifices kaléidoscopiques” (JANKÉLÉVITCH, 1968, p. 118).
Bibliography


