

Hate Music Loving It

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The article examines two emblematic examples of literary hatred of music: those of Robert Musil and Pascal Quignard. Its main thesis comes down to the following statements: 1) Music appears as a challenge for literature whenever literature as “the art of the words” realizes the limitations of its own capacity to speak about the unspeakable. 2) The contradictions are inherent in the literary discourse on music. 3) The literary negation of music is not only an end in itself but also an element of specific rhetorical strategy for discussing other issues (ethical, esthetical, philosophical or political).

Keywords: literature and music / Musil, Robert / Quignard, Pascal / attraction / hatred / resistance

Let me start with the finding that in our days there is an increasing interest in the forms and functions of the literary negation of music. This finding is particularly valid for the contemporary French theory. For example, the scientific magazine *Recherches & Travaux* released in 2011 a special number under the title *La haine de la musique (The Hatred of Music)*. The next year, the same topic was in the center of all the articles published in the number 66 of the magazine *Littératures*. This time the chosen title is *La mélophobie littéraire (Literary Melophobia)*. Some authors like Thimothée Picard or Frédéric Sounac try to propose different typologies of the most frequent reasons of writers' skeptical or negative attitude in regards to music. The cases they observe show that the biggest music lovers among writers and philosophers have said the most severe words about music. Somewhat simplified but not unfounded explanation of this fact lies in the idea that the essence of music is elusive and each effort of the language to capture it finds itself doomed to failure. Roland Barthes claims with unwavering certainty that “many writers have spoken well about painting; no one has spoken well about music, not even Proust” (Barthes 247). Recently, in his book “The musical alteration or what does the music teach philosophers”, the contemporary French philosopher Bernard Sève affirms that philosophers “have never been able to assess what happens in music, what happens in a musical work, and in the ear, body and spirit of those who play and/or listen” (Sève 43).

Of course, the feeling of helplessness that music is capable to cause to philosophy and literature, both being linguistic areas, is not the only reason

of their skepticism towards it. Most often, by means of the anti-musical rhetoric other ethical, philosophical or political problems are discussed. Frederic Sounac, the editor of the collection *The Literary Melophobia* I mentioned above underlines that many difficult moral, social, philosophical and ideological questions lie at the base of “the semiotic trial against the irresponsibility of this non-signifying art”. By the way, there is a symptomatic resemblance between the cover of this collection and that of an English book published the same year (2012). Its title *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease* is no less revealing. The author, James Kennaway, is a British specialist in history of medicine.

Both illustrations – a fragment of Bosch’s triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, more precisely from the right panel (*The Hell*), and the caricature of André Gill *Richard Wagner splitting the ear drum of the world* represent a tortured ear. There is nothing accidental. According to a large number of thinkers the fact that music is the art of the sound makes its harmful effects so powerful and uncontrollable. As Kant notes, the sound infringes the freedom of those who listen to it. It affects us not by activating the free play of our faculties, but rather by means of the “mechanical” working of external forces to our bodies. He criticizes the music for its “lack of urbanity”.

On the other hand, according to Kierkegaard, the ear is the most spiritual of the senses. In the Preface of *Either/or* he confesses that little by little hearing has become his favorite sense. Therefore, he determines language and music as the most spiritual mediums, but at the same time, he states that music as a medium does not stand “as high as language”. However, for him the sensuality remains the essence of music.

By recalling these well-known ideas of Kant and Kierkegaard, I actually outlined some of the arguments of the anti-musical discourse in general, such as: the ability of music to spread infinitely in the social space; the vulnerable and defenseless nature of the human ear; the complicated, often conflicting relationships between the verbal language and the language of music. Of course, this enumeration can continue, but now I will content myself to point out a – perhaps only apparent – paradox that both praise and negation of music are often provoked by one and the same of its features. One of the most typical examples is related to the concept of the unspeakable, to which music seems to be the only art that could have access. Because of the fact that music belongs essentially to the unspeakable, it has been a subject of divinization, but also of darkest suspicion.

