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The Music of Fausto Romitelli: Concerning the Question of “Musical Material”*

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Abstract. The end of the 20th century demonstrates an expansion of horizons of the comprehension of musical sonorities, the conception of their transformation from music into “sound,” which radically changes the perception of timbre: this element becomes transformed from a peripheral component of sound to the primary element, thereby changing entirely the entire conception of musical material. Thus, the theory of music material developed by outstanding German philosopher Theodor Adorno in the middle of the 20th century has found its confirmation. The latter’s concept of the historicity of music material was upheld and further developed by Italian composer Luigi Nono, who fundamentally changed the sphere of perception of this phenomenon, which subsequently was testified by his German student Helmut Lachenmann. This required not only new combinations of sound, but a reevaluation of the attitude of working with them. Fausto Romitelli (1963–2004) pertains to the generation of composers that discovered new paths for work with sound. In his musical output sound becomes a complex multicomponent phenomenon presuming an interaction between acoustic instruments, electronic sounds and reverberation — the sound “aura” and the sound “halo,” both of which are also composed consciously (presenting “composed resonance”). Romitelli’s individuality demonstrates itself in the fact that he builds this component of his musical material, basing himself on sonar discoveries in the sphere of rock music, in particular, the Pink Floyd ensemble, which finds reflection in such of his works as *EnTrance*, *Professor Bad Trip*, etc. Romitelli characterized the “aura” of his sound as “dirty,” comprehending this as a specific resonance of the sound of the electric guitar in rock music. Romitelli’s “composed resonance” is not characteristic solely of him; “composed resonance” as an element of musical material may be discerned in the works of other composers, in particular, Kaija Saariaho in her *Amers* for solo cello and ensemble.

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Теория музыки

Научная статья

Музыка Фаусто Ромителли: к вопросу о «музыкальном материале»**

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Аннотация. Конец XX века демонстрирует расширение горизонтов понимания звука, концепцию его перехода в «саунд», что в корне меняет представление о тембре: из сопутствующего компонента звучания тембр становится основным, меняя в результате всю концепцию музыкального материала. Таким образом находит своё подтверждение теория историчности «музыкального материала», выдвинутая первоначально выдающимся немецким ученым Теодором Адорно в середине XX века. Его концепт был подхвачен прежде всего итальянским композитором Луиджи Ноно, который принципиально изменил зону представлений об этом феномене, о чём свидетельствует его ученик Хельмут Лахенман. Это потребовало не просто новых звучаний, но пересмотра отношения к работе с ними. Фаусто Ромителли (1963–2004) принадлежит к той генерации композиторов, которые в области академического искусства нашли новые пути работы со звуком. В его творчестве звук (саунд) становится многокомпонентным, специально сочинённым сложным феноменом, где взаимодействуют акустические инструменты, электронные звучания и реверберация — «аура», звуковое «гало», которые также сочиняются намеренно («сочинённый резонанс»). Индивидуальность Ромителли сказывается в том, что этот компонент своего музыкального материала он строит, опираясь на звуковые находки в области рок-музыки, в частности музыки группы «Пинк Флойд», что отражается в ряде сочинений (*EnTrance*, *Professor Bad Trip*). «Ауру» своего звука Ромителли характеризовал как «грязную», понимая под этим специфический резонанс звучания электрогитары в рок-музыке. «Сочинённый резонанс» Ромителли не является чем-то присущим только этому композитору; феномен «сочинённого резонанса» как части музыкального материала можно проследить и у других авторов, в частности у Кайи Саариахо (*Amers* для виолончели соло и ансамбля).

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Ключевые слова: Фаусто Ромителли, Адорно, музыкальный материал, саунд, «сочинённый резонанс»

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Fausto Romitelli (1963–2004) has captivated Russian listeners by his dazzlingly brilliant media opera *An Index of Medals*, which was performed in Moscow as part of the *Drugoe prostranstvo* [*Other Space*] festival in 2016, and then in St. Petersburg in 2017. By that time, the composer was not alive for some time. However, during the 41 years of his life, he was able to demonstrate himself as one of the greatest stars of the generation of the end of the 20th century. The weight of his contribution to the art of music may be confirmed by the imposing list of publications bearing witness to that interest that his art has aroused among professionals, critics and the general public.¹

Romitelli studied in Milan with Franco Donatoni, and in 1991 he came to the “Course of Musical Informatics” at the IRCAM, since he was interested in the French Spectral music, in particular, the works of Hugues Dufourt and Gérard Grisey. And while Grisey and Dufourt merit to be characterized as the “indomitable sons of Darmstadt” who rejected the legacy of Boulez and Stockhausen, Romitelli ought to be dubbed as their “indomitable grandson,” who distanced himself from Spectralism, but departed into the realms

where the “Arthouse” Darmstadt music feels itself uncomfortably — the spheres of psychedelic art-rock music and the complex forms of jazz.

