

Labyrinth of Ideals

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Toward the end of his life, when he was asked to comment on “the ideal at the age of twenty,” the poet Stéphane Mallarmé answered by writing the following sentence: “Whether happy or in vain, the will I had in my youth has remained intact.”

But he immediately added: “now, if I have reached it through maturity, this assessment only belongs to those who have always shown interest in me.” That said, the essential—or even autobiographical—question has been expressed as follows: “What was my ideal at the age of twenty?” By a curious coincidence, this answer was given less than a month before his sudden disappearance. Even though from his side there was no intention at all to make a definitive personal statement, one phrase echoes as a glance beyond life: “sufficiently true to myself, my humble life thus remained meaningful.”

I realize that, more or less intentionally, I have begun with the end, because, in order to accurately describe the course of one's life, its development and its journey, one must have at one's disposal precise information that mark the different stages, define the evolution and emphasize the important moments, which establish the deepening or the discontinuance. This is why, if it is difficult to sum up one's existence, it is all together impossible and artificial to—literally—predict it, let alone plan it. At the most, we are able to foresee or make temporary assessments, or rather occasional summaries, knowing at the same time that we depend on circumstances, on a particular moment, and that we can at any time be left to contradictions.

And first of all, what ideal enables you to even reach at the age of twenty? There are as many stories as there are characters. Are they really interesting? If they go beyond mere anecdote, of course they are! Even if we mention the influence of the environment, some kind of genetic transmission, so many cases go against this very specific sense of heritage. However, it is undeniable that we discover ourselves as we organize ourselves.

Most certainly, we depend on the culture surrounding us, just as we find out what sort of judgement we are capable of. I do not mean tradition yet, but only

atmosphere. We feel attracted to, and focused on, some cultural phenomena, while others seem less interesting or leave us completely indifferent. It is hard to justify ourselves regarding this, since we are magnetized by our instinct. Whether our ways of absorbing culture are easy, difficult or even roughly non-existent, instinct will take any chance to initiate some kind of orientation.

What role does chance play in the decisive choices to come? It is hard to say. But there is no doubt that either a rough environment or a weakened instinct is responsible for many withdrawals. This statistic is hard to control due to the wide range of situations, but also to the differences between individuals.

Having overcome this first barrier, we enter the labyrinth of ideals, so to speak. In fact, if it is already difficult to sum up a life, it is impossible to predict it, to plan it. However, life itself is a chaotic series of temporary assessments helping us define our actions. Are we so highly dependent on the influences of the culture that we progressively become a part of, or has our instinct—from the beginning—the strength and the capacity to choose? Is the cultural environment so restraining that it forces us to make certain choices?

One cannot deny that group phenomena exist, tendencies towards the same direction, similar choices, or even trends that one should be able to profit from as well as distrust. Our century, in particular, is more and more turning into a huge library, a vast data bank, thus leading to a definite fetishism of the historical document. But can we still call this culture and not superstition, some kind of exoticism across time, where we end up taking refuge in order to distance what we see as dangers and inconsistencies of present invention, which could only be perceived as out-of-control, opposed to the order of the natural data?

Weak cultures like to take refuge in the past, this past which gives them the illusion of a civilization with all its strength and splendor. But even so! Powerful civilizations are those who can take the liberty to destroy because they will be able to replace immediately the emptiness thus created by something new. The strong civilization can compare itself to the Phoenix perishing at its own stake, only to rise again from the ashes. I wouldn't say that, in order to survive, a civilization should consistently burn all evidence of its history, but it simply should distrust fetishism, all fetishisms, especially those that trap it in its past, which then becomes something inert,

dead-still.

Are we deluding ourselves in believing that we are in sync with both eras and pieces resulting from an uninterrupted evolution? There again, unless you let yourself go into some sort of “historicist” fetishism, and consider the means of transmission more important than the texts themselves, the word tradition is highly ambiguous. Actually, it really implies a chain of mannerisms, more or less strong, more or less systematic, that could be called—as it is said of translations—the beautiful (or less beautiful...) unfaithful. To become aware of this, one needs only to go back in time: the documents being rarer, more difficult to interpret, our sensitivity is sometimes lost and can only hesitate on seeing attempts at reconstruction whose authenticity is ever more reassessed.

The summary of our tradition is lost in misty historical perspectives, and is getting weaker and weaker. When capable, are we not better off creating a tradition at each initiative or “cast of the dice” rather than being subjected to it? The new action, if strong enough, makes us rethink the whole, and can even radically change our point of view and corroborate our testimony.