Comparing the language of music with “the language of intentionality”, Adorno concludes that the language of music “contains a theological dimension. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Its

Idea is the divine Name, which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings.” (Adorno 2)

In semiotic terms, this ability of music “to name the Name” is due to the identity between the signifier and the signified, which is considered to be proper to it. For instance, according to Boris de Schlözer “in music, the signified is immanent in the signifier, the content is immanent in the form, to the extent that, strictly speaking, music *has* no meaning but *is* meaning”. The author defines music as “the limit - in the mathematical sense of the word - of all the arts because in music the immanence of the content in the form is absolutely realized” (de Schlözer 25).

This kind of self-sufficiency of music was one of the main reasons for its idealization, especially in the context of German Romanticism when not musicians but writers were those who assigned to music the highest rung in the hierarchy of arts. They described music as the unspeakable *par excellence* and in the same time they spoke about music with intensity and eloquence unknown up to then. Ultimately, in this manner their confidence in the omnipotence of language was implicitly demonstrated. In other words, to speak about the unspeakable music was for literature as the art of words a way to reaffirm itself.

The manifestations of the literary melophobia become more frequent and more decisive after the age of Romanticism. This fact was due to the desire of many writers to get rid of the romantic heritage. Although the Symbolism seeks to differentiate itself from the Romanticism, the cult of music remains one of the common features of the two literary movements. But in fact, regardless of the famous formula of Verlaine “Music before all else”, the attitude of the symbolist poets towards music is rather ambivalent. Paul Valéry describes it as a rivalry, even as a struggle for lost rights. He claims that the only secret of these poets was their intention to get back from the music their own good. The most curious case is that of Mallarmé. Paul Valéry speaks about his “sublime jealousy” towards music. For Mallarmé the essence of music does not lie in sound but much more in a peculiar way of composing the work. In that regard, the literature is capable to compete with the music, even to surpass it. In short, the paradoxical idea of Mallarmé was that the musical ideality could find its highest realization in literature more than in music.

The type of tension between literature and music I considered above can be determined as esthetical. But there are ethical and political aspects of the relationships between these arts, which are no less dramatic. The idea that in the very nature of music there is something that makes it able to serve sinister purposes is very old. Music seems to have ever been the

art of the greatest extremes. From Antiquity to the present day, the art of sound has been considered sometimes as divine, sometimes as demonic, and the mystery of its contrasting nature is an irresistible provocation for the literature. As Thomas Mann emphasizes in his interpretation of the Heinrich von Kleist's short story *Saint Cecilia, or the Power of Music*, music can be a symbol of a heavenly miracle, but also of a hellish punishment.

Thomas Mann's own attitude toward music is a blend of admiration and skepticism. In *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* published in 1918 as a riposte to his brother Heinrich's political position he opposes the "culture" of Germany, which he defines as essentially musical, to the "civilization" of France and England, which, according to him, consists entirely in "linguistically articulated intellect". In *The Magic Mountain* the idea of the musical essence of the German spirit is maintained through the character of Hans Castorp. But after rejecting Nazism, Thomas Mann disavows this idea in favor of the idea of the demonic nature of music.

The case of Thomas Mann proves that very often the intensification of the anti-musical rhetoric is politically and ideologically grounded. The germanophobia of Paul Valéry after the two world wars results in repulsion to German music. Initially, the French author praises Wagner's music and describes it as an "unusual combination of sensual and intellectual power". Later, this same music becomes for him "the art of lying, echolalia, idiotic mimics" (Valéry 196) and he admires the ancient Greeks because of their ability to submit to Apollo the dark Dionysian power of music. Vladimir Jankélévitch also refuses to open a German score for the rest of his life.

