

## Music, History, Autonomy, and Presentness: When Composers and Philosophers Cross Swords

Martin Kaltenecker and François Nicolas, eds. 2006. *Penser l'oeuvre musicale au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: avec, sans ou contre l'histoire?* Paris: Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine. 134 pp. ISBN: 2-9516440-9-4 (paper)

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## MUSIC, HISTORY, AUTONOMY, AND PRESENTNESS: WHEN COMPOSERS AND PHILOSOPHERS CROSS SWORDS

*Danick Trottier*

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Martin Kaltenecker and François Nicolas, eds. 2006. *Penser l'œuvre musicale au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: avec, sans ou contre l'histoire?* Paris: Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine. 134 pp. ISBN: 2-9516440-9-4 (paper).

Thinking the Musical Work in Twentieth Century: With, without, or against History? is the translation I might suggest for the French collection of essays reviewed here. The volume follows a seminar given by Gilles Dulong and François Nicolas at l'École Normale Supérieure in 2003–4 (under the same title), and another by Martin Kaltenecker at the Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine in Paris ("La musique du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: l'hypothèse de la continuité"). As the editors indicate in their introduction, eight essays, divided into two parts, make up the volume. "L'hypothèse de la continuité: Variations à partir de Jacques Rancière" (7–38) by Martin Kaltenecker opens the discussion. The second, "Généalogie, archéologie, historicité et historialités musicales" (39–49), is by François Nicolas. There follows a heated debate between Jacques Rancière and François Nicolas, the former with "Autonomie et historicisme: La fausse alternative" (51–59), the latter with the response "Comment développer (et non déconstruire) l'autonomie si contestée de la musique?" (61–70). Four further essays constitute the second part of the volume: "Le compositeur de la Renaissance: Son discours sur l'œuvre et sur l'interprète dans les dédicaces, préfaces et avertissements" (71–84) by Isabelle His, "La présence de Bach" (85–94) by Antoine Hennion, "Notes sur l'engagement de la musique, et en particulier sur *Un survivant de Varsovie*" (95–109) by Esteban Buch, and "L'émancipation gnostique du timbre chez Schoenberg" (111–29) by Hugues Dufourt.

Music history as either break or continuity, structured according to the legacy of twentieth-century composition, defines the scientific quest behind the volume. The idea is to investigate the extent to which we can judge current musical creativity as belonging to history or to a new artistic conception—one shaped in the ontology of today. But the general feeling that arises from the eight essays is that the whole enterprise, especially in the second part, has been pushed too far. Although the high quality of the texts should be noted, the problem lies in the discrepancy between the two parts, the first being tighter than the second. In other words, the reader may feel that the main idea was to focus attention on the debate within François Nicolas and Gilles Dulong's seminar (the first part). This is why the following lines focus on that debate. Two facts explain my choice.

First, it's not every day that musical literature gives us the chance to read a compelling debate between composers and philosophers. What is at stake in this exchange is the way we should envisage current musical creativity. As we will see, current concepts of history and autonomy generate a multitude of questions, whether about the possibility that models shaped in the last centuries can be continued, or that musical creativity can be renewed in twenty-first century. Second, the debate engages a constellation of current ideas and concepts from the humanities and social sciences, most notably from philosophy, historiography, and politic sciences. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière, author of *Le partage du sensible* and professor emeritus of Université de Paris VIII, is the scholar who crosses swords with François Nicolas. It is not my aim in the paragraphs below to discuss his philosophy in detail, just as it is beyond the range of the present essay to depict the influence the French philosopher Alain Badiou has had on François Nicolas.<sup>1</sup> According to François Cusset (2008, 106), Rancière and Badiou hold important scholarly positions in American university departments of literature and philosophy, and yet contemporary musicology maintains a bias toward French theory of the 1960s and 1970s. Like the historian François Hartog (another important scholar whom we will encounter further), these current scholars have much to say about our contemporary world and its new political issues. Perhaps the time has come to open a new conceptual discussion, one that takes into account the renewal of French theory (i.e., in the aftermath of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and many others) since the 1990s. It is with this in mind that I briefly survey the second part of the book. In the opening text of the second part, Isabelle His investigates the concept of the composer as the owner of his works during the Renaissance: dedications, prefaces, and forewords circumscribe the historical inquiry. In tandem with the new position that composers gained within institutions such as the church, her conclusions tend toward the idea of the musical work as a category that encompasses invention and a kind of individual expression. While we readers discover the process by which music authorship was established in early music practices, we have to take into account how far we are from the main purpose of the volume. The same can be said for Antoine Hennion's essay. A sociologist, he returns to ideas he developed in *La Passion musicale* and *La Grandeur de Bach: L'amour de la musique en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (co-written with Joël-Marie Fauquet). The authority of Bach in twentieth-century music is used to recall what we already know: the double status of the work as past reshaped by present. At least the reader feels that Hennion attempts to build bridges across the problematic framework of the volume: appropriation of the past always creates for him an irreversible distance from it, with the past work then being subject to a process of re-creation in present time.

