Forêt profonde by Francis Dhomont - Representation of the Unconscious
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The investigation/representation of the psyche has been a preoccupation of artists in all media in the last century. Francis Dhomont’s preoccupation with the psyche is evident in his ambitious work, Forêt profonde, in which we can observe how the composer has achieved a representation of the unconscious through his particular attention to: 1) the interpenetration of concept and sound through a complex process of metaphorization; 2) and temporal structures.

Forêt profonde is a nearly hour-long computer-generated work including extensive narrative, ambient sound and composed electroacoustic music, an "acousmatic melodrama" in Dhomont's words, which draws on traditions of instrumental music and the radio play as well as other electroacoustic works. In this brilliant and troubling piece, Dhomont concerns himself with no less than the subject of human evil and the nature of the unconscious. He creates a complex web of association between various fragments of fairy tales, the Holocaust and the work and fate of one individual, the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim. He draws inspiration as well from Schumann's children's suite for piano, Kinderszenen, dividing his work into thirteen sections as did Schumann.

One can see the work as developed out of a preoccupation with fragment (both speech and sound), noise and the process of montage. One could label his mode of working as one of composition by way of linked fragments. These fragments are bound together in a complex metaphorical and musical union. If Trevor Wishart contends that it is necessary to be metaphorically literate in the symbols of one’s culture in order to use them to full advantage, then Dhomont exhibits a profoundly nuanced appreciation of sound metaphors in Forêt profonde.

Metaphorization

The central hub of the metaphorical wheel of this piece is the very ‘forest’ of the title, first associated with the realm of fairy tales. Within the first several minutes of the piece (and its first two sections), we hear bits of bird and frog song, fragments of several fairy tales mentioning ‘forest,’ and a striking text/sound fragment in which a low time-stretched voice of an older man enunciates the phrase, ‘hubo una vez’ (once upon a time). In and of itself, of course, his few words can hardly represent the notion of forest; yet by the register, grainy timbre, surreal quality, age of the speaker, and content of spoken text, this voice comes to stand for the forest of fairy tales, the primeval, and soon, the evil and/or potential for evil, in human nature. In Section III, a male voice (the same?) becomes brutally animalistic and threatening and cohabits a surreal montage with a sort of reified presence of innocence, as embodied in gentle and fearful female voices. A grainy thrashing texture, evokes a struggle through tangled overgrowth, erupts chaotically throughout this section.

In Section IV a high, wildly activated tapestry of flute-like tones appears in contorted melodic motion, a shock of shard-like bird song, briefly prefigured in Section I by a brief swatch of naturalistic bird song. This highly activated texture exhibits a musical behavior I have labeled ‘birds in alarum’ and is produced by a
sustained, granulated brassage texture. Such a texture is derived from a characteristic computer music technique in which sounds are sliced into small segments and reassembled in a different order, often with varying degrees of randomness affecting the order of the reassembly, the scope of the selection of sound segments within the original sound, and the pitch, duration, loudness and spatialisation of the individual segments. 

The general behavioral characteristics are of a trembling, scintillating mass of tiny sound objects with a common timbral identity. 

Short fragments of piano music, including but not exclusively fragments from Schumann, are subjected to the 'birds in alarum' effect in this section as well, accompanied by a brassage texture of glass-breaking. The inclusion of piano sounds in these brassage textures suggests a link between the world of nature and that of humankind as if representing both the broken Romantic ethos of Schumann, his individual psychosis as well as a more general societal collapse.

Later in the section, Dhomont repeats the opening canto from Dante’s Inferno, with several different male narrators repeating fragments in a layered and 'gnarled' contrapuntal texture. Their low voices contrast with the earlier high canopy of bird-like song and piano brassage. Dhomont has established the ground, as it were, of tangled roots - of Dante’s "savage and harsh and dense” forest - above which sings the brilliantly contorted bird-like song. If birds cause us to look up and away, then this brassage of piano/bird textures, with its continual motion and preponderance of higher frequencies, lifts the ear up to a canopy of figurized flight/escape. The male voices suggest the inversion of that ascent into a harrowing journey into the psyche’s depths. The very extremes of register, it seems, can be heard/experienced as a sonic metaphor of the expansive, moral, aesthetic, even political, of the psyche.

The flight motif is poignantly continued at the end of Section VI. This multi-layered and static section, characterized by repeating water drips, machine sounds, and reverberant female choir clusters, surprisingly ends with the close-miked sound of wing flutter, as if of a caged bird in futile flight.

One of the most important elements in the narrative structure of the work is the 'Commentator,’ a recurring figure who speaks from time to time as the omniscient narrator. When he speaks, the surrounding sonic maelstrom recedes and there is a kind of relief in his presumed authority, his glacial calm and seeming omniscience. In the course of the piece, his is the only voice which we come to recognize; every other voice is rendered anonymous by its infrequency and fragmentation. This figure interprets and explains the deeper meanings of fairy tales, their connections to myth.

So in this first half of the piece, the listener is drawn into a thick tangle of suggestive sonic metaphors focusing largely on two families of metaphor, firstly, the male voice, and its treatment through time-stretching, timbral transposition and fairly traditional contrapuntal layering. The second fecund family of metaphor is based on the birds in alarum behavior, in which the quality of bird-song itself is less essential than the mercurial, chameleon-like behavior applied to various sounds.