He formulated his artistic creed in the following way: “The pivotal idea of music is to examine sound as the material which is intruded upon in order to endow it with physical and perceptive characteristics by means of refinement...”² The concept of “sound” bears a special meaning for the composer: the author of the first monograph on Romitelli, Italian researcher Alessandro Arbo testifies that “...anybody who had the luck of meeting Romitelli most likely remembers how he pronounced that word suono [sound], with that exceedingly characteristic intonation of his, resonating on the vowel ‘o.’ When he was listening to music that was not his, sound was the first (and sometimes the last) thing to attract his attention. He conceived a substantial part of his compositional work as an attempt to make the energy of sound work.”³ Sound in this case is understood not as a compendium of parameters, such as pitch, duration or timbre; it is comprehended particularly as the *material*, that is something substantial, complex, but at the same time unified. The conventional concept of “sound”, on the

¹ See: Guidarini L. *Transtextuality Techniques and Spectral Manipulation in Fausto Romitelli's Late Compositions*. URL: <https://www.academia.edu/41452505> (accessed: 30.01.2024).

² Cit. ex: Veller V. *Vechnaya krasota v sovremennykh zvuchaniyakh* [*Eternal Beauty in Contemporary Sounds*]. URL: http://gnesin-college.ru/content/print/concerts/20111213_mforum.pdf (accessed: 27.01.2024)

³ Guidarini L. Op. cit.

one hand, is subdivided into pitch, timbre and articulation; on the other hand, these parameters are not summated in sound, but are especially comprehended within a unified complex and *composed*. Not only these parameters are realized in sound, but also in plastic and psychophysical traits; in this respect it is possible to view the parallels in relation to sound as it is perceived by Romitelli and, to take one example, Erwin Schulhoff; the way Schulhoff presumed “bodily pleasure” from sound determinately finds a parallel with Romitelli’s understanding of sound. [1]

In present-day musicology, it is customary to presume that the term “musical material,” notwithstanding the historically existent usage of the word, was brought into broad discourse by Theodor Adorno. Some Russian researchers (such as Mikhail Pylaev⁴ and Liudmila Leipson⁵) note that particularly in German musicology this expression has become, as Carl Dahlhaus expressed it, “a term pertaining to philosophy and music theory.”⁶

In his *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno for the first time begins polemicizing with the predominating “naïveté,” according to his characterization, the characterization of musical material as a certain assemblage of tones abstractly granted to the composer. He rejects the possibility of this definition as an exclusively physical phenomenon,

asserting that it is essentially a historical category, rejects the invariant understanding of musical material for all the times and speaks of the necessity of cognition of “the laws of the motion of the material,” according to which “not everything is possible in each of the epochs.” As Leipson shows, “...the compositional material is to a certain degree distant from pitches in the same way as language is distant from the supply of its phonemes. The material does not merely narrow down or expand with the flow of history. All of its specific features are signs of the historical process.”⁷

With the appearance of atonality and Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method and the dissolution of the classical-romantic forms, Adorno comes up with the necessity of posing the question of new consistent patterns of the musical material pertaining to New Music. And this becomes justified — the Second Viennese School presents a paradigm shift in the organization of pitch. However, the musical material of the composers of this direction continues to exist within the autonomy of the tempered scale, which had been created before them and was carefully preserved during the course of several centuries. The conception of musical sound remains the same in it.

The appearance of the new genres of the postwar avant-garde style and the emergence of the tendency towards creating

⁴ Pylaev M. E. Muzykal'no-sotsiologicheskaya kontseptsiya T. Adorno: opyt kharakteristiki [The Music-Sociological Conception by Theodor W. Adorno: Trial of Description]. *Modern Problems of Science and Education*. 2015. Vol. 1, Issue 2. URL: <https://science-education.ru/ru/article/view?id=19797> (accessed: 27.01.2024).

⁵ Leipson L. K. The Concept of Musical Material: From Adorno to the Present. *Almanac*. 2018. No. 10, pp. 73–86. (In Russ.) URL: https://nma.bg/almanac_en/the-concept-of-musical-material-from-adorno-to-the-present/ (accessed: 27.01.2024)

⁶ Cit. ex: Pylaev M. E. Op. cit.