Despite the efforts of Derrida and other deconstructionist thinkers to overcome our tendency to think through binary oppositions, the thinking about music and especially about its relation to morality was and remains highly dependent on a large number of oppositions such as: light – darkness, reason – passion, will – seduction, masculinity – femininity, science – magic, power – weakness, maturity – infantilism, and so on. One can find all of them in the following excerpt from the Jankélévitch's book *Music and the ineffable*:

A woman who persuades solely by means of her presence and its perfumes, that is, by the magical exhalations of her being, the night that envelops us, music, which secures our allegiance solely through the Charm engendered by a trill or an arpeggio, will therefore be the object of a deep suspicion. Being bewitched is not worthy of a rational person. Just as a masculine *Will* insists that its decisions are made on concrete grounds – and will never admit a preference founded in emotion – so masculine Reason will never admit itself prone to seduction. What is science for if not to sustain us the intoxications of night and the temptations exercised by the enchantress appearance? Music, the sonorous phantasm, is the

most futile of mere appearances, and appearance, which with neither the force to probe nor any intelligible determinism is nonetheless able to persuade the dazzled fool, is in some way the objectification of our weakness. A man, who has sobered up, a demystified man, does not forgive himself for having once been the dupe of misleading powers; a man who is abstaining, having awakened from his nocturnal exhilaration, blushes for having given in to dark causality. Once morning has returned, he disowns the pleasurable arts themselves, along with his own skills of pleasing. Strong and serious minds, prosaic and positive minds: maybe their prejudice with regard to music comes from sobering up. (Jankélévitch 2)

Many authors insist on the capability of music to collaborate with antihuman political regimes. The history of the 20th century proved that this argument of the melophobia is very strong and almost irrefutable. As Pascal Quignard notes, Plato knew yet that music is inseparable from discipline and war (Quignard 202). Maxim Gorky mentions in his essay entitled *Leo Tolstoy* that Tolstoy who personally was very sensible to music claimed without hesitation that where slaves are needed, there should be as much music as possible (Горький, part IV).

Of course, other thinkers support no less ardently the opposite idea that music is an incarnation of freedom. For instance, according to Jacques Attali, there is no freedom without music. It inspires men to rise above themselves and others, to go beyond standards and rules to build an idea – however fragile – of transcendence (Attali 32).

Contradictions in regards to music exist not only between different authors but also in what a single author speaks about music. The examples are numerous but in the following part of my article I will examine in more detail two of them – Robert Musil and Pascal Quignard, because their works illustrate very clearly the conflicting character of the literary discourse about music.

In March 1937, in Vienna, a year before the *Anschluss*, Musil delivers a lecture entitled “On Stupidity”. He proposes to distinguish two basic types of stupidity that he determines respectively as “honorable stupidity” and “intelligent stupidity”. The first one is common and not alarming. Even, it is a bit endearing in its poverty of words and ideas, its predictably slow comprehension. But the second one, the “intelligent” or “higher” stupidity, is much more dangerous, because it is difficult to recognize, and it appears at the highest levels of social and political power. In Musil’s own words:

It is not so much lack of intelligence as failure of intelligence, and the higher stupidity is the real disease of culture [...], a dangerous disease of the mind that endangers life itself, because it is not a defect of the mind, but a defect of the spirit. (“On Stupidity” 283–284)

Musil's interest in the problem of stupidity appears also in some of his reflections on music. Well-known is the aphorism in which the author proposes to paraphrase the question "is there a stupid music" and to ask rather if the stupidity itself could be musical. His following observations give the answer:

[P]rolonged rehearsals, stubborn insistence on the same pattern, movements in circle, limited variations on what was seized at a given moment, pathos and vehemence in lieu of spiritual enlightenment: without modesty, the stupidity would have a right to claim that these are its favorite features. (Vibert 97)

These mocking words are rather misleading. In reality, in the works of Musil, especially in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, the question of music is not limited to the condescending observation that music is stupid. The irony towards music in *The Man Without Qualities* is an element of the satire of the Austrian social and cultural reality as a whole. But the presence of music in the world of the novel, as in Musil's thinking in general, is more complicated and ambiguous. By the way, the author has noted in his diaries that his inclination to blacken music is due to jealousy towards it, because of his love for literature (*Journaux* 420).

The way in which music appears as an instrument of representation of the novel's characters is often derisive. For example, in the eyes of his cousin Diotima, Ulrich (the main character) is like a modern music: not at all satisfactory, but excitingly strange; Diotima's servant Rachel is similar to Mozart's music, written for housemaids; Walter is like a rhythm without melody, etc.