By the ninth section in which the Holocaust material is presented, several transformations have occurred. The low voice has become a continuous and eerie pedal-tone, and the

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3Dante, A. quoted and translated in Dhomont (liner notes) (1996:20): 
"In the middle of the journey of our life
I came to myself within a dark wood
where the straight way was lost.
Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell
of that wood, savage and harsh and dense,
the thought of which renews my fear!
So bitter it is that death is hardly more."
narration is no longer fantasy but a stark description of torture and entrapment in a dark forest by Nazi pursuers. Any semblance of the natural aspect of forest imagery drops away entirely in the frantic heart of Section IX, as relentlessly pulsing textures commingle with a brutal mass of repeating sirens.

When a *brassage* texture returns, it is in Section X, the redemptive partner to Section IX. But here the tangle is constructed of bowed string fragments – in a ravishing and elusive playlet which seems to imply that music may be the only redemption.

**Temporal Structures**

Having briefly noted instances of the elaborate metaphorization of sonic/textual elements, we can now note the careful temporal structure of the work and how it contributes to the ultimate effect of the representation of the unconscious.

Dhomont first confronts the listener with a subtle ‘temporal’ shock at the end of the first section, a shock that deepens as one listens into the piece. In that evocative introductory section, a wall of sound is first presented which includes consonant fifths in the bottom register and metallic/noise elements throughout the middle and upper registers. Upon this, delicate piano and toy piano timbres play a succession of minor/major triads, sounds of frogs, birds and children emerge and disappear and the original ‘wall’ transforms into a dynamically active texture. As the section dies away, superimposed upon the fading piano and textural elements is a perfect authentic cadence – IV, V, I, in the key of C (played on the piano). This cadential gesture, introduced so quietly and never exceeding a piano level, has the effect of a surprising deflection. Dhomont has in fact quoted the last cadence of the last piece of *Kinderszenen*. He has ‘pulled’ a serious pun on the listener, who, even without knowing Schumann’s piece, feels the emotional equivalent of a headlong fall into a huge feather pillow.

This cadence, despite its traditional finality, can only leave one with a curiously unsettled feeling, its slow intoning of archetypal chords stretched to uncommon length. The earlier chord successions of the piano layers do not themselves progress to this ‘cadence,’ though the listener will certainly connect the chords to the cadence because both are piano music and both are fragments suggestive of tonal or modal music. But the chords and cadence exist independently of one another. The cadence ends the section but does not function as a release or resolution because there has been no building up of the traditional harmonic tension. Its tonality is non-functional; it does not resolve anything, at least in the immediate context. In sum, the cadence has not been implied.

This curious ending, which I have called an "appended ending," has its analogues in the conclusions of three other sections; in each case, the endings contain material never heard before in the particular section. The effect is one of derailed closure. Continuity is insured, yet discontinuity is maintained because of the diverse, disparate materials and their curious montage. Disjuncture halts the listening process, encouraging a continual retrospective review, the effort to try and connect disconnected fragments and sections. Will the cadence be repeated? Its pristine perfection is never matched in the ensuing fifty-eight minutes and we cannot but feel that even as the entire piece is ended, that we must begin again in order to truly end. The memory of that cadence leads the listener out of the actual piece at its end, and in retroactive memory, starts the listener off again at the beginning and back into itself in a serpentine tail progression. Thus the musical structure works as a circular metaphor evoking a process which is endless and endlessly repeating—the child to the adult, fairy tale to modern history. The implicative force of the cadence, then, operates outside the realm of any

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*Meyer, L. (1973:110).* For Meyer, the "implicative relationship is one in which an event – be it a motive, a phrase, is patterned in such a way that reasonable inferences can be made both about its connections with preceding events and about how the event itself might be continued and perhaps reach closure and stability. By ‘reasonable inferences’ I mean those which a competent … listener – one familiar with and sensitive to the particular style – might make.”
traditional syntax, be it tonal, modal, atonal or microtonal.

But the irony is that as a tonal cadence placed in a non-tonal context, it actually acts as an anacrusis to the entire rest of the piece. Which is to say, it is acting as gesture⁴, as a directed musical motion. At the end we are not at the end - we are somehow always in the midst of our continuing journey. And of course when we do come to IV-V-I progression, we are quite literally in the midst of the piece. Retrospectively, it seems that the opening sound texture we heard at the beginning was no beginning—simply the start of the piece, resuming from some eternally sounding source.

We could say that the sum effect of Forêt profonde is one in which concepts are imbued with musical characterization -- or perhaps the music is imbued with conceptual imagery such that it becomes quite difficult and unnecessary to differentiate between sound and sense. Together, the process of metaphorization in a particularly fluid temporal frame strikingly represents the process of the unconscious.

References


⁴ Smalley contrasts ‘gesture’ and ‘texture.’ Gesture is concerned with action directed away from a previous goal or towards a new goal; it is concerned with the application of energy and its consequences... Texture, on the other hand, is concerned with internal behavior patterning, energy directed inwards or reinjected, self-propagating,... Denis Smalley, “Spectro-morphology and Structuring Processes,”p. 81-82.