

The Presence of the Distant Past: Maximilian Marcoll's *Amproprification* #6

In music and in art in general, there is a long tradition of drawing on other works, of quoting, distorting, rebuilding, cutting up, reassembling them. It is often said that these works become material. But what does it mean to make something into one's material? The word suggests an undifferentiated mass that lies at one's disposal, but that cannot be the point – the works that are used have to remain recognizable. Still they will have to be dismantled in some way, deprived of their qualities. Creation implies a partial neutralization of its material.

This general observation applies even to materials in the traditional sense: there is no wood in nature, it has to be produced by sawing up trees. Since nothing is material in itself, the work of neutralization is part of any process of production or creation (or its preparation). On the other hand, no material can be neutralized to the extent that it loses all resistance, hence this process always has to deal with what the material allows, suggests, prohibits – Adorno would have said what it *demands*.

In his essay *Schläft ein Ding in allen Liedern*, Maximilian Marcoll quotes Hans Zender's observation that the pieces one uses as one's material strike back, as it were, develop their own agency and disempower the composer. Even though Zender is thinking of very specific types of reference, this active role is the origin of Adorno's general theory of artistic and especially musical material. It is a theory of the historicity of art, which it finds within the forms of the individual works. If every work draws on other works, be it implicitly or explicitly, in a concrete or general manner, in order to have any kind of substance at all, this reference and the way it is employed can be examined with regard to its approach: whether it is critical or affirmative, functions as continuation or rupture, whether it deals with the questions and problems that result from the previous works or whether it ignores them. In summary, the question is how reflected and sophisticated a work deals with its material. Even without a strong theory of progress in the arts, which Adorno is often credited with, this remains a productive approach.

Consequently, we don't have to ask *if* a work uses other works as material but *how* it does that, what granularity it imposes on its material. This may take place between two extremes: the first one would be the case in which the material is completely digested, as it were, so that the work's substance consists of nothing but pieces from the past, none of which, however, are still recognizable. What will be recognizable are forms in a more general sense, varieties of structure, inflections, instrumentations, sounds, through which the piece situates itself within and assumes a stance towards the space of a tradition. The second extreme would consist in simply repeating other works without any change, something that Elaine Sturtevant practiced in the visual arts. In notated music this is hardly possible because it lacks material originals – the copying of a score does not produce a new piece (even though Jorge Luis Borges subtly claimed this for the comparable case of literature in his *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* from 1939).

In his *Amproprifications*, Marcoll invented a very specific way of making previous pieces into his material, a method that paradoxically leaves them completely intact and radically changes them at the same time: his intervention is restricted to a composed amplification of the individual voices or parts. This method is applicable to any musical piece, and the spectrum of the nine pieces he has produced so far is extraordinarily broad: starting with almost contemporary composers (Berio, Donatoni) moving to moderate early modernists (Fauré) and immediate contemporaries (Maierhof, Kysela, Ablinger, Lang), the greatest classic of them all (Beethoven) and of course Palestrina. The questions that arise in each of those cases are completely different so that even though the method itself may be universally applicable, it must be developed and differentiated each time anew. When dealing with contemporaries, this might be a purely formal matter, but in the case of older pieces historical distance will inevitable have to become a topic. Between the composition of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* and the premiere of Marcoll's *Amproprification* #6: *Missa Papae Marcelli, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina*, roughly 460 years have passed.

Listening to the various pieces, one notices that the method of composed amplification in itself sounds more or less distant to the original piece. The most recent piece, *Amproprification #9: Schrift/Bild/Schrift*, Bernhard Lang, could almost pass as a homogeneous composition, as if the same person had composed for instruments and amplification, or maybe as a remix by someone whose aesthetics are close to that of the composer. This is obviously impossible with Palestrina. When applied to a piece from the Renaissance, the method itself emphasizes distance – its own distance, the distance of the composer to his material, and also our distance as listeners in the 21st century.

There is the common notion that this music speaks to us immediately over the centuries. The idea of music being a universal language closely tied to the emotions seems to corroborate this, and the intimate feeling that listeners sometimes experience seems to reach directly into one's heart. Whether this relates to the sublimity of a rather stern religiousness or the expression of human feeling seems to be of secondary importance. Listening to a mass by Palestrina appears to open a window of tranquility and reveal a strict but mobile order that despite its foreignness seems to be very close to us in a peculiar way. Besides, this particular piece is a kind of hit, which probably has to do with the legend that by composing it, Palestrina saved church music from an impending ban of polyphony.

One could say that we are dealing with a type of presence of the past that is at least partly based on misunderstandings. In taking this mass as his material, Marcoll is referring to this presence, and by refracting it yet letting it shine through, his piece amounts to a critical reflection. Because he does not extract formal elements or motives and rework them into a new composition, he can address the piece as such and its effects on us. His material is not so much Palestrina's way of composing but the specific presence of his music in our present, the seemingly immediate accessibility of a polyphonic mass from the 16th century and the attitude it embodies for contemporary experience.