I do not mean at all that one must have absorbed the history of music in its entirety in order to start exploring what is to become one's favorite field. Strong civilizations never had the habit of looking back, and things were not worse for them. However, we certainly discover ourselves as we organize ourselves, and this is particularly true in this day and age. Is the ever-renewed summary on what precedes strictly personal, or does it depend mainly on the environment we live in? Is instinct fundamental to the attainment of self-revelation, or do we strictly depend on influences we are subjected to?

These questions are not futile, but are only answered by individual cases. The ideal we try to reach will certainly come through encounters more or less by chance to which you owe yourself to react most intentionally with a series of agreeing and disagreeing. Reducing one's journey and approach to a single pattern would be vain.

Nevertheless, pedagogy—whether depending on teachers or being autonomous, so to speak—represents an essential step in finding one-self. All summaries would not only be ineffective, but also useless if they were not supported by an acquisition of language itself, of the work tool: one must learn how to write, and not less, to hear. The

pieces that have contributed to the history of our culture serve as models in two aspects. The first is more direct and consists in learning the mechanisms and rules of language. The second, less direct, is to learn these mechanisms and rules following the evolution of language. From this learning, the most fundamental lesson to be learned is that language is not a fixed set of rules and common practices but that it changes and transforms itself in meeting the needs of musical expression. In other words, the golden age—such a convenient concept—is a lazy way of seeing things. In contrast, language is a living entity we can only take an active part in. This does not necessarily mean progress from one state to the other. There is evolution and the tools are the agents of this evolution. We can sometimes regret the sacrifices of knowledge, the simplifications that have to take place at certain times of radical transformation. But compensations are sufficiently obvious and efficient that there is nothing to regret.

As far as I am concerned, during my educational learning, especially when first I was not capable of proper judgment, instinct played the key role, along with an early affinity for things I did not know. Even reluctantly, or with immediate incomprehension, I was attracted by the modernity of contemporary works I was hearing for the first time. I wished to reach, to master, to understand this modernity I had caught more or less by chance, by mere instinct.

But at the same time, I really knew I did not have the tools to analyze this, that means the knowledge, still to be acquired, of this specific moment in language, of the way its elements were used, all kind of combinatorial I ignored every aspect of. One may object that reacting emotionally would have been sufficient to enter an unfamiliar world. That way, I could have gotten used to some aspects of modernity, but I would have missed the depth of novelty and furthermore, I could not have used critical thinking to consider personal consequences. In fact, this review, as personal and precise as it can be, does not only imply automatic reactions of admiration and praise. It also implies the following question, the most important one: “What can I do with that?” Since imitation is the worst solution, we need to be thorough, to go beyond what the piece gives us straight-away, to understand how necessary were the solutions given by the composer and to deduce, absolutely deduce, the consequences that will really be ours. As long as we have not reached this underground level where the source of invention is found, the review of what precedes us will not have attained the specificity

we can expect from it.

For such a summary, what is the most general criterion that personally makes me choose or prefer one particular composer, one particular moment of his work? It is certainly because of the instinctive attraction I feel—without even wishing to explain it to myself—for one piece, one part of a piece or one collection of pieces. I need this in order to start existing. This is an equivalent for music of the well-known comment that one does not become a painter by looking at a landscape but rather by looking at paintings representing landscapes. The question I ask myself then is: “Had this composer not existed, would the history of language, of musical expression, of music itself, have been different or not?” If, in my opinion, the true answer, deeply felt, is: “no, the history of music would be slightly debased, but not fundamentally different, I am not really concerned by this composer and I will not seek my own resources within his work.” If the answer is: “yes, no kind of critical objections, even if important, will make me forget the key role he had in the continuity of musical expression.” Of course, we need to apply this need, this demand or lack of it shown by our predecessors to ourselves, in a steady manner and moreover, we should not yield to the belated illusions of experience. The poet Mallarmé, to whom I have already referred, spoke of “the haphazard outside contribution we pick up that is rather called experience.” Actually, experience and routine are not very different from each other. Experience shows an acquired skill in commanding constituent elements of language, but also denounces the inertia of which this command has become a victim.

