

Value in Contemporary Art and the Category of the 'Sublime' in New Music

(works of F.-B. Mâche, J.-C. Risset and P. Eötvös)

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The notion of value is defined differently in various disciplines (linguistics, semiotics, logic, aesthetics, etc). From a general (or philosophical) point of view, three major categories of value can be distinguished:

- 1) 'truth value' (or value of veracity);
- 2) moral value (ethics);
- 3) aesthetic value (aesthetics).

In the field of semiotics and/or linguistics, the school of A.J. Greimas¹ refers to three other categories (beyond the concept of *linguistic value* defined by Ferdinand de Saussure and *truth value*):

- 1) Descriptive values
 - a. *subjective values* as objects to be consumed, objects of desire, pleasure, 'states of feeling', etc.;
 - b. *objective values* defined as 'accidental values' (such as objects that may be in the possession of the subject, etc.).
- 2) Modal values (such as wanting, being able to, having to, knowing how to be/to do).
- 3) The third category is derived from narrative semiotics: narrative discourse introduces the notion of *transfer of values*, linked to the circulation of objects of value.²

¹ Greimas and Courtés, *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1982.

² Greimas and Courtés, *op. cit.*, pp. 364-366.

In order to examine a number of issues in contemporary art and music, I will refer mainly to the aesthetic categories defined by Étienne Souriau,³ who distinguishes between *epistemological value* (the value of learning and describing) and *aesthetic value* (linked to *aesthetic categories* and *genres*). Souriau argues that an *objective judgement of value is possible in aesthetics*, and seeks to define its conditions.

Souriau describes the long fight of aesthetics as a science (since Baumgarten and Kant), seeking to be recognized as a discipline that provides knowledge and not merely subjective impressions⁴.

The capacity of aesthetics to pronounce an objective value judgment was for a long time denied. Significant doubt was cast on aesthetic value and its very existence. Etienne Souriau and André Lalande argue that an objective value judgment is possible in aesthetics if the essence of a genre or aesthetic category are taken into consideration, and if a rigorous analysis is conducted to determine whether artworks comply with the demands or criteria of these essences.⁵

These aesthetic categories include beauty, the marvellous, the pathetic, the fantastic, the ugly, and the sublime (among others), and can be used to appreciate a work based on whether it produces an ethos.

In my work on contemporary art and value, I examined a number of recent books by the French philosopher and aesthete Yves Michaud, who published a book on aesthetic criteria and the judgment of taste in contemporary fine arts in 1999⁶. Michaud's main contribution to the question of value in contemporary art is to be found in another book, entitled *L'art à l'état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*⁷ [*The Vaporization of Art. Essay on the Triumph of Aesthetics*]. In this highly subversive book, the philosopher describes the new era that has emerged since the 1980s and 1990s, known as the so-called 'post-post' era, i.e. *art after postmodernism*.

In discussing traditional aesthetic values, Yves Michaud quotes Baumgarten: "The aesthetic value of an object resides in its capacity to provide

³ Étienne Souriau, *Vocabulaire d'esthétique*, PUF, Paris 1990.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1376.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1377)

⁶ Yves Michaud, *Critères esthétiques et jugement de goût*, Hachette, Paris 1999, 2005².

⁷ Yves Michaud, *L'art à l'état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*, Hachette/Pluriel, Paris 2003.

enduring [*vivace*] experiences”.⁸ Monroe Beardsley listed five characters or facts defining an aesthetic experience:

- concentration of attention to the object;
- relief from worries;
- detachment;
- active implication in the discovery of the object;
- emotion of interpretation of the experience.

In *L'Art à l'état gazeux* (sometimes referred to in English as ‘Evaporating Theory’), Michaud identified three key phases of twentieth-century art: modernity, post-modernity, and what he terms ‘the art of the “post-post era”’.

1) In the *modern period* (19-20th centuries), the concept of artwork referred to rare and precious objects that were deemed to possess an aura or glory – a magical quality making them the centre of unique, elevated and refined aesthetic experiences. The 1960s saw the disappearance of the artwork conceived as the object and focus of aesthetic experience (see Michaud, 2003: 9).