Esteban Buch explores the aesthetic and compositional problems that came after the Second World War with the idea of *musique engagée*. At the core of his investigation is the question of political intentionality in music: how

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<sup>1</sup> Author of the *Petit manuel d'inesthétique*, Alain Badiou is professor emeritus at l'École normale supérieure in addition to having a career as dramaturge and activist.

could one grasp political statements without a text? Another question looms: is there a dualistic posture in the fact that a listener could potentially enjoy a music that carries political content? Buch diagnoses this moral problem in focusing his attention on the debates around *A Survivor from Warsaw*. His inquiry is guided by the difficulty René Leibowitz encountered when he tried to transpose Sartre's concept of engagement onto a musical level. As a specialist on Schoenberg and political meanings in music (*Le Cas Schönberg: Naissance de l'avant-garde musicale*), Buch highlights the conceptual background of this debate. And finally, in a compelling text that reflects his background as a composer, Hugues Dufourt develops the idea of a Gnostic emancipation of timbre in Schoenberg's music. This investigation is delimited by the quality of the sound with both metaphysical and aesthetic implications. During the expressionist period, this change in musical composition was emancipated through works such as *Die glückliche Hand* and *Die Jakobsleiter*. Coming from a spectral composer, this interest in a timbral reading of Schoenberg's atonal quest will surprise no one. But as Dufourt showed us, as a philosopher and author of *Musique, pouvoir, écriture*, the correlation between musical choices and philosophical ideas—in cultural, metaphysical, and ontological ways—holds a crucial place in understanding the depth of meanings that govern music. From this perspective, Dufourt tries to understand how far Schoenberg went in the perspective of a music shaped by timbre, which means that all the parameters are governed by sound colour, which in turn operates as the manifestation of a new musical consciousness. Like Buch's essay, this last essay is a major contribution to the study of twentieth-century music. Yet the question remains whether those texts could have been better placed in another volume, one on Schoenberg for example.

## A FEW CONCEPTS

Before plunging into the debate, I will start with concepts that lay the epistemological foundations of the volume. While the overwhelming importance of history sets the tone of the volume, the discourse on the autonomy of music presents the other side of the same coin. History is envisaged in this volume as the nexus of our understanding of music. This situation leads us to the question of whether or not musical creativity can free itself from historical conditions that extend into the present. Composers argue for the autonomy of musical creativity, whereas scholars locate this creativity within the limits of tradition. As we will see later, the questions that arise with such notions tend toward the breaks or the continuations in historical narratives that we theorize and construct. The problem can be summarized in the following question: to free musical creativity in the present, do we have to place autonomy and history in opposition to each other, so that autonomy can be detached from history? Insofar as history and autonomy are intrinsically linked, because the latter was shaped in a historical process at the beginning of the nineteenth century (music as a distinct entity with new technical devices and ontological conditions), it is difficult today to see musical autonomy as something distinct from

history, something that can be renewed and investigated for its own contemporary richness. Indeed, autonomy is understood as something established, *un fait acquis* that comes from the inheritance of music history. Hence autonomy is submerged by the very historical process that governed it, instead of being something that each period can rethink. Is it possible to distinguish history and autonomy, to see one, autonomy, as a process that stands independently with its own logic and its own development? The question is a heavy one if we take into account just how our musical consciousness of Western music is fostered by the absorption of historical knowledge. Musicological studies that present autonomy as a distinct entity are difficult to find. That is one of the problems the debate addresses.