As I have already mentioned, whether we want it or not, we are influenced by our culture, even the most basic. We cannot escape from it, whether this culture is traditional, popular or scholar, as it is categorized. As for me, I tried, as much as possible, to be open to world cultures, especially non-European, which offer a wealth of learning opportunities. There too, I have tried very hard not to fall into the trap of exoticism, so tempting to extricate us from a tradition that may sometimes seem too heavy, too self-centered. The most immediately interesting, the most explicitly seductive aspect of such confrontation was amongst others the difference of sounds and in the composition of the music groups: whether one listens to African wooden percussions, Balinese metallic percussions or to the blown long-held notes of Gagaku played with micro-intervals of great subtlety; more directly involved in the structure of

music are the rhythmic periodicities of African or Balinese music and the expanded time of Gagaku; or also, the different vocal cultures, with such different technique and expression, that can be heard in Japanese Noh and Tibetan rituals. These collective musical manifestations are so deeply attached to the civilization they belong to that wishing to adapt them directly in our individual world would be absurd. Transgressing them and seizing their essence is the way we can insert them into a way of thinking that has “idealized” them to the point of belonging to a totally different mode of expression.

Along the same line, we may wonder to what criteria the project obeys that shall become a musical piece, to what imperatives it is subjected, which creative mechanisms stakes this project. One can think of a given sonority, of a group of instruments belonging, for instance, to the same group: the resonant instruments, from the piano to the mandolin, amongst others. The sonority thus obtained will be very specific but also wide-ranging, resulting in a variety of durations and timbres. This is my starting point, which alone will not be enough for me to find the resources I need to compose. I need to think of the characteristics of resonant instruments: the duration or the durations of their resonance in different registers, according to the dynamics used, the depth of harmonic objects and so on. If I use these instruments exclusively for their various, somehow inert properties, I can decide only to observe, to listen to the results and if I want to work without any metric aspect: the pure sound aspect will then take over the music piece or at least some moments of it. Furthermore, should I allow these instruments—elements of a chord, of a sound object—to go on, my careful perception will be able to identify its different components according to the instrumental data. On the contrary, if I use this chord in a very sharp, very short way, my perception will most certainly not be able to identify the individual components.

With these very simple methods, I have already at hand the capacity to develop precisely the ideas that will be born from this world of sound such as I had first conceived it vaguely. I gave this example because I think it easiest to grasp but I insist on the fact that each piece is created through its own process. This process can be more or less abstract, can bring up a very general vision or be inspired by the graphical lay-out of a poem or by the colorful structure of a painting... In brief, everything is a source of inspiration, anything can be a source of inspiration but it is indispensable to know how to transform this acoustic or visual source into a true musical creation. There

must be some kind of a transmutation, otherwise it is only superficial illustration.

Is the conception of a music piece different depending on the moment it takes place in the composer's trajectory? Indeed, the evolution of a composer, the new situation he faces every time he begins a project different from the one he just left, or whenever he gets again onto a project he doesn't know when and how to finish, this new situation or rather this collection of new situations, can it still be called "trajectory?" Yes, if by trajectory we do not mean a straight line, a shortest way, a path that has no surprise in store, no detour, but, if on the contrary we mean by trajectory an unexpected, even unforeseeable journey, whose conclusion is sometimes far away from what was first intended, even contradicting it, if this turned out to be necessary, inevitable. This is probably the most radical achievement of modernity: lack of preconceived patterns, lack of approved definite settings, the pursuit of an original trajectory, individually linked to each project and arising from the discovery of all the potential uses of the technical material as well as the resources of expression that were found along the way. The forms obtained by combining our inventive spirit with a certain material are those who will determine the course or "trajectory" of a music piece—this trajectory being given, determined or subjected to random variations.

If we consider some recent trajectories and if I think of other means of expression such as painting, it always starts with a very adventurous period: we search, and we find something totally new. Willing to create something completely new, we turn vocabulary, grammar and language upside down and do not let anything get into our way. A new conception of music appears, noisily and brightly—whether it is Stravinsky's irregular rhythm or Schönberg's suspended tonality. The same can be said, for example, of Kandinsky and Mondrian, who are reaching the limits of what can be expressed. Then it seems that these incredibly intransigent personalities feel some kind of anarchical threat. They do not take fright but they see a threat coming, one of chaos, of lawlessness, of disorder, one that cannot be mastered. They will resort to order, whether it is the repertoire of preconceived forms or the world of geometry. As Stravinsky plays with the relics of history but taking them "off the rim" so to speak, Schönberg looks to confirm thoroughly his dodecaphonic principle using patterns that are known to work. He, the inventor of free forms, submits himself to a discipline of "back to" that Stravinsky had rather alluded to. Seeing this, my generation first reacted