In 1972, Harold Rosenberg, a critic of the American avant-garde, observed that the artworks of his time were increasingly difficult to categorize in any particular genre and that they rejected the recognized materials of all known genres.

2) 1973 marks the beginning of the *era of post-modernity*. In this period art ‘de-defines’ itself. It loses its definition and begins a process of non-aestheticisation (i.e. the lack of aestheticisation) by discarding pleasure and beauty as inherent components of aesthetic experience. Art can thus no longer be defined. That which presents itself as art can no longer stake a claim to producing aesthetic experiences in the sense of the traditional, time-honoured experience of beauty, of the sublime, or of inventiveness and innovation.⁹

This momentous shift marks the end of all avant-gardes and movements driven by particular programs or manifestos, but also spells the end of a model of history based on the logic of forms and the questioning of

⁸ Yves Michaud, *L'art...*, op. cit., p. 164.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

such forms. It also marks the end of all references to any particular tradition: all that remains is that which is 'post-'.¹⁰

Postmodernism is the age of pluralism and diversity, 'the end of the meta-narratives' structuring all representations, as Lyotard warned in 1979. Some were keen to celebrate the advent of postmodernism as a liberation, while others demonized it as the rule of 'anything goes'. Postmodern artists resorted to a wide range of new strategies in an attempt to adjust to the new artistic paradigm.

In postmodernism, artists continued to situate their work in a context of interrelated problems and solutions, though without any real faith or belief in the ultimate goal or purpose – as if the linear progression from modernism were continuing beyond its supposed end while simultaneously erasing all trace of itself as it developed. Here, reference must be made to Baseliitz.¹¹

Other artists who accepted the advent of postmodernism began searching for a new position from which to produce art. New meanings – irony, criticism, humour and social reference – became key features of the new artistic practices, thus distancing and reducing the intensity of the modernist appeal for 'pure' form or 'art'. Situationism became particularly prominent, especially under the impulse of citationality in the 1980s. Artists were engaged in arbitrary re-appropriations and blendings of past forms and sequences. They also became acutely aware that the modernist model of history was obsolete, though it continued to hold a particular fascination. Richter is a good example of this position.¹²

3) In the 1990s, the ambiguities of postmodernism were definitively exhausted, marking a distinct shift in the artistic landscape. Thus began *the era of post-postmodernism* – an era that did not really come 'after' anything at all. Though nobody realized it at the time, it is clear in retrospect that the modern twentieth century was by now well and truly over.¹³

The visual arts were marked by a wide diversity of creations and works, both rich and anecdotal. They had become inextricably immersed in a globalized, industrialized process of cultural production (e.g. Hollywood

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

movies, countless television channels, musical industry, books for pleasure, etc.). As a result, the most diverse practices became acceptable, while an ever increasing number of minority groups began to make themselves heard. Women, gay minorities, and ethnic or immigrant minorities all began to stake a claim to artistic existence. Internationally, many new points of reference began to appear on the world map of art: Australian art, Korean art, contemporary African art, and the art of the former Soviet bloc (among many others), not to mention the artistic productions that China was beginning to produce and diffuse.¹⁴

The 1990s saw the emergence of a double logic that began to govern the state of contemporary art. In 1991, the American philosopher Nelson Goodman bid goodbye to the aura of art. Those who had never known the modern era experienced neither a sense of disruption nor a crisis: art had become the ether of life. In short, art had evaporated.¹⁵

Although the experience of contemporary art assumed the diffuse and evaporated form of aesthetic experience, it did so within deeply conventional and recognized frameworks (i.e. in art galleries, art schools, artistic exhibitions, etc.). *Such is the nature of the evaporation of art.* At the same time, an aestheticisation of experience in general was also underway, positing that beauty knows no limits (unlimited beauty) and that art is everywhere, to the point of being nowhere. *Such is the nature of aesthetic zed experience.* This state of art is embodied in three distinct areas: hedonism, tourism and the new Darwinism.¹⁶

Yves Michaud describes *different oppositions of values* between *Modernity* or *Great Art* (the Great Tradition) and *the new system* (the new regime) of art, i.e. the *post-post*.¹⁷ In the Great Tradition, works of art conveyed a metaphysical, religious or philosophical message about the meaning of life and existence.