⁷ Leipson L. K. Op. cit. P. 75.

borderline genres involving the contiguous forms of art and technology have stimulated considerable radical changes in the regular laws of choice. The figure of Luigi Nono appears along this path rather predictably: Adorno's pivotal ideas are present in the foundation of the understanding of music intrinsic to the Second Viennese School as "intrusions into the sound reality of our time."⁸ This was reflected in Nono's text *The Historical and the Real in Contemporary Music* written by him in 1959. Nono's student, Helmut Lachenmann continued the work of his teacher. The perception of the "real" in contemporary music imminently led towards a strengthening of attention towards the acoustic component, towards the expansion of the field of experiments with sounds. The logical result of this was the creation of IRCAM — the institute of electroacoustic research in Paris and the electronic music studios in various countries — Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Lachenmann acknowledged that he had sent his students to IRCAM to obtain experience of what he called "real" sound in a concert hall. The new "turn of the collective ear" distinctly heard in its sound an immense potential of the inner microstructure of sound, its endless diversity. The prospects of the disclosed possibilities seemed endless; this explains why Lachenmann stated in his interview in 2012: "There is something dangerous in sound."⁹ This "real sound" is connected by the composer particularly with the work in electronic studios, which,

in his opinion, has led to a new conception of musical sound. "The old, traditional concept was not rejected, but it was seen as historic: melody, harmony, rhythm, symphony orchestra, counterpoint, polyphony... <...> 'a harp pizzicato,' or another pizzicato, or a certain intensity, or a certain duration, or a register, etc. One tried to think in these categories, and Nono was one of the most strict [of the] persons doing this."¹⁰

Lachenmann felt that during his studies with Nono, he was made to be sort of an object of experimentation. As he remembered it: "I was a kind of *Versuchskanninchen* [a guinea pig]; he tried out how to teach."¹¹ He writes: "Whenever I wrote two notes, one after the other for the same instrument — let's say for an oboe a C# and then an E b with a legato slur — he said, 'This is a melodic element, this is bourgeois, you should never do this!' And this was hard. If I wrote a trill, he would say, 'You are François Couperin, with all these ornaments...' <...> Some weeks later... he said that if you wrote only one note, let's say for harp, it was already a bourgeois element. <...> These were very important provocations for me, so I had to think about other categories. <...> He has to construct his own behaviour. And he has to find it for each new piece again and again. And this is not in the electronic medium (which is a kind of 'paradise'), but in society's material."¹²

It is well-known, what the search of musical material in Lachenmann's music resulted in: he was able to create an original conception, a peculiar aesthetics and

⁸ Phillips W. Spaces of Resistance: the Adorno–Nono Complex. *Twentieth-Century Music*. 2012. Vol. 9, Special Issue 1–2. P. 83. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572212000217>

⁹ *Experimental Affinities in Music*. Ed. by Paulo de Assis. Ghent: Orpheus Institute, 2015. P. 93.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., pp. 93–94.

a typology of sound, which has continued to attract researchers by its originality — let us make a reference to one of the latest attempts of interpretation of “the phenomenon of Romitelli,” Nastasya Khrushcheva’s article, [2] as well as the recently published article by Svetlana Lavrova. [3] Romitelli did not create his conception of sound as material, but we are able to reconstruct it: we can determine certain features of Romitelli’s sound that characterize the specificity of his compositional style. In a certain sense, he was also compelled to follow the path of Lachenmann — through the rejection of pre-established standards of sound.

Musicologist Alessandro Arbo highlighted the concepts that were crucial for Romitelli: sound, modernity, the high and the low, degeneration, paroxysm and profundity.¹³ This may be considered as a contour description of the entire sound material of Romitelli.

The term “sound” began to come into general use by musicologists, first of all, for describing and analyzing rock music: the “sound” created by the electric guitars may have been so individual that it did not fit in any of its variations into the pure form of a timbre or an individual manner of playing. The level of individualization of the sound was built out of many components: the attack of the sound, the manner of intoning, the degree and character of technological processing of the initial sonority. “Sound” may also be understood as the source character of the “musical material,” similar to the way how in the present day it is of no