with rigor and passion. We had to diversify, continue and standardize what Schönberg had brilliantly initiated and what Stravinsky had freely been bold enough to try. Many theoretical works have been published but most did not even mention the idea of perception, nor did they refer to expression. Even though this field has been studied only briefly, it has not been in vain since we soon realized the inanity of some categories in which we wanted to confine the language. The absurdity of some suggestions in their absolutism helped getting pass this childhood disease of order above and in spite of everything! Then came the time to think about what we perceive, how we perceive it, which categories are precise, quantifiable and which ones mainly depend on the quality of perception. This resulted into a dialogue between the real and the theoretical, between the writing that supports the piece and the means it used to obtain appreciable results. At this moment, much more flexible notions came into account as: gesture which for me has replaced the notion of theme because it is more general and adaptable; as: envelope, a word used in acoustics which in this case refers to one or several important characteristics pointing out a given moment; as: accident when the thematic gesture comes up against unexpected perspectives and the musical development therefore changes its direction. This improvement developed many other characteristics, very easy to use and therefore closer to what we wish to express. This is why abstract controversies or imaginary descriptions of the serial system—as if time had gone fifty years back—seem further and further from reality. It's true that this extremely harsh and pure serialism—since it actually existed, let's use the actual word!—was a first-rate field to learn how to organize things and make deductions.

In fact, self-learning of how to compose first consists in coming up with ideas but almost at the same time, it means being able to deduce from these early beginnings the consequences we can draw from it. While we create a piece, we might have to consider local subordinate detours, thus acquiring a sort of unexpected independence from general guidelines: freedom not acquired without precautions because one has to avoid what I would call to “get off the road” what would make the path suddenly become incoherent. Therefore the supreme, theocratic hierarchy that organizes everything and would not let escape anything from its control, an absolute centralizing organisation, is no longer an issue. In principle, it should not be recognized and identified as such unless it uses the traditional arsenal and an arbitrary contrast between

two dimensions, —horizontal and vertical—that complete each other arithmetically speaking rather than corresponding organically. Does this kind of deduction, of local development leave enough space to be spontaneous and unexpected? In my opinion, yes, because the unexpected can occur any time, especially if it is emphasized by exclusive features. The freedom of invention knows it can always rely on instantaneous resources.

For an artistic mean of such immediate expression as music—for which descriptive words have rarely coincided with sound-objects and for which a comment has often illustrated, rather than understood the sensitive profound component, one could be surprised about the speculations on the actual act of composing, on what is still, viewed from outside, a mystery that we cannot, that we should not penetrate. Nowadays, if music does not communicate directly with the audience, it is almost automatically blamed, if not incriminated, for being intellectual. From thereon, one could draw the consequence that this category “intellectual” does not match the musician's profile and that he does not have a quality he cannot bear the consequences of. However, in order to be a good composer, without speaking of exceptional talent, one ought to be first a good artisan—which implies all kind of considerations, judgements and mastery. Beyond this first level, one needs to be able to speculate—let's say more simply to think—even and most particularly, outside any environment, since it helps you figure out solutions that your experience alone would hardly been helpful to find. Speculation relieves you from being tempted to rely on already employed solutions, it forces you to go beyond the facilities of your memory, of the “the haphazard outside contribution we pick up as experience,” as it was put by the poet I quote again in this particular context. The composer, as a constructor, an architect, as well as the bearer of a strictly musical sensibility, if he perfectly fulfills his mission, should not be burdened with the word considered pejorative of “intellectual” in order to refuse him the quality of “sensitive.” That a composer includes in a work relaxing moments, compared to moments of tension, nothing is more acceptable. That the vocabulary of the relaxing moments is immediately more accessible than the one used for the moments of tension is nothing else than the use of contrasts on a higher level than the one of usual oppositions.

That you find within the production of a composer, pieces that are more “communicative” than others, which resist immediate comprehension because they are more complex and more demanding is nothing abnormal, existing already for centuries:

construction, form and structure are always first more or less opposed to expression, sensibility and seduction. This opposition fades away once the language is accepted as normal. Of course, we may think that the acceptance of the elements of the current vocabulary is slower than we wish, but one has to note that as far as certain elements are concerned, familiarization is of a more complex nature. There are no “classified” chords anymore: this convenient way of ordering chords is no longer used making it more difficult to identify these chords, making it aleatory to know to which family they belong to and what role they play; there are no pre-established forms any longer, instead, we must find out the form of a new piece while hearing it for the first time; the use that is made of an orchestra is less and less conventional since the “Klangfarbenmelodie” (melody of colours) offers a variety of colors within a given element of the phrase, with the result that this element is at the same time more obvious and more difficult to grasp because of the division of the phrase into different colors. This way, we enter a new musical piece through many ambiguities and uncertainties. The last one is not the least: in order to complete the journey of what we are hearing, our memory must act retrospectively, being based on impressions that one is absolutely not certain that they are the good references. Due to moments of inattention, taken by an instrumental color suddenly more striking, a unusual rhythm of strong dynamic, our perception of the whole remains indecisive, and is unable, after listening to a piece for the first time, to perfectly recreate the course of this piece. This is why the general notions of envelope, gesture and polarity that I have mentioned become so important today. They put forward what is common, at a given moment, to all the elements of a composition. For example, when we go from a rhythmic to a dynamic envelope, or from a polarity of pitches to a different one, the listener can record this in his memory and this will guide him in the reconstruction of a form. In a way, he is encouraged to listen actively and to determine the importance of his choices. Proust said something similar to that: “A novel is made by the person who reads it.” This is what we are dealing here with: “The work is made by the person who listens to it.”