In the post-post era, the relativization of the artistic message is accompanied by a loss of seriousness and responsibility in art. In the post-post era, the work of art is closely linked to the world of communication and *fashion*. Art is thus seen as a 'tendency' rather than a metaphysic. The notion of *the engagement of the artist* is also redefined, becoming local, lim-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

ited, and without ambition. The artist is thus no longer a guide or a scout (*'éclairéur'*), but a mediator within the collectivity.

Michaud's thesis is that the traditional Great Art in the West (*'Grand art'*) and its core values have been replaced by a general cultural state¹⁸ in which we are enveloped or 'evaporated' by fluid aesthetic experiences and distractions and where everything is made under the aegis of *the beautiful, the fine, and the nice*. We live in the era of the triumph of the aestheticisation of art – an era in which the great works of art and their 'aura' have been replaced by enveloping installations and the aestheticisation of our entire life. The frameworks of this new aesthetic experience are governed by hedonism, tourism and the 'new-Darwinism'.¹⁹

I will conclude this presentation by quoting the very last paragraph of Michaud's radical book (which will be cited, exceptionally, in French). These phrases evoke the transit (passage) of our age from the 'oeuvre d'art' to an ornament and to costumes (fineries, parings):

Je suggère donc que *l'art n'est plus la manifestation de l'esprit mais quelque chose comme l'ornement ou la parure de l'époque*. De l'œuvre autonome et organique, ayant sa vie propre, on est passé, pour parler comme Georg Simmel, au style – du style à l'ornement, et de l'ornement à la parure. Un pas de plus, juste un pas, et il ne reste qu'un parfum, une atmosphère, un gaz: de "l'air de Paris", dirait Marcel Duchamp. Cette aura, cette auréole, ce parfum, ce gaz, [...] dit à travers la mode, l'identité de l'époque²⁰.

* * *

If we focus now on contemporary music, we have yet to see the emergence of the same landscape. Of course, there is some evidence of post-modern effects and influences in the field of music. However, the most striking tendency appears to have been a conscious return to the great aesthetic categories, such as *the tragic, the sublime and the comic*. I am referring in particular to some recent operatic works in France, such as "*Amour de loin*" (2000), *Emily* (2010) and the oratorio about the life of Simone Weil (*La Passion de Simon*, 2006) by Kaija Saariaho, and *Faustus, the Last Night*, an opera after Christopher Marlowe by Pascal Dusapin (2004) – all

¹⁸ 'Régime d'art' in French.

¹⁹ Yves Michau, *L'art...*, *op. cit.*, Introduction.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204-205.

of these in the *register of tragic*. “*L’amour coupable*”, an opera on the text of Beaumarchais by the French composer Thierry Pécou, created in March 2010, marks the *comic style* and we encounter the evocation of the *sublime* and *marvellous* in many recent works premiered in France in the last fifteen years.

In this paper, I shall use examples of three contemporary composers to speak about the category of the sublime: works of F.-B. Mâche, J.-C. Risset and P. Eötvös. Other composers, such as Pascal Dusapin, Tristan Murail, Kaija Saariaho, Philippe Manoury, György Kurtág etc. could have been quoted. However, before giving a number of musical examples, some definitions of the *sublime* (and to a lesser extent of the *marvellous*) are required.

Etienne Souriau gives a very simple description of the sublime as one of the major aesthetic categories: “The *sublime* is a dynamic ideal that transports (carries) beyond the human forces”²¹. Other useful definitions can be found in the chapter on the *sublime* in the *Vocabulary of Aesthetics*²². The adjective ‘sublime’ comes from the Latin ‘sublimis’, meaning ‘to raise, to elevate in the air’. In the figurative sense, the term means ‘great’, ‘elevated’. In French, the adjective describes *forms of sacrifice, abnegation, renunciation, and heroism*, particularly when a human being rises above the animal in himself/herself, at the risk of endangering his/her life.²³

The *sublime* as an aesthetic category

According to Longinus²⁴, the sublime is characterized by a force that elevates the soul and produces delight (rapture and ecstasy)²⁵, leading in turn to admiration combined with a *marvellous* experience.

