

Congratulating Pascal Dusapin— Recipient of the 2007 Dan David Prize for Contemporary Musical Composition

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Allow me to address you as Dear Friends...

I am very happy that we are hosting among us today, Pascal Dusapin, recipient of the 2007 Dan David Prize for contemporary musical composition.

Firstly, I am happy that the Dan David Prize has chosen our “domain” as being worth of a prize. In a world in which art—an unprofitable activity—is relegated to a secondary place in the public consciousness, if at all, I feel that this kind of recognition encourages and stimulates creative artists. It also compensates them with a positive recognition for their otherwise somewhat secluded and solitary activity. Solitude and peace of mind are surely needed, but it is good to know that society reimburses them, and shows signs of gratitude and need that are not part of the “market” laws.

On the other hand, the choice of Pascal Dusapin as the recipient of this prize gives us a special reason to be proud. I would like to describe the significance of Dusapin’s music—primarily, of course, through the filter of my own subjective experience.

I first got acquainted with Dusapin’s music around twenty years ago: I heard a piece of his chamber music on a record I bought on a street stand in Paris. The name of the piece was *Fist*, a powerful and concise work for a small ensemble. I was impressed by the expressive force of the work, by the plastic quality of the musical setting, and by the strong linear quality showed by the music, despite the complexity and richness of the texture.

Example 1 Recording of *Fist* – 6’ 50”

I understood the music as a flow of dense “lava” that erupted from an expressive need, full of certitude. The logic of the flow, the musical syntax, obeyed a kind of melodic logic—a thread, thick and rich in information, which I felt, however, was linear in character.

My interest in Dusapin’s music continued: I learned about his background as a disciple of Xenakis (the only student to be recognized as such by the master), his affiliation to the heritage of Varèse, and his work with Donatoni. It was clear to me, already at this juncture, that his musical method was linked directly with the Varèse tradition, with no other stylistic or technical filter, so as to create a personal, independent musical idiom.

When talking about the Varèse tradition, I refer not only to the musical-spatial conception so dear to him—music as sound-sculpture in space—but also to a primeval musical expression, an expression that in Varèse’s world was inspired by primitive cultures, real or ideal. What results, I think, is a very direct form of expression, in which the artist bears witness to his confrontation with the basic experiences of life—

a sense of being in front of an abyss, of experiencing a “limit situation,” to use a term coined by Karl Jaspers.

At the beginning, we heard a work whose title refers to a musical expression, a musical convention, like *Coda*, which was written more or less at the same time. *Attacca* refers in music to the anacrusis, to the upbeat, to the landing-connecting into the next, principal section. But it has an inherent sense of warning, of “beware of...” Don’t we hear in this music a tragic premonition of what will next befall us: the fatality of our destiny?

Example 2 *Attacca*

Doesn’t this quasi-martial music (trumpets and drums) announce an inevitable catastrophe?

To return to my personal experience of Dusapin’s works—after becoming acquainted with his other works (the wonderful *Hop’* for ensembles, etc.), I was surprised, in the late 1990s, to hear a work for cello and orchestra that had won a prize at the Leonard Bernstein international music composition competition in Jerusalem. The name of the piece was *Celo* (“Heavens” in Italian). I was caught unaware by what seemed to me to be a turn to a more directly melodic, quasi-modal method of writing. Some years later, when I suggested the performance of *Coda* to one of our country’s ensembles (which we performed again with our students two years ago), I saw the interesting connection between the thick line and the massive sonorities of *Coda*’s conclusion to its direct melodic expression, and also its strong inclination toward the Phrygian mode, with its archaic and Oriental associations. This same Phrygian mode is also very strongly felt in Dusapin’s *Attacca*.

Example 3 Recording of *Coda*: from 9’00 to end [11’30”]

This trend toward a clean melodic line, enriched in various heterophonic ways, affirmed for me the independence and uniqueness of Dusapin’s way, his independence from the structured methods and strategies of the so-called avant-garde. It is interesting to note how similar and disciplined those who claim to struggle for new, liberal means of expression can be. True, expression—in order to be true—has to be unique. But significance and signifier must correspond; each new utterance needs to use a new means to deliver the meaning. Many times, however, we see that things get mixed up. The human being (even an artist) descends into conventions and mannerisms that look “new” but are actually what we (or others) anticipate as “new.” It is clichéd avant-garde, and not the unique expression that we are seeking.

