

Phaedra Behind the Curtain-Veil: Her Metamorphoses and Relevance as a Contemporary Message – Thoughts Towards an Ontological Focus of Composition

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ABSTRACT

Jean Racine's *Phaedra* (1645) followed a long tradition of Phaedras all the way from Euripides' *Hippolytus*. How and why a contemporary Canadian-Hungarian composer picked up the thread and where did it lead him?

Phaedra is a multi-stage *tragédie/parodie en musique*¹ based on a tetra-lingual collage-libretto, both by Gyula Csapó after Racine's classic tragedy (1676), for eleven singers, a Narrator, two Messengers, a small chamber choir, a double stage (two curtains), and thirty-six musicians. The essay will focus on the *universal* questions behind its creation, tracing creative *decision-making* along the following lines:

- a) how did this subject force a rethinking of music, stage, stage-direction, feminism, prosody and why?
- b) how did Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, Jacques Derrida and French post-modern thought influence it and why?
- c) what expectations of contemporary opera does it address or defy?
- d) how, and what does contemporary music communicate?
- e) what informs the process of selecting its technical and aesthetical means?
- f) how can an expected engagement with these issues by listeners and performers occur, on what factors does it depend?

In the summary, an ontological approach to deal with composition in general will be suggested, with flashbacks to Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, to claim new relevance for art music in our vital contemporary discourse.²

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¹ Not in a historical sense of Lully's term: the "/" refers to a kind of oscillation; no denial intended of the preponderance of *tragédie*, played out *en musique*, i.e., as a tragedy of music, upon music.

² A dire necessity, given historicizing evasion in the work of Rochberg or arbitrary narcissistic individualization in Henze's, of the recent past.

libretto, music and text, multi-lingual, dramaturgy, stage direction, post-modern, French post-modern thought, Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud, Peter Brook, Derrida, Habermas, Heidegger, Feyerabend

I. MUSIC, TEXT

1.1. Libretto, languages, intelligibility

The libretto is a collage/assemblage by the composer, using excerpts non-linearly from Jean Racine's original French and from its Hungarian and German translations as its raw material. English is added in the final dialogue of two New York-style bicycle-Messengers. Multilingualism creates a structural dissonance. A translation/re-translation technique yields an ongoing micro-variation process (much as Samuel Beckett¹ applied this technique on his own texts between English and French). Linguistic dissonance conveys some of the central concerns: the tragedy of communication, and the absence of a unified context of understanding among the characters. As the *need to translate* betrays defective or partial understanding, the use of unintelligible chunks of language for their acoustic value alone became a necessary element of the text. Out-of-order syllables often emulate *language* deprived of its intelligibility. In a sea of broken linguistic units, the impact of suddenly restored intelligibility can shock. In Act Two, No. 2, Hippolyte sings the following: *humilié me... ce discours... et les Dieux... à mon tour... verrais... il veut... avec... moitié... moi... éternel... dans... mortel... plus... lui...l'obstacle...mon père...qui nous...sépare* (meaning restored from "lui" onward). Or consider Act One, No. 8, from m. 39: *en... le... pris... je... pars... père... mène...vais... ra... pars... je... Thé... cher... Le dessein en est pris: je pars...*² This is just a hint about the language-games (*à Wittgenstein*) employed.

1.2. Text handling, prosody

In Act One, No. 29, Pseudo-Phèdre I sings this to Oenone: „Mily gyümölcsöt remélsz e lázas unszolástól? Borzadsz, ha megtudod, csöndem mit palástol.“ („What fruits do you hope out of this feverish prompting? You'd recoil in terror, should you learn that which my silence conceals“)³. The music staggers, stutters and chews on the word „gyümölcsöt“ („fruit“), *literally* munching (gyü-[mö-hö-hö-hü-hő-...hü]-mölcsöt), in effect consuming, eating up the text itself. Further, at „remélsz e lázas unszolástól“ ("what fruits do you hope from this feverish prompting"), the word „lázas“ is prosodically „incorrect“ as it places a sudden jolt – reinforced instrumentally – on a normally *unaccented* syllable. Is it rows of teeth knocking against one another...the same teeth that chewed the word „fruit“, now shivering from „fever“ – the poisonous secret of Phaedra which she'd rather eat than spit out but which ultimately has *got to come out* even if vomited? That „teeth“ (even „tongue“) is *more than metaphorical* is shown by the transformation of the Tamburo piccolo *tremolo* into the *Flatterzunge* of the Flute, bars 2-3. Language is *body* here, and text is clearly treated as an *obstacle*. Artaud's connection between text and body comes to mind, out of his famous letters to Jacques Rivière : “This scattered quality of my