According to Burke²⁶, ‘whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest

²¹ Étienne Souriau, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1319.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1319.

²⁴ *Traité du Sublime* – written in the 1st or 3rd century (supposedly by Longinus – 3rd century).

²⁵ Étienne Souriau, *op. cit.*, p. 1319.

²⁶ Edmond Burke, *Recherche philosophique sur les origines de nos idées du Sublime et du beau* (1757).

emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'.²⁷ According to Kant²⁸, the *sublime* can be crashing, burdening, horrible, and shapeless; first it causes an *interruption of vital forces*, then it creates a feeling of *sorrow* followed by a feeling of *joy*.

Souriau later defined the difference between the *sublime* and the *beautiful* in the following terms: 'while the beautiful evidently refers to the perfection of a being, the sublime enigmatically refers to a higher perfection that transforms a being'.²⁹ The observer, spectator or listener – like the artist through the process of artistic mediation – is able to gain access to the highest spiritual feelings that can be experienced by a human being. Based on the notion of allegory in Schelling's sense of the term, the sublime can be defined as 'the visible and tangible allegory of a higher status accessible to someone receiving its imprint'.³⁰

Another important aesthetic category is the *marvellous*³¹

In a general sense, the term refers to all kinds of phenomena that arouse admiration, astonishment and a kind of *delight* (*ravissement*).

In Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the marvellous was characterized by the continuity (i.e. non-distinction) between the natural and the supernatural. The notion of *thaumata*, i.e. marvellous phenomena, was not opposed to the laws of nature, but viewed as one of its laws.

In the seventeenth century, the two levels – the natural and the supernatural – became separated as a result of the development of scientific thought.

We will see that there is evidence of a return of the first conception in contemporary music influenced by the Middle Ages.³²

In giving musical examples of these two categories (the sublime and the marvellous), I could be accused of using a subjective value judgment. However, it is important to note that this is one of the particularities of the aesthetic categories.

²⁷ Cited after: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 2nd edition, (1759), Sect. VII Of the Sublime.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, Königsberg, bei Jacob Kanter, 1764 (See: Étienne Souriau, *op. cit.*, p. 1320).

²⁹ Étienne Souriau, *op. cit.*, p. 1322.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1322.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 998.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 999.

We will see that new technologies (as in seventeenth-century theatre) or references to natural models (as in seventeenth-century opera) may influence composers in evoking the sublime or the marvellous.

The first example is François-Bernard Mâche (born in 1935). Since the 1960s, Mâche has recorded and transcribed the sounds of nature, such as the sea, storms, birds, amphibians, insects, frogs, etc. In his recent music (in pieces written since 2001), the macro-structure changes in a very specific way. In *Les 12 lunes du serpent* (*The twelve moons of the snake*, 2001), in *Canopée* (2003), *Chikop* (2004), ‘mythemes’, i.e. the themes of mythology, take on a more important role. I would argue that the intervention or operation of supernatural forces (or simply natural forces) enters the scene, and that these forces create a ‘*magie musicale*’, a kind of ‘musical magic’ (in the composer’s own words). The third and last section of each of these important works introduces a radical break with the preceding pages, as if we have entered a marvellous transcendental world. This new world may be delightful or terrible – since it is a world governed by new supernatural forces.

I will show the beginning of *Canopée* (2003), written for the recorded sounds of nature, recorded percussion sounds, and ten strings (violin, viola, cello and double bass). The title *Canopée* is a reference to the canopy of tropical forests populated by mosquitoes and many other species. The work is dedicated to ecologists and is a piece of Fantastic Realism.

1) At the beginning, we hear the recorded and sampled sounds of insects and a Chinese cicada, accompanied by strings and by effects such as glissando and pizzicato in the low register (see Example 1).