One of the most revealing examples of the signification of music in this novel is its role in the love triangle Walter – Clarisse – Ulrich. Music seems to bind the couple Walter – Clarisse, but in fact, it separates them. When they play four hands, they look like one, completely detached from the outside world. But the comparison of their bodies with "two locomotives racing side by side" suggests that their togetherness is only apparent. "In a fraction on second, gaiety, sadness, anger and fear, love and hatred, desire and satiety passed through Walter and Clarisse. They became one, just as in a great panic hundreds of people who a moment before had been distinct" (Musil, *The Man I* 150). That is to say that their anger, love, joy, gaiety and sadness are not "full emotions but little more physical shells of feelings that had been worked up into frenzy" (Musil, *The Man I* 151). As the narrator says, "the dictate of music united them in highest passion, jet at the same time it left them with something absent, as in the compulsive sleep of hypnosis" (Musil, *The Man I* 152).

According to Milan Kundera (*The Curtain*), in scenes like this Musil derides not only music, but also the lyrical nature of music, in other words, this kind of enthusiasm that inspires the feasts, but also the battles, and turns individuals into enthusiastic crowd. For Kundera *lyrical* is synonym of *sentimental*. And the sentimental is the essence of the kitsch. One of the most repulsive incarnations of the kitsch is what the Czech writer calls “stupid music”: such as the music of the joyful songs, broadcasted on the speaker, in order to inspire the joy of living in communist Czechoslovakia; but also, such as any music that pushes to individual or collective ecstasy. A similar repugnance to the musical ecstasy is expressed in Musil’s novel through Ulrich’s character. As the narrator says, the strong position of Ulrich in the household of passionate musicians like Walter and Clarisse seems paradoxical, but only at first sight. In reality, his influence over them is due exactly to the fact that he defines music as a “weakness of will and mental disorder” and speaks about it in a more dismissive way than he actually thinks. This attitude of Ulrich appears as a difficult challenge for Walter and Clarisse, because at that time they meet him music is for both of them “the source of their keenest hope and anxiety”. So, they partly despise Ulrich for his attitude towards music, and partly revere him “as an evil spirit” (Musil, *The Man I* 46).

In fact, Walter and Clarisse perceive music in very different ways. Unlike Walter, for whom the music is a source of sensuality and consolation, Clarisse, whose character incarnates some ideas from Nietzsche’s essay *The Case of Wagner*, is convinced that music must be completely indifferent to feelings and morality. She even reproaches Walter for having too much conscience because, according to her, one can be a good musician only by being devoid of conscience. Clarisse, who plunges in madness little by little, becomes more and more obsessed by the figure of the murderer Moosbrugger and by the idea that there is a deep similarity between music and crime.

Music plays an important role in the Musil’s exploration of the dark sphere of human passions and emotions. In fact, to understand the nature of the emotions was one of the main aims of his work as writer and thinker. He affirms that the world of feeling and that of the intellect are incommensurable, invoking the example of music. He defines as a misjudgment every attempt to clarify music through words and thoughts. But the so called *other condition* (*der andere Zustand*) Ulrich and his sister Agathe look for is also described as inaccessible to the language of rationality. Other condition is the name that Musil gives to his own utopian project. As he explains, to reach the other condition does not mean to escape in some imaginary other world, but to live better in this world. In his essay *Towards a New Aesthetic* he defines the other condition as a situation in which the

ordinary subject-object relationships tend to disappear, resulting in a de-reification of the self as of the world. This impulse of the self to merge with the rest of the world is related to what Musil calls a “day-bright mysticism”. This is a peculiar kind of mystical experience, which is comparable to a religious ecstasy but without believing in God.

The significance of the following sentence from the second volume of the novel stands out more clearly in the context of the ideas I mentioned above: “In music the man becomes again a whole” (Musil, *The Man II* 887). Furthermore, because of this ability of music, the author distinguishes it from morality, psychology and sociology, which treat the man only as composed of separate parts. This view of Musil explains why music appears in the description of situations, in which the characters seem to be very near to the other condition. But it is not a music someone plays. It is rather like a spirit, whose presence is felt everywhere. For example, for Ulrich and his sister the silence of the sea is “music, which is greater than anything in the world”.