small importance on what material an artist draws (whether he uses concrete, paper, plastic, glass or a composite surface) and what he draws with (a pencil, oil, wax, drawing ink, etc.). Already prior to the artistic stylistic manifestations, the source technological data prepare the ground for fundamental differences in a work of art. Of course, their choice is stipulated by the personality of the artist (or the composer), but, nevertheless, for the beginning, it remains beyond the limits of the individual: Romitelli oriented himself on the world of complicated (complex) sounds in which the leading role was played by electric instruments (first of all, the guitar) and, complementarily, the electronic processing of sound. Researchers note that “these sonorities were combined by him with traditional orchestral instruments.”¹⁴ We may concur with Svetlana Lavrova’s opinion: “Romitelli distinctly realized the aesthetic importance of the technological revolution, which has created new forms of sensitivity.”¹⁵ The composer asserts: “At the center of my composition lies the idea of sound as a wholeness. Sound is material, it possesses traits of the tessitura element — graininess, porosity, density and resilience. Its physical characteristic features must necessarily be made accessible to perception. The new possibilities today are — sound sculpture, instrumental synthesis, anamorphosis, sound transformation, spectral morphology, drifting into the sphere of unstable densities, distortions, and interferences occurring, among other reasons, because of the use of electroacoustic

¹³ Arbo A. *Le corps électrique: voyage dans le son de Fausto Romitelli*. Paris: Harmattan, 2005. 198 p.

¹⁴ Lavrova S. V. *Salvatore Sharrino i drugie. Ocherki ob ital'yanskoi muzyke kontsa XX — nachala XXI veka* [*Salvatore Sciarrino and Others. Essays about Italian Music of the Late 20th and the Early 21st Century*]. St. Petersburg: Vaganova Ballet Academy, 2019. P. 120.

¹⁵ Ibid.

technologies. In the present day, a greater amount of significance is attached to sounds of a non-academic origin, 'adulterated' and 'harsh' sounds, those of metallic nature, derived from rock and techno music."¹⁶ All of this inevitably redirected the composer toward the computer technologies of processing and obtaining sound immediately at the beginning of his association with IRCAM.

The piece written during this period, *EnTrance* (1995–96) includes in itself a study of sound with the help of a mantra from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The idea of the composition is rooted in ritual, and its aim is to arouse the state of a trance. The text of the work is served by a mantra consisting of 15 syllables. The means used by Romitelli are: the sound of breathing (inhaling and exhaling.) This is accompanied by turns of the head, as if recreating the physiology of reaching the state of a trance. For the sake of enhancing the action of the ritual, two microphones are used on both sides of the singer's face, transmitting his voice. The exhalation is sounded through the frontal microphone, and regular reverberation is applied; at the same time, the inhalation is, in contrast, carried away through microphones to the rear wall of the hall, and a lengthy, unnatural reverberation with the light effect of an echo is made use of.

The material of the entire piece summarily consists of three components: acoustic sound, electronic sound and reverberation — the latter merits additional discussion. It is difficult to say, at what moment the spot of the resonance becomes the object of special attention on the part of composers. It may be presumed that at first it was paid

attention not so much by the "arthouse" composers, as it was by rockers, especially those who were inclined not towards mass art, but toward more conceptual intentions. We could remember the audio experiments of THE BEATLES at the time of the release of the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, inasmuch as there still exist valuable video recordings, where Paul McCartney manipulates the multitrack recording. There are memoirs available written by ingenious British sound engineer Peter Zinoviev about his work in a British studio with the PINK FLOYD group. There is proof available that Romitelli was very enthusiastic about the music of PINK FLOYD, admiring their sound. It turns out chronologically that the famous albums of the PINK FLOYD, such as *The Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*, were created, respectively, in 1973 and 1975, almost 20 years prior to Romitelli's trip to IRCAM. One could presume that the magical effect of the sound reverberation, or the "aura" of sound, a sort of sonar "halo" became an insuperable sound enticement for Romitelli, an effect which he brought into the sound material of his music from the very beginning.

The composer had a predilection toward referring to Bacon and rock music, as he acknowledged that "...sound in contemporary music has been castrated by formalism and dogmas in regard to the purity of the musical material: cerebral (lacking sensitivity), incorporeal sound, bereft of flesh and blood. Personally, I love dirty sound, distorted, harsh and visionary, which at times is created by pop music and which I am trying to integrate in my compositions."¹⁷

¹⁶ Cit. ex: Ibid. P. 266.

¹⁷ Cit. ex: Arbo A. *Le corps électrique: voyage dans le son de Fausto Romitelli*. Paris: Harmattan, 2005. P. 143.

Romitelli carried out several intentions where aura prefers to be “dirty.”