2) Later on in the second part, in the interlude or transition, we hear a dialogue of birds (with the help of the two AKAI samplers) (see Example 2).

3) In the third part, in the principal ‘movement’ (after the Introduction and transition), we hear the song of the African bird *cosypha cyano-campter* – a cosypha with blue wings –, singing a real melody covering an octave, emphasizing intervals such as a major third and a minor third (see Example 3).

CANOPEE F-B.Mâche
2003

The score is for a chamber ensemble. The instruments and their parts are:

- Kawai 1:** Treble clef, marked with a box "1.oiseau LX".
- Kawai 2:** Bass clef, marked with a box "1.cigale chinoise (séquence 1, mi insectes)".
- Violon 1:** Treble clef, marked "molto legato", "pp cresc.", and "molto legato".
- Violon 2:** Treble clef, marked "pp cresc." and "molto legato".
- Violon 3:** Treble clef, no markings.
- Violon 4:** Treble clef, no markings.
- Alto 1:** Treble clef, marked "pizz" and "mf".
- Alto 2:** Treble clef, marked "pizz" and "mf".
- Violoncelle 1:** Bass clef, no markings.
- Violoncelle 2:** Bass clef, no markings.
- Contrebasse:** Bass clef, no markings.

The tempo is marked $\text{♩} = 72$. The score is divided into measures 1 through 5. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score includes various dynamics and articulations such as *molto legato*, *pp cresc.*, *pizz*, and *mf*.

Example 1: First measures of *Canopée* (mm. 1-8).

The image displays a musical score for an interlude titled "Dialogue of sampled bird sounds" from the work "Canopée". The score is arranged in five systems, each with two staves. The instruments are labeled on the left: Akai 2 (top), A. 1 and A. 2 (middle), Akai 1 and Akai 2 (lower middle), and Vin. 1 (bottom). The first system (measures 24-30) features Akai 2 and A. 1/A. 2. Akai 2 has a box labeled "A" above measure 27 with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 80$. A. 1 and A. 2 have boxes labeled "A" above measure 27 with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 80$. The text "2.oiseaux" is written in a box above measure 27. The first system ends with a dynamic marking of *p* and the instruction "(jeu :)". The second system (measures 31-35) features Akai 1 and Akai 2. Akai 1 has a box labeled "A" above measure 34 with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 80$. The second system ends with a dynamic marking of *pp* and the instruction "sul tasto".

Example 2: *Canopée*, Interlude – Dialogue of sampled bird sounds (mm. 27-40).

The image shows a page of a musical score for strings, measures 46 to 52. The score is arranged in systems for different instruments: Akal 1, Akal 2, Vln. 1, Vln. 2, Vln. 3, Vln. 4, A. 1, A. 2, Ve. 1, Ve. 2, and Cb. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 100$. A rehearsal mark 'B' is placed at measure 49. The score includes various performance instructions such as *sordine*, *arco*, *pp cresc.*, and *pp*. The string parts for Violins 1, 2, 3, and 4, and Violas 1 and 2, have specific markings: *(ne pas jouer plus fort que la partie enregistrée)* and *pos. nor.* (normal position). The Cello part has a marking *pp cresc.* at measure 49. The score is transcribed on the strings (mm. 49-52).

Example 3: *Canopée*, song of Cossypha Cyanocampter transcribed on the strings (mm. 49-52).

The piece is composed of 15 sections and lasts 16 minutes³³. The first eleven sections use natural models (sounds mainly recorded by the composer in 1972 in Indonesia, at Bako, Sarawak). These sampled sounds are for example different birds (of three continents), amphibians, insects, a cricket recorded in China, different frogs.

An important break – a major change – occurs between the eleventh and twelfth sections. The eleventh section presents the ‘alarum’ effect (term used by Trevor Wishart in his book of 1985³⁴), the alarm signs of different birds, with a threatening ostinato string accompaniment. After a general pause (caesura), a whole new section begins with recorded percussion sounds that connote the marvellous. The sampled sounds come from Taiko drums, Japanese percussion of the Nô Theater, and also from claves, bamboos, congas, balaphones, tables (tablas), and also from sampled flowerpot sonorities.