With their placement of a quote from *Foundations of Music History* on the back cover of the volume, the editors reveal what they had in mind to counter the problematic concept of autonomy. The passage is taken from the chapter on value-judgment after Dahlhaus has discussed Weber's distinction between value-relation and value-judgment: "The distinction between historical and aesthetic significance is by no means useless; we must only bear in mind that it is vague and provisional, and try less to make a hard and fast dichotomy of it than to understand the dialectics that it gives rise to" (1991, 95). If this quote is justified, this is not a reason to omit the title of Dahlhaus's book, and the two next sentences that make up the whole passage: "As we shall see, the canon of things 'belonging to history' is largely presented to the historian 'from without'; and, to identify this outward connection, the term 'aesthetic' as opposed to 'historical' is a quite handy label for things that must inevitably precede an historical study, even though not all the features that contribute to the establishment of a musical canon are aesthetic in nature." Hence Dahlhaus discusses one of the conflicted relations to the musical canon in his study of music history. He is interested in how we construct our own points of reference to shape a representation of music history. It would have been justified to discuss this perspective in the introduction of the volume, just to show how rich the dialectical relationship between autonomy and history is. This relationship, too, is sensible insofar as musical tradition within our academic institutions is embraced in a troubling way. Not only are modernist musical works shaped by this dialectical relationship, and not only do composers confront it every day in their *métier* (i.e., the inheritance of technique versus the renewal of creativity), but historians too cannot escape it *vis-à-vis* their own understanding of musical works. To put it simply, we are all heirs of the musical process that led to the autonomy of our artistic field.

Yet, with the dawn of a new century and our growing distance from modernist discourse, perhaps the circumstances are in place for us to envisage new ways to forge beyond the relationship between history and autonomy. It is now necessary to consider the crucial differences between twentieth-century debates on autonomy and new twenty-first-century contexts; furthermore, there is room for hope in examining history and autonomy with new and refreshed theories. To think like this is certainly utopian, but to do so matters greatly, because what is at stake is how to think of the musical work today, historically and

aesthetically. The possibility that musical artifacts create meaning strengthened by our contemporary world is the origin of most issues addressed in the debate. Thus, in the opposition between a composer and a philosopher, we can understand why that debate takes a dialectical perspective: the composer, François Nicolas, defends autonomy as an unfinished project, whereas the philosopher, Jacques Rancière, argues for the same ideological ground that has determined artistic creativity from the eighteenth century until today. It's not false to see here a never-ending debate between artists and scholars, the former—not all of them—claiming a singularity and a present freed from historical determinations, the latter—not all of them—confining contemporary artistic output in the boundaries of historical contingencies.

Regime is another concept that dominates the debate, one that belongs to current French thought. Regime as a concept encapsulates the conditions of thought that specifically engage our values and relations to time. François Hartog, director of studies at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales de Paris (EHESS), has developed the concept under the label *régime d'historicité* (regime of historicity). His *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* focuses on how timelessness is built into a historical era. The concept, as Hartog argues, is related to temporal order in Foucault's legacy, specifically from his inaugural speech at the Collège de France in 1971, *L'ordre du discours* (see Foucault 1972). How history plays a role in the consciousness of an epoch could be a way to reveal the aims pursued by the regime of historicity. Hence, the matter through which present time articulates its relation to past and future is subject to scrutiny:

Formulated from our contemporary moment, the hypothesis of a regime of historicity should allow the deployment of a historical questioning of our own relation to time, historical in the sense that the interrogation plays on different layers of time, by initiating a dialectical process between present and past or, better, many pasts, possibly very distant, in time and space. This movement is its only specificity. Dealing with various experiences of time, the regime of historicity would become a heuristic tool, helpful to have a better apprehension, not of time, but of all the times or the time as a whole, here and there, when, precisely, the articulation of past, present, and future comes to lose their clarity.<sup>2</sup>

The operation thus highlights the specific nature of history for present values.

The concept of regime also occupies a fruitful place in Rancière's theory of arts, where art history is divided into three *grands récits*: the ethic regime of images from Platonic tradition; the poetic or representative regime from

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<sup>2</sup> "Formulée à partir de notre contemporain, l'hypothèse du régime d'historicité devrait permettre le déploiement d'un questionnement historien sur notre rapport au temps. Historien, en ce sens qu'il joue sur plusieurs temps, en instaurant un va-et-vient entre le présent et le passé ou, mieux, des passés, éventuellement très éloignés, tant dans le temps que dans l'espace. Ce mouvement est sa seule spécificité. Partant de diverses expériences du temps, le régime d'historicité se voudrait un outil heuristique, aidant à mieux appréhender, non le temps, tous les temps ou le tout du temps, ici et là, quand viennent, justement, à perdre de leur évidence les articulations du passé, du présent et du futur" (2003, 27). All translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.

Aristotelian tradition; and the most significant for our discussion, the aesthetic regime after the eighteenth century. In Rancière's thought, the concept of regime finds another meaning: the interconnection of art with the global context in which it is produced, that allows us to highlight what different cultural forms have in common—in other words, a regime of arts aims to conceptualize how the arts belong to a specific practice that influences their historical and ontological features. No doubt a regime of arts as a new heuristic tool allows Rancière to envisage the historical development of arts in an overview. It is necessary to mention here that Rancière is a post-Marxist thinker; as such, a political interpretation reveals its presence in the way he conceptualizes cultural artifacts. Even though Rancière is concerned mostly with cinema, he agreed to act as respondent to François Nicolas's ideas.