An analogical coexistence of opposite attitudes towards music characterizes the literary writings of Pascal Quignard. Below I will try to trace some of the most dramatic changes in his attitude towards music with examples of his books *All the Mornings of the World*, *The Hatred of Music*, *Secret Life* and *Butes*.

The events in *All the Mornings of the World* take place in the 17th century. The characters of Sainte-Colombe and Marin Marais incarnate two very different attitudes toward music. Marais sees in it a means for achieving social prestige. For Sainte-Colombe, in contrast, music requires a complete alienation from the public vanity. The whole essence of his understanding of music is in the following words he says to the young Marais:

You didn't play badly. Your posture is good. You play with feeling. Your ornaments are clever, often charming, but... I heard no music. You will help the dancers, or play for singers on stage... You will earn a living. You will live surrounded by music but you won't be a musician. Can your heart feel? Do you have any idea what sounds are meant for when it is no longer about dancing or pleasing the king's ears?" (Quignard, *All the* 41)

There is nothing in this book, filled with deep love and veneration toward music, which portends the reversal, manifested in the book *The Hatred of Music*, published five years after *All the Mornings of the World*. The author himself explains that this title wants to express in what extent music can become hateful for someone who loved it most (*La Haine* 199).¹

The book is composed of ten “treatises”. The seventh one, also entitled “The Hatred of Music”, starts with the following sentence: “Music is the only one of all the arts that has collaborated in the extermination

of Jews by the Germans from 1933 to 1945.” (Quignard *La Haine* 195) Invoking the memories of the Italian chemist Primo Levi and the Polish composer Simon Laks, both survivors from Auschwitz, Quignard insists that it is no longer possible to ignore the question why music has been able to intervene in the execution of millions of human beings. Quignard is convinced that the answer lies in the very nature of music.

Music exercises violence on the human body. It makes people stand up. When the ear meets music it cannot close itself. Since music is power, it joins any power. The inequality is its essence. There is a deep connection between hearing and obedience. (*La Haine* 202)

The French verb *obéir* (*obey*) derives from the Latin verb *obaudire* (*hear*).

But music is not only violent and oppressive. Music incites a desire of dying. This intuition is deeply explored in the fifth treatise entitled “The Sirens’ Chant”. There is an impressive similarity between Quignard’s view and that of Deleuze and Guattari. In *A thousand Plateaus* we read the following:

[M]usic is never tragic, music is joy. But there are times it necessarily gives us a taste for death... Not as a function of a death instinct it allegedly awakens in us, but of a dimension proper to its sound assemblage, to its sound machine... Music has a thirst for destruction, every kind of destruction... Is that not its potential “fascism”? (Deleuze and Guattari 299)

Quignard is also convinced that exactly the sound nature of music makes it so dangerously irresistible. The human body has no barriers against the sound. As Quignard says: “the ears have no eyelids” (*La Haine* 108). It is not possible to hear music without obeying it. In the concentration camp there is no difference between the SS whistle and the music of Schubert, Wagner or Brahms.² Being assimilated to the everyday life in the camp the separate musical work ceases to be itself, loses its own form, and becomes an unarticulated part of the *sound scape*, composed of the cry of the speaker, the shouts of executioners, the sobs of the victims and other irritating and painful noises. The Canadian scholar Jean Fiset perceives this image of the camp as a metaphor of the living in today’s world. According to him, Quignard’s text expresses an aspiration towards liberation from the “organized sound” and towards silence (*La Haine* 42). Indeed, the silence as the absolute opposite of music is the central subject of the third treatise entitled “For My Death”. This part of *The Hatred of Music* starts by the following statement: “No music, neither before nor after the cremation.” (137) The author does not cease to remind that music lures to death. But when death is coming, music must fall silent. Perhaps it seems somewhat

paradoxical but for Pascal Quignard the silence is the only thing that can turn the hatred of music into love. Except that, it will be no longer the same music. Its essence will be no longer the sound but the silence.