I have not spoken about the most recent evolution: the intrusion, or considered as such, of new technology. What does it really bring to a universe—already so rich—that it seems too excessive sometimes? It adds several dimensions but I will only mention a few of them. In the field of intervals: every scale you can imagine, rigorously

computed, that our instruments, either due to their manufacturing, or because of external conditions, the climate in particular (hygrometry, temperature, ...), cannot produce; Playing in space: our sound universe being linked visually and acoustically to the instrumentalist, the attention focuses on this fixed sound source, but when it is transmitted by speakers, the sound of this instrument travels through space obeying a dynamic that transgresses its own. The “natural” sound can also trigger the transformations of its own specter, and thus totally modify our perception of it. I could give many other examples, especially the one I have set my heart on: where the interaction between performer and technique initiates either virtual scores or modifications in timbre or rhythm.

This chapter is only at its beginning, but I am sure that it will very quickly be part of the history of musical composition since it completes what we write in a world that is familiar to us. If I'd dare to use only one word to sum up what I consider essential in this relationship between the direct and the technology, it would be “transgression.” To transgress is to extend the limits of our instrumental technology—the construction of the instrument and its use. To transgress is to go towards a new world—if not entirely new, at least uncommon. This is the exception that has become the rule.

If I had to answer the same question than Mallarmé over a century ago, in 1898, and if I had to answer yes or no to the question “What was my ideal at the age of twenty?,” I think that retrospectively, I would say, “I didn't have any” or in a more subtle way: “I thought I didn't have any.” Or even I would have concealed my answer as Mallarmé so elegantly did: “It is not improbable that I have already expressed it, even weakly, because I have chosen to write.” Now, for me too, the response to the question that, this time, I have not been asked would today also be: “I have chosen to write.” Of course, I did not only satisfy myself with writing since as I was myself convinced, I ought to convince others. This is why I spent so many hours working for the public service, if I may say. Sometimes people were very reluctant, if not outright hostile but all this only stimulated me even more. Having said this, I have also benefited from this constant contact with the world of interpreters. Of course, I have not forgotten all about speculation, but it has made it more realistic for me. By the way, realism does not mean to accept having the wings and the nails cut. It means to master—to a certain point!—what we wish to pass on and the way we pass it on. I have also learnt to listen better,

to foresee better, but one can never be totally sure...

What if the word “Ideal” was replaced by Demand? I might find it more appropriate to our time, it would perhaps even fit me better. The word Demand implies action, resolution, movement, real life, but also the part of utopia that governs it. Ideal: a very beautiful word, civilized, elevating the soul, ecstasy. No! I do not want a caricature, but perhaps, in one century, this word ideal has taken a slightly trivial meaning and seems weak, in any case, in comparison to the word demand except if we refer to the meaning it has in Rimbaud's verses, “My jacket also became ideal.”

The vivacious and bohemian irony of young Rimbaud is very different from the quiet and skeptical irony of Mallarmé at that particular time of his life. I would like to quote his conclusion, after which there is nothing more to say, “Whether happy or in vain, the will I had in my youth has remained intact.”

Of course there is the rhetorical restriction of “happy or in vain,” a mark of humility that does not surprise us, because if he knew exactly his value, he knew exactly how to estimate the distance between what he had already done and what he had not yet achieved. In addition, he replaces ideal by will, a modification that has a clear impact. In the same answer, he adds: “if I have reached it through maturity,” meaning this ideal and he does not finish answering the question since the answer belongs to “those who have always shown interest in me.” That means that he feels both confident and unsure. As far as I am concerned, I will give the same answer in which doubt and demand combine in order to prolong the effort. Demand has sometimes been happy, sometimes in vain. Whatever I may add would be a truncated response.