There are numerous ways of dealing with this, among them commentary, critique, alienation, confirmation, irony, and we find examples for all of these. Marcoll treats the parts of the mass very differently, creating a situation where the distance between the layers of the original piece and the amplification varies greatly between clear simultaneous presence and complete amalgamation. Essentially, the formal possibilities are limited: sudden entry and disappearance, crescendo with abrupt truncation, sudden entry with following decrescendo; other forms like vacillating volume are rarely employed. Within these basic forms, however, the possibilities are vast. It is the difference between abrupt and crescendo-like entries, the density of amplified events and their length that make the biggest difference. Sometimes they seem less like amplifications than like a filter that only lets very little through. The shorter the individual events are, the more they affect the sound itself by first making it stutter and then creating something that sounds like electronic distortion.

Sometimes the amplification has affinities to what Carl Dahlhaus called "analytic instrumentation", referring to Anton Webern's instrumentation of the Ricercar in six voices from Bach's *Musical Offering*. In a way this could be generalized into claiming that Marcoll's approach is always analytical, albeit following a great variety of criteria: sometimes it is the structure of the music or the relation between the voices that motivates his interventions, sometimes it is the overall impression, sometimes the text.

His approach is analytical also in another sense: since his method relies on amplifying an electroacoustic signal, it can be applied to recordings just as well as to live performances. However, it does not edit sound files like mashups or Plunderphonics do because it uses the individual voices, which are treated just as individually. In this sense it refers to the inner structure of the score instead of to the piece in its overall sound. Even though there may be little difference between recording and concert with regard to the sound, it does make a huge difference to see and hear musicians and singers from a distance while experiencing Marcoll's own contribution represented by loudspeakers situated close to the audience.

How Marcoll proceeds in each of the individual parts varies greatly: the *Kyrie* is dominated by abruptness and a slowly accelerating pulse that tends to get lost in the *Christe eleison* and gains traction in the second *Kyrie*, finally rushing towards the end where it turns into distortion, which

provides a technologically mediated force that seems more like an infusion of coolness than a critical commentary. As a whole it is a kind of exposition of the method's possibilities and also of the relation the composer assumes towards his material: a deep respect that is well aware of its distance, which he accentuates and orchestrates. Overall, the *Kyrie* appears like an actualization of Palestrina: taken in itself, this music is distant and foreign, it seems to say, but with these means it can be salvaged for the present. At the powerful end it can even flex its muscles, as it were, which considering the text ("Lord, have mercy on us") seems almost like a category mistake.

The *Gloria* has a similar feel but the following profession of faith is not something Marcoll can leave as it is. This difference in approach reminds us that there is a distance in more than one sense: historically and musically but also with regard to Renaissance religiousness. Asking this god for mercy may be acceptable but stating one's faith in the Almighty Father goes too far. The amplification produces only shreds that grow more dense in the second half. This way they create a paradoxical effect: the less it lets pass, the clearer the mass remains intact in itself while the amplifications create an additional layer that oscillates between leftover shreds and interjections from the outside. Their concentration leads to a convergence of the two, leaving the piece itself in shreds and tatters like material in a more straightforward sense.

The contrast to the next part, *Et incarnatus*, could hardly be greater: instead of fragmentation there is a swaying movement that eschew any harshness even in acceleration – birth and becoming human seem to call for greater tenderness. The *Crucifixus* starts with poignancy but remains unamplified for the most part. Here Marcoll's approach is probably least obvious to the listeners because this is the only part where there is a simple projection of visual forms onto the music: the amplifications follow four different cross shapes or rather one shape that progressively rotates by 90 degrees. While this allows little attention to the progression of the piece, the sober distinctness that results seems very appropriate.

The last piece of the *Credo*, *In spiritum sanctum*, leaves the structure of the music all but untouched but its dense impulses lead to a striation of the voices, a kind of vocal güiro. The *Sanctus* continues this and introduces crescendi and decrescendi that extend over the individual pulses. With this technique, the original piece does not remain as a perceptible layer and what we hear is an alienating reworking rather than a commentary. The *Benedictus* with its softer, longer forms that seem to hover in the void is almost diametrically opposed to this, while the first part of the *Agnus Dei*, which is a variation of the *Kyrie* in the original piece, varies the latter's technique.

After all this, the listeners will ask themselves how Marcoll will deal with the end that concludes the mass and provides the final validation for faith and prayer, neither of which he can subscribe to. It starts with a distorted noise the voices have to extract themselves from – from noise to voice –, which slowly expands into recognizable pulses and finally into islands of sound. The individual voices, temporally and sonically, don't quite come together because their entries are never quite aligned and because some sound clear and some quite rough. This leads to a peculiarly swaying motion, like objects floating on eddying water in the light. The last "dona nobis pacem", for which they all reassemble, almost comes as a surprise. It is brittle and rough, but completely lacks the triumphal gesture of the ending of the *Kyrie*. The composer may not be willing to align himself with the celebration of the Almighty but he cannot ironize the prayer for peace either. The group of those who beg for peace has lost the harmony of unquestioned community without completely falling apart, and the roughness of their voices is related to the affliction of a disintegrating world rather than to any faith in redemption. Nobody knows what will come next.