The last section (the last third) of *Canopée* uses these percussion sounds. However, at the end, after a conversation with nocturnal bird songs, the marvellous sounds become distorted, destroyed and broken down (mm. 433-556). The piece ends in a macabre atmosphere. If we would like to give some hermeneutical explanations of the teleological aim (closure) of *Canopée*, it is important to remember that this music was dedicated to ecologists...

The second example is a mixed electro-acoustic work lasting 14 minutes by Jean-Claude Risset entitled *Voilements (Veilings)*, written in 1987 for tenor saxophone and two-track magnetic tape (today, CD), and dedicated to Daniel Kientzy. The composer himself describes the interaction between the solo and the tape (recorded sounds) as follows.

“The title refers to the role of the tape. The tape initially echoes the soloist. The sound coming from the loudspeakers begins to dominate the solo performance while simultaneously modifying, warping and veiling it, like tissue drifting in the wind or a wheel that stops turning. (...) At the end of the piece, the tape recedes into the background, becoming ever more remote and more distant. Synthetic sounds that are foreign to the

³³ See the table of sequences of the whole work in the appendix of the article (reproduced in French).

³⁴ Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, York 1985, p. 99.

The image displays a musical score for the section '8. Claves-Pot de fleurs' from 'Canopée', measures 285-296. The score is arranged for two AKAI samplers (Akai 1 and Akai 2) and a piano part. The piano part is marked '13. Tapon: claves'. The score shows complex rhythmic patterns with many beamed notes and rests. The measures are numbered 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, and 300. The piano part is marked '15^{mo}' in several places.

Example 4: *Canopée*, 12th section – sampled percussions on 2 AKAI samplers with marvellous sonorities (mm. 285-296).

world of the saxophone can be heard. A more remote and more peaceful relation develops between the tape and the various performance techniques used by the soloist right up to the end of the piece”³⁵.

The beginning is thus a dialogue between the saxophonist and the tape; their relationship or hierarchy will be gradually/progressively modified.

In the last (the third and fourth) parts of the work, the saxophone’s figures or motives become agitated, and a strange transformation occurs: the equal temperament tuning disappears gradually, and a shift of per-

³⁵ Notes of the composer in the score of “Voilements”, Salabert-Universal Classic, 1987.

spective – a zoom backwards – arrives. In this section, the sampled sounds are that of an ancestral instrument, the didgeridoo, produced by Australian Aborigines.

This 3rd part of the piece contains (pages 9-15, duration of the section: 4'15''):

1. 0' – turning gestures, arabesque figures
2. 0'35'' – coda begins: slow and pedal voices
3. 1'47'' – didgeridoo + saxophone with singing voice à 2'10'', 3'10'' ->4'15'' (crossed synthesis).

Example 5: *Voilements*, beginning of the 3rd Part (page 9).

In the coda, (Section IV) the saxophone's fragmental sounds are gradually lost, inhaled or dissolved by the synthesized comical sounds.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for Saxophone (Sax.), Choir (Chr.), and Bassoon (Bde.). Each system includes a staff for each instrument and a corresponding waveform graph below the Bassoon staff. The first system is marked with '1 min 23 s', '1 min 40 s', and '1 min 45 s'. It includes the instruction 'Attenuation de la voix imiter la bande' and 'mpf (saxo et voix à l'unisson)'. The second system is marked with '1 min 50 s' and '1 min 55 s', with the instruction 'Attenuation de la voix imiter la bande'. The third system is marked with '2 min', '2 min 05 s', and '2 min 10 s', with the instruction 'enlever le bec'. A handwritten '18' is visible in the top right corner of the first system.

Example 6: *Voilements*, the beginning of the coda (at the 4th part: pages 17-18)

Examples of the marvellous and the sublime can be found in another dimension in Peter Eötvös' opera *Lady Sarashina* (and in its non-theatrical instrumental-vocal version: *As I crossed the bridge of dreams*, 1999). The opera was created in 2008.