The rediscovery of music as silence is the subject of the novel *Secret Life* published two years after *The Hatred of Music*. The most important thing for the music teacher Némie Satler is not the instrumental technique but the slow and silent internal concentration in complete silence before the start of the playing. Sometimes she seems to play the piano, but in fact she doesn't even touch it. This is not just a silent reading of a musical score, which is common practice for each musician, but a silent performance.

Yet, music did not become silent in Quignard's writing. Its presence continues to be felt in other of his books written after *Secret Life* such as *Villa Amalia*, while in 2008 he publishes *Butes*, the last little book devoted to music. The author recalls the undeservedly neglected figure of Butes, mentioned only in the epic poem *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes. According to this story, while the ship of the Argonauts sail past the island of the Sirens, Orpheus adds two strings to the seven strings of his lyre and beats with his plectrum an extremely fast counterpoint in order to drown out the Sirens' voices. Butes was the only Argonaut who left his rank and jumped into the sea. In the eyes of Quignard this act makes him the first one, and perhaps the only one who has understood what real music is. Unlike Jankélévitch according to whom the musical is not in the voice of the Sirens but only in that of Orpheus because "real music humanizes and civilizes" (Jankélévitch 10), Quignard affirms that the real but irretrievably lost music was that of the Sirens. Only Butes – not Orpheus and not Odysseus – was able to recognize in their chant this *native music* (*musique originaire*).

In *Butes* the author does not give up his idea that music is an appeal to death but he rethinks it. Music calls not so much to death as to the before-life situation. Butes jumps into the sea led by the impulse to join the blessed prenatal condition. The listening to music is a painful experience because it awakens in us the memory of a deeply hidden and forever lost happiness. That's why the true definition of music is the nostalgia. According to Quignard the only one, not only among the composers but also among the poets and philosophers, who has really known that, was Schubert visiting the Haydn's grave a little before his own end.

Is this little book a vindication of music after *The Hatred of Music*? At first glance, perhaps yes. But in fact, the two books express one and the same deep belief that music is pain. The difference is that in *Butes* this nature of music provokes no longer a desire of resistance. What else if not a sign of reconciliation are the following words of the author: "Without music some of us would die." (*Boutès* 87)

NOTES

¹ As the book of Quignard *La Haine de la musique* (*The Hatred of Music*) has not an official English translation, the quotations from this book are translated by the author of the present article.

² This is, of course, only one aspect of reality. There are no less convincing facts proving that for many inmates the presence of music in the Nazi concentration camps has played a life-saving role. (See for example the book *Music in Terezín 1941–1945* written by the Polish born Czech-American musician Joža Karas.) But this other side of the truth does not fit into Quignard's rhetoric

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Sovražiti glasbo tako, da jo ljubiš

Ključne besede: literatura in glasba / Musil, Robert / Quignard, Pascal / privlačnost / sovraštvo / odpor

Članek poskuša raziskati primera Roberta Musila in Pascala Quignarda – pisateljev, katerih življenje je bilo tesno povezano z glasbo, ki pa sta glasbo hkrati obtoževala številnih moralnih grehov. Musilov roman *Človek brez posebnosti* opisuje glasbo kot tesnobno, nemoralno, sorodno kriminalu, norosti in kolektivni ekstazi, v kateri človekova individualnost povsem izgine. Izhajajoč iz etimologije glagolov slišati (ouïr) in ubogati (obéir) Quignard v delu *La haine de la musique* razkriva odnos med glasbo in nasiljem, glasbo in smrtjo. A tovrstnega protiglasbenega diskurza ne smemo razumeti dobesedno. Prav skozi glasbene teme pisatelji, kakršna sta Musil in Quignard, razglablajo o najpomembnejših problematikah svojih literarnih del in kažejo, da lahko tema služi kot nekakšno glasbilo, skozi katerega lahko literatura spozna in analizira samo sebe.

April 2015