The saturated energy of his music arouses the intense sensation of the sonar “presence” that the composer expresses verbally, characterizing *EnTrance* for soprano, ensemble and electronics. He asserts that in this piece he wished to put a stop to all “dialogic, discursive and purely formal intensions in favor of the intensions of sonar presence, immobile and continual, hypnotic, spherical, revolving in space and time.”¹⁸ A component of such a hypnotic sound is created by what may be called “composed resonance.”¹⁹

Another composition by Romitelli — the cycle *Professor Bad Trip* — illustrates perfectly the idea of “composed resonance” according to the logic of “shadowed aura.” In his annotations to this three-movement cycle, the composer wrote: “That which predominates in *Professor Bad Trip* is the hypnotic and ritual aspects, the taste for deformation and the artificial; constant repetitions; continuous persistent accelerations of the material and the time prone to turbulences and distortions, to the state of super saturation, flat spectrum noise and catastrophe, constant driftage to the direction of chaos, objects denominate and attenuated; unsupportable speed and density; ragged, discontinuous routes or, on the contrary, harshly set ones as the trajectory of a shell.”²⁰

The first of the movements of *Professor Bad Trip, Lesson 1* (1998) is written for an ensemble of eight instruments (flute and bass flute, bass clarinet, electric guitar,

piano and electric piano, percussion instruments, violin, viola and cello) and electronics. The piece begins with a section of “persistent repetitions.” This movement, which may be called “the accumulation of energy,” is intriguing from the perspective that it aspires towards the interfusion of all the elements; it becomes clear that it is particularly this interfusion (or amalgamation) that provides the sensation of the “aura.” It is perceptible in the example that several strata superimposed on each other support each other: the winds, the guitar, the electric piano, the vibraphone and the strings create a rich “texture” of sound wherein it becomes impossible to isolate any separate sonorities from each other. This circumstance is emphasized by many researchers: “Romitelli succeeds in maintaining a delicate balance between sounds of diverse origin, and as a result the extremely heterogeneous ensemble is perceived as a unified whole, without being divided into the ‘acoustic,’ ‘electroacoustic’ and ‘electronic’ groups. It is also inappropriate to talk of a predominance of the ‘acoustical’ or the ‘electronic’ sound: these are intermixed in the unified authorial sound, without which the composer’s style is unthinkable.” [4, p. 33]

There is a sensation that the aesthetics of the “composed resonance” revealed itself most strongly during the time period beginning from the 1980s and ending with the 2000s in the music of a mixed type, wherein electronics neighbors with acoustic instruments. This is demonstrated especially brilliantly by the repertoire

¹⁸ Cit. ex: Arbo A. *Anamorphoses. Études sur l'œuvre de Fausto Romitelli*. Strasbourg: HERMANN, 2015. P. 25.

¹⁹ Analogous ideas are developed in Svetlana Lavrova’s aforementioned article. See: [3].

²⁰ Cit. ex: Arbo A. *Fausto Romitelli: An Index of Titles*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005. P. 55.

of IRCAM, including Boulez's *Resonances* (1981–1984). There the electronic sounds are heard as a double of the instrument, or as an intensification of the creation of the “halo” or the artificial prolongation, or even immersion — the feeling intensified by the fact that not infrequently these compositions required special spatial conditions. At times, this “aura” is created by that fact that the electronic sounds seem to form an echo for the instrumental part. This is especially characteristic for the music existent in line with the ideas of Spectralism, for example, the early compositions of Kaija Saariaho.²¹ [5] In *Amers* (“Coastal Landmarks”) for cello, ensemble of instruments and electronics, the material is “worked out” from the cello sound as the result of the existent spectral analyses of the cello trill upon different positions of the bow and with different bow pressure. The spectrum changes when it is generated from a sound made with normal bow pressure and *sul ponticello*. As for the procedural side, characteristic for spectral scores, we see changes, which frequently are not perceived as confirmations of the evolution of the pitches, when a sole spectrum becomes variably either richer or poorer. The electronic transformations

interacting with the cello make use of Iana, and such programs as CHANT, Phase Vocoder SVP and the IRCAM program of synthesis of physical modeling. Their aim is to generate the sound “halo” that sometimes merges with its instrumental counterpart. This sonar “halo” or “aura” is one of the most important qualities of the new sound material at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries, when electronics do not generate sound, but create a sort of a new periphery of sound commensurable in certain ways with the acoustic experiments of those who wrote musical compositions acoustically having in mind a particular church (for example, there exists the opinion that Monteverdi's *Vesperae* was composed particularly in expectation of being performed at the San Marco Cathedral.) The new conditions of sound of music in the 20th century suggested something different: an “aftermath” is being created especially for it, which no longer presents a certain uncontrolled summarizing result — the acoustic resonance of a certain particular space. The latter in particular is what becomes a part of the musical material, a self-sustained component that possesses its own laws of elaboration and possibilities of development.

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²¹ It must be noticed that in her compositions of her mature period, Saariaho also constantly makes use of “construction” of the sound spectrum, without applying any computations during the process.

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