As Dusapin demonstrates, the simpler means: pitch, rhythmic gesture, melody, sometimes express a more novel technique when they are involved in a committed and expressive situation.

This process, of passing organically from a sculptural sound conception to a melodic-linear one, has to take two distinctive characteristics of Dusapin’s music into account: on the one hand, his increasing tendency to create in the dramatic-vocal genre, and, on the other, what I will call an “existential” meaning of the sound utterance. We will see that these two factors are very much interlinked.

In 1989, Dusapin wrote his first opera: *Roméo et Juliette*. This was followed by *Medeamaterial* after the libretto of Heiner Müller, *To Be Sung* after Gertrude Stein, *Perelà (uomo di fumo)* and, last year, *Faustus, The Last Night* with his own

libretto based on Christopher Marlowe (Shakespeare's contemporary) and other sources. To these we might also add his 1992 "opératorio" *La Melancholia*.

This focus on dramatical-musical works could be explained by the evolution of the musical material into different methods of "singing"—a little like the trend away from polyphony to basso continuo monody at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the first operas and oratorios were created. The monody that appears in Dusapin's works, however, is imbued with the multiform, quasi-chaotic and, perhaps, "unconscious" nature of the earlier sound sculpture. Suddenly the paramodal melodies sound different, new, and fresh.

And, yet, melody is subject to dramatic and expressive gestures in a very abstract manner. For example, near the end of *Faustus, The Last Night*, we hear a quartet that includes sheer shouting: a magnificent, very extended coloratura soprano shouting that may be unique in the opera repertoire. It is melody (and provides counterpoint to the other simultaneously singing characters), but, at the same time, it is abstract sound. In fact, this, as many other instances (see, for example, the 1993 work *Comœdia*, after Dante), combine the instrumental-abstract sound material with a linear-vocal one that share the same gestural expressive character.

Example 4 Recording of *Comœdia*, I – 2"45"

Another important aspect of Dusapin's music mentioned earlier, also connected to this return to basic musical materials, is what I termed "existential" meaning. Paraphrasing Sartre, I could say that the existence of sound, in this context, precedes its essence, its meaning. It is as if the composer throws a dice, and listens to the results of his throw—he reacts to them, shapes them differently, etc. This impression ("every sound, rhythm or sound combination is worthy by itself") is very much present for me in his piano *Études*, for example.

But there is another, "existential" meaning to all this: we hear the mechanisms of speech also in non-vocal music, and in music where there is no verbal text. A word, the subsequent listening to it, the thinking about it, the reaction, and—perhaps most importantly—the silence. I feel that Dusapin's music respects silence more than most other types of music. I once heard a writer quoting an old Chinese proverb: When you write a word, you must be sure it's worth more than the silence that existed before.... Not only that: in *À quia*, a concerto for piano and orchestra (2002), some of the climaxes, dramatically speaking, are the silence itself. The meaning of the title is: to remain speechless.

As a parallel, in the domain of the drama, we can give as an example a different kind of silence, a conceptual-philosophical one. At the end of *Faustus, The Last Night*, Togod (an imaginary personage whose name combines a literal meaning ["to-God"] with an inversion of Beckett's "Godot") tells Faust—who desperately seeks "Light" during the entire opera (life)—the truth: there is nothing, nothing, that's it....

And here we reach the point that seems to me the most fundamental when describing Dusapin's method of expression: apart from its largely melancholic and lachrymose nature, there is this sense of wonder, of speechless reaction to the world, which results in the uncompromised approach of listening to every aural phenomenon. We could perhaps say that much of it strives toward silence as a goal. But this is an active, or should I say, a screaming silence—a kind of realization in music of the Sartrean dichotomy of being and nothingness.

Nothing is granted, nothing is clear or explained in advance. Everything is subject to an “astonished” inquiry. So, here, the “existential” musical composition joins the “phenomenological” strategy for action: the absence of a preconceived strategy, the need to react, in “real time” to every detail of sound perception. The present is thus more present, more unpredictable, more alive...

I congratulate Mr. Dusapin for receiving the Dan David Prize for contemporary musical composition, and I hope that he will travel yet further on his creative journey, and continue telling us, in his new works, about the still unknown silences.

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