¹ Verbal information communicated by Morton Feldman in 1986.

² E.g., the connection *père... mène...* hints at the paternalistic relationship between Hippolyte and Thérémène.

³ Jean Racine: *Phaedra*, Hungarian translation by György Somlyó; English rendering by Gyula Csapó.

poems, these defects of form [...] must be attributed not to a lack of [...] control [...]; but to a central collapse of the soul, to a kind of erosion [...] of the thought, [...] to an abnormal separation of the elements [...] at each of the terminal stratifications of thought, passing through all the stages, all the bifurcations of thought and of form."¹ Text is not simply distorted; emotive corrosion destroys it. Structural deconstruction enables *Phaedra's* subject – eroticism, the embodiment of which is music – to function. Say whatever the words may, their destiny is ultimately determined by the musical waves they ride at their peril.

Prosody in a classical European sense is but a vehicle of *censorship* in its attempt to uphold the *authority* of the word under any musical circumstance. Modernist prosody² often relies, residually, on the same principle. In my *Phaedra*, text is deprived of its position of authority.³ The road to this had certainly been gradually paved, as shown in a letter from Schönberg to Berg about opera writing: “[...] *the text gets finalized only in the midst of the composition, at times even afterwards.*”⁴

II. STRUCTURES, STAGE

All five acts of *Phaedra* are different in structure: Act One – *Pendulum* (increasing incompatibility); Act Two – *Schism* (two tectonic *tableaux*); Act Three – *Frenzy* (forward/backward simultaneities); Act Four – *La Conspiracy* (film-montage); Act Five – *Silence* (broken-glass structure).

The schism between *Phaedra's* thinking and actions, and those of the other characters demanded a *double stage*. An upper stage (with an independent curtain) is exclusively used by *Phaedra*; a lower stage by the rest. Only the doomed Oenone, *Phaedra's* confidante may occasionally cross that boundary. This setting should suggest separation, not hierarchy.

2.1. Music, Roles, Dramaturgy; Suggestions for Stage Direction

The real *Phaedra* is silent for most of the work. Her rare singing assumes the character of an instrument within the orchestra. Music is her incarnation. Three Pseudo-*Phaedras* convey *Phaedra's* messages. They are her protagonists. A Pseudo-*Phaedra* – a dream-like apparition – occasionally appears in the forefront of the stage, in direct contact with the audience. They cover the range from coloratura through lyric soprano to contralto: a vast expansion of *her* voice-range, carrying the full weight of a role meant to be unfathomable. *Phaedra* is *not representable*.

In Act Three, Nos. 29, 30 and 31, simultaneous dialogues run parallel among three pairs of characters confessing love in the wrong direction in *prestissimo pianissimo*, replete with coincidental over-hearings and misunderstandings. At the top of this frenzy – as if muted by a push of a button – they keep to their (written-out!) parts *in total silence*⁵, while the orchestra quietly produces subliminal sounds (paper-tearing,

¹ Artaud, Antonin: *Selected Writings*. Edited, and with an introduction by Susan Sontag, translated from the French by Helen Weaver. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976. Pp. 35–47.

² As in, for example, Kurtág's *Bornemisza* or even in the amalgamated method of Berio's *Circles*.

³ One may sigh with Stockhausen: *...how time passes...*

⁴ Arnold Schönberg, in a letter to Alban Berg, dated Territel, 1931 August 8.

⁵ A *lontano* string quartet may project their notes from the outside, barely audible.