The libretto draws on a piece of ancient Japanese literature entitled *Sarashina Nikki*, written a thousand years ago by a Japanese court lady³⁶ born in 1008. Her diary describes her dreams, the slightest events of her life, and above all her desires.

Lady Sarashina was naïve, timorous, introspective, solitary. Though kind and affectionate by nature, she had difficulty in asserting her emotions. One senses something ineffectual and irresolute about her, not only in personal relations but in her entire approach to the outside world. She

³⁶ The Lady belonged to an extraordinary group of educated literary women in an advantageous social position. Her letters describe every nuance of feeling, every intimate hope, and sadness.

protected herself by a barrier of fantasy; the final escape was in the world of dreams. Dreams are important in Buddhist imagery as a metaphor for the illusory nature of human experience. Lady Sarashina's book is the earliest diary in which dreams are central. She evidently attached great importance to these dreams and remembered some of them in detail years after they took place.³⁷ The opera (and so does its chamber music version *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*) begins and ends with the evocation of the marvellous. In the overture of the opera a vocal trio whispers the following words³⁸:

“When the tolling of the temple bell
Told me that dawn and my vigil's end had come at last,
I felt as though I'd passed a hundred autumn nights.”

The feeling of the marvellous comes from the instruments that introduce and accompany this whispering:

1) Prerecorded sounds on CD: glockenspiel and chimes [Jeux de timbre and carillons (mm. 2-6)].

2) Percussion 1: crotals (with hard sticks) (mm. 1-6).

3) Percussion 2: glockenspiel with pedal; later: metal chimes (carillon de metal); later: sizzle (mm. 1-6).

4) Celesta – tremolo (mm. 1-4).

From measure 7 on,

1) (CD): Tubular bells (mm. 7-13).

2) Percussion 1: crotals (mm. 8-13).

3) Percussion 2: Tubular bells with pedal (mm. 8-13).

4) Celesta: (mm.12).

The sonority is very enveloping, floating yet at the same time ringing, jingling. Thus a special atmosphere is created which is capable of producing dreams and visions, of generating the marvellous.

³⁷ See the introduction by Ivan Morris to his translation of the book, in Lady Sarashina – I. Morris, *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-century Japan*, Penguin Classics, 1975, p. 3-4.

³⁸ The source of the libretto is *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-century Japan*, *op. cit.* (Text reduction for the libretto by Maria Eötvös).

LADY SARASHINA (2006/07)
Opéra en neuf tableaux

Peter Eötvös

Ouverture

(♩ = 60)

CD

SOPRAN

MEZZO

BARITON

Schraghorn 1

Schraghorn 2

Cello

Sub. sempre

CD

Schra. 1

Schra. 2

Cel.

Example 7: First page of the score of *Lady Sarashina* (2006–2007), by Peter Eötvös, Ricordi, 2007.

The opera itself consists of 9 sections, namely 8 + 1 dreams and/or recalling of past events. The last one (#9) is an evocation, variation and amplification of #6. The successive visions are:

- 1) Spring
- 2) The Guard (2/2: The princess)
- 3) Pilgrimages
- 4) Dream with the Cat (4/2: Requiem)
- 5) The Moon
- 6) Mirror-Dream
- 7) Dark Night
- 8) Remembrance
- 9) Fate (recalling #6).

The opera ends on a tragic scene (Sarashina recalling the main events of her life, a life in which she has accomplished nothing...). Yet the music becomes progressively marvellous and sublime – as if the mere fact of becoming aware of the void of her life might give a transcendental dimension to her existence or raise it to a new plane (“*since her life was so unhappy*”).

The beginning of #9 (Fate) reiterates the tubular bells and the vibraphone in the percussion part (and also clarinet and alto saxophone, flute and alto flute: mm. 1-8). Sarashina’s monologue is the following:

“Fate, fate is not a friend of mine. I remembered that, when Mother had dedicated a mirror at Hase Temple, the priest had dreamt about a Weeping figure rolling on the floor. Such was my present state, that was the end of it all.”

