

Björn Schmelzer about *Ars Difformiter Difformis*:

"Far too long the music of the late middle ages has been the subject of strange questions like: "should you perform it with voices only or accompanied with instruments?", "which voices and which instruments should you use in order not to be anachronistic?", "how can we convince the public that this music is primarily about mathematics and about achieving a high level of correctly performing the complex notations of the manuscript, and not so much about sound experience?"

As always, complexity - mannerism at first sight - is not more than a starting point, a superficial symptom, even in the style which has been called '*ars subtilior*' by musicologists of the late '50's and '60's to describe a sort of strange but intriguing 'aberration' of the rules of the 14th century *ars nova*. It is more an instrument, an impetus if you wish, which lifts you up to another level. In the case of *ars subtilior*: the level of hyper-sensuality and hyper-sensitivity. The level where naturalism and artifice find their point of indiscernibility. It is the same point which the famous French art historian Henri Focillon is speaking about when he says concerning late gothic mentality: "la mode et l'art métamorphosent l'homme en bête".

The connection with late gothic, flamboyant art is easy made. Think for example at the cathedral towers constructed as high, filigraed pinnacles following complex but logic geometrical principles and proportions. Or the web of vaults playing with your eyes when walking inside a church. Although they are very rationally constructed the effect they generate is far from rational or geometrical. This game, this operative experience, is ultimately searched for. If you analyze these effects which amaze our experience, we discover how clever they tackled technical problems, how complex they could make very simple principles.

With music the problem is only slightly different. The almost synesthetic experience which 'reading' - and thus performing - the notation on the manuscript evoked to the contemporary singer is now so difficult to imagine because we are not imbedded in the same psycho-acoustical reality. What was essential to this experience?

First of all there was made no distinction between writing, reading, performing and listening. This is difficult to understand nowadays, at least in the beginning. But in fact it's something which is not so strange if we would compare it with our own daily (professional) practices and experiences.

Like all operative practices, the *ars subtilior* style developed it's knowledge, it's savoir-faire in a combination of tradition, innovation, playfulness, experiment...When we start from a reading-performing experience the question if the notated pieces were the result of an oral, improvisational practice becomes in fact obvious and irrelevant at the same time.

The notation developed gestures, formulas, variations on the level of modality - how you draw a line - , on the level of polyphony - how do you combine lines and what do they tell each other or not; the same counts for the sound, simultaneous and/or successive, and the rhythm. If there is one connection possible with the 20 th century avant-garde music it's certainly the *ars subtilior*'s integrality of musical parameters. *Ars subtilior* composers are really masters of the line: no doubt they invented the most beautiful lines ever in western music history, comparable with late gothic miniaturist drawing. And it's amazing how they use syncopation, ornaments like appoggiatures which never reach their solution, rhythmical ornaments, all with a view to have the line going up, flying...

Secondly we have to imagine musicians, singers, composers whose world consists of these musical pieces, for example those gathered in the famous Codex Chantilly. Imagine a singer/composer starting to 'read' a piece: he immediately recognizes all sorts of actual and virtual materials. For example musical gestures, which you can find in other familiar pieces, very often musical quotes. These quotes could become formulas which you could

perform in a certain way, to stress the connection, or to cover it, to keep the secret in the family. But he also would recognize textual links. At the same time the singer had the knowledge to connect the words of the text, which were very often full of emblematic power – symbols in the way people like Warburg or even D.H. Lawrence in the beginning of the 20 th century still understood them – in a fertile and adventurous way to the melodic gestures, at the same time dividing parlando-segments and more ornamental commentaries.

Let's come back on this complexity aspect. How do we have to integrate this into the performance of a hyper-sensitive repertoire?

The musical tradition they were standing in was for a large part related to the cult, to the religious service. Polyphonical music had a very strict and clear function. At the other side, there was an equally strong chanson-practice in the tradition of courtly love.

What happened in the ars subtilior is not what a lot of musicologists say. It has never been a purely aristocratic and decadent musical experiment of a few freaks in a castle far from the living world. It becomes now more and more clear that we have to speak about large networks of artists in the larger sense, philosophers, theologians, inventors and practitioners of all kinds of things who reflected on the reality of existence. Ars subtilior is maybe this: the input of physical reality in all its complexity for the first time into musical practice. And if it was élitist, it was not more or less than everything connected with culture, art, spirituality at that time.

Oral tradition, improvisation, ornamental practice, notating music, inventing complex relations were all mixed together in a new sort of sensibility. Maybe we have to see the 14 th century as the real cultural revolution, more than the so called renaissance of the later centuries which was in fact only a representational pose, a mediocre fixation of what happened already a century earlier.

In one way or another all this pieces performed tonight are the first and most beautiful attempts to create a sort of descriptive music. But let this be clear: these are not descriptions of extensive forms, things with a clear contour or phenomena. In fact they let us hear what they speak about. Music has stopped to be a vehicle of a message or an emotion. It is now the most up to date instrument to show complex realities, to spread out the complex, subsisting field of powers at work in and between all sorts of bodies. Ars subtilior, but maybe polyphonical music in general, is the art, long before cinematography, which develops the most all possibilities to experience the dynamical and kinematical levels of existence, leaving visual arts far behind, fixated as they are on image and representation.

The man who developed these experiences for the first time very clearly in theory was Nicole Oresme, friend of Philippe de Vitry and no doubt 'brother in arms' of musicians and poets like Eustache Deschamps, Solage, Cordier, Senleches, etc.

If we adapt Oresme's idea about configurations to the complex notation of the Codex Chantilly it becomes clear that this music is just the way people experienced reality, existence, affectivity, space.

Oresme was the first to develop a sort of diagrammatic thinking, using what he called a 'configuratio' to represent intensities in all sorts of phenomena and bodies. To get a real view on a body – he means its internal configuration, its potentials and what it is capable to – you would have to make an infinity of diagrams, because a body exists of an infinity of surfaces. Oresme's diagrammatic idea is the attempt not to represent things in reality but to construct a map of there capacities and intern powers.

Could you imagine what would happen if a poet or a musician would develop such an idea with a simple trouvère song? It is what happened in the pieces of the Codex Chantilly.

In fact you have to perform them just like simple songs or Latin chants, but with a changed worldview, with a changed climatology, or better: the climate, the intern potentials are now folded into the song, animating it, like a swarm of insects. Gardens are not so much described or talked about, no, they are stretched out for our ears and eyes, we can smell them in very strange way, as we can smell the body of the lover, the mistress or the dead. We feel political powers, knightly forces. We sense the inner mixture of humours, the increasing and diminishing of vapours (fumees), which excite the olfactoric and cerebral capacities in a moving synesthesia."