The “fate” motif (sung or declaimed by the soprano) is accompanied by repeated notes “*con sordino*” and “*con vibrato*” in the parts of V11, V12, V1a, Vc, Db – *all divisi* (mm. 9-21). After the monologue, a great tempest, i.e. an emotional storm starts brewing in the orchestra (mm. 33-71). This is a real moment of catharsis or terror of the Sublime described by the theoreticians of the Sublime (Burke and Kant, see above). The music and the emotion become expressive, burdening, horrible, and shapeless. The explosion of vital forces is followed by sorrow and pain (see *tutti: f, mf* – mm. 49-70). After this culmination point of the horror of the sublime, the music expresses joy and consolation (mm. 72-117). The very last measures (87-117) re-introduce the marvellous sonorities of the Overture: we hear the glockenspiel, the chimes, later the tubular bells (until they fade out) from the pre-recorded CD.

The image displays a page of a musical score, identified as Example 8. It is a full orchestral score for the climax of Section 9 ("Fate") of the opera *Lady Sarashina* by Peter Eötvös. The score is written for a large orchestra, with multiple staves for various instruments including strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. The notation is dense and complex, featuring intricate rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *p*, *f*, *pp*, and *sf*. The score is divided into measures, with a double bar line indicating the end of a section. The overall appearance is that of a professional musical manuscript.

Example 8: Section 9 ("Fate") of *Lady Sarashina*, by Peter Eötvös: climax
(mm. 49-55, p. 215: *tutti orchestra, forte*)

Musical score for the last measures of the opera (mm. 84-117). The score is divided into four systems, each corresponding to a specific measure range. The first system (measures 84-91) includes a CD track with a tempo marking of quarter note = 60 and a 'back' instruction. It features parts for CROT (Crotchet), METAL-GUMMES, and SZZLE (Sizzle). The second system (measures 92-101) features a CD track with 'Tubular bells' and 'Tempe 2a'. The third system (measures 102-111) continues the CD track. The fourth system (measures 112-117) features a CD track with 'fade out' and 'FINIS'. The score is written for CD, Schz. 1, Schz. 2, and Cel.

Example 9: Last measures of the opera (mm. 84-117): marvellous sonorities in the pre-recorded sounds (tubular bells, in special playing mode, combined with pedals, giving inharmonic and sparkling sonorities).

Appendix:
Schemata of the macrostructure in “Canopée”
(2003) by F.-B. Mâche

Introduction – Slow [process and/or archetype: space defined by its lower/higher pitch limits ;
tension between these two extremes]

Transition/Interlude – Slow (model=insects) [process/archetype*:
awakening - night or early morning]

Movement a1 – Moderato (bird 1) [style *parlando* and ascent, narrowing of
space + amplification]

Movement b1 – Quick (amphibians) [polyrhythmic *ostinato* – stasis]

Transition/Interlude – Allegro (multiple models: confluence of all kinds of elements);
[increasing complexity and progressive transition from the aquatic to the aerial world]

Movement a2 - Slow (bird 2) [canon: wave-like movement]

Movement a2 variation - Slow (“Mist”) [as above plus catabasis, descent]

Transition/Interlude – Slow (3 models) [dialogue between the amphibian and the bird;
nocturnal atmosphere]

Movement b2 – Quick (amphibians + other models) [*ostinato*; increased tension
due to additional crackly, chirping, sounds]

Transition – Quick (multiple models) [transition from the aquatic to the aerial world]

Movement a3 (double) – Quick (bird + rhythms) [increased tension, then
warning cries, ominous *ostinato*]

_____ Caesura _____

Movement c1 – Very quick, percussive elements, [play, battle of “marvelous” sonorities]

Movement c2 – Very quick, percussive elements + instruments; [chase]

Movement c3 – Quick and *Adagio* - previous material, with four interrupting occurrences of element
‘a’ (bird); [the chase is stopped by the song of the bird]

Movement c4 – percussive elements + instruments [deconstruction, *catabasis*]

* Afterwards, [] always: [process and/or archetypes]

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