This presence of Rancière explains why Martin Kaltenecker, in a long and sometimes weighty essay ("L'hypothèse de la continuité"), has felt the necessity to ground the idea of an aesthetic regime in music history. According to him, musicology asserts the concept of a regime of arts, applied to musical realities that are seen as symptomatic moments in the history of music. Thus, in the historical development of music, such events as Beethoven's individualization of musical language, Berlioz's quest for orchestral timbre, Wagnerian's harmonic revolution, as well as graceful moments in twentieth-century music with Stravinsky, Varèse, Cage, are now explained under the heuristic operation of the aesthetic regime.

Foremost, one determinant consequence of that regime is identified in its relation to history: "The recycling of a past of arts always re-read and re-played."<sup>3</sup> The past feeds the present in its needs for explanation and justification: witness the Second Viennese School and most of the composers in the avant-garde trend. The production of a proper genealogy spreads as one of the cornerstones of the modernist artistic consciousness. If this idea is a commonplace of aesthetic history, it is nevertheless reshaped by Kaltenecker through a more persuasive function: "Thus, music bears witness to the disquieting power of interpretation, which we always need to be ahead of and to defuse."<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of what came before reveals an infinite quest for artistic self-justification. Since macro-historical interpretation has a bad reputation in a postmodern knowledge troubled by holistic views, it will always be easy to criticize someone who chooses this kind of approach. For the debate, however, one of the important ideas in the text occurs when the aesthetic regime is used to understand what it is to "come after." Kaltenecker points out that the past has to be envisaged as the *modus operandi* of musical creativity under an aesthetic regime: "More music will be destabilized . . . and the imaginary annexation of a past will be stronger."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Le recyclage d'un passé de l'art toujours relu et remis en scène" (11).

<sup>4</sup> "La musique témoigne ainsi du pouvoir inquiétant de l'interprétation, qu'il faut toujours devancer et désamorcer" (14).

<sup>5</sup> "Plus la musique sera déstabilisée . . . , et plus forte sera l'annexion imaginaire d'un passé" (29).

What about the simplistic holistic approach that the extraction of facts obviously implies? One cannot watch how Kaltenecker mixes historical facts that belong to romantic and modernist music without apprehension. Can the musical consciousness of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries be the same in a broader aesthetic regime? Maybe, but to focus only on the tensions carried by the development of musical content is also to take a dominant historicist posture, thanks to Adorno's shadowy presence. In relation to a progressive agenda, this analytical approach is always a reduction that misreads history, in diachronicity instead of synchronicity, although Kaltenecker sees composers as the ones who promoted such misreading—a concept that he borrows from Bloom, but without references to its theorization in music theory.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, no doubt Kaltenecker is obsessed by a sense of rupture beneath the authoritative view of teleology: the long trajectory of musical creativity is strengthened by significant discontinuities in the operation of musical revolutions. We could then ask the question, an aesthetic regime is certainly an efficient tool, but what does it teach us beyond what we already know—a long overview of canonic gestures linked to our historical consciousness?

### FRANÇOIS NICOLAS'S POSITION

The first essay written by François Nicolas is certainly the most complex and audacious in terms of how a composer deals with music history. *Polytechnicien*, professor at l'École Normale de Musique in Paris and key figure at IRCAM, Nicolas attempts the arduous task of defining the contemporary moment as a quest in its own right and as a never-ending project. It is necessary for the composer Nicolas to position himself against history in consideration of the overwhelming presence of historicity. With historicity, the present belongs to a category in which time is governed by the past. As the composer is limited merely to a figure by which the past is recreated and remade, Nicolas diagnoses the danger of enslavement to the past. Rather, the contemporary moment should be shaped by presentness. The problem for Nicolas can be summed up thus: turned towards history, how can a composer build the categories for the contemporary world as a time and place demanding its own concepts, statements, and projects? It appears necessary for composers to escape a dictatorship discourse linked to the past. Thus, to think of the contemporary moment as a unique project is the starting point if composers seek to gain distance from past.

Yet, as a composer, Nicolas knows just how music education is shaped by historical consciousness. Therefore, a break with history is certainly a *passage nécessaire* (rite of passage), but not by moving away from the tradition through which a composer develops his musical skills. The subtlety of Nicolas's thought points in this direction: a meditative perspective between past and present is possible via the contemporary moment as a project grounded in presentness. Nicolas suggests the idea of a *tenaille singulière* (a singular stranglehold) between historicism (when everything depends on history) and postmodernism

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph Straus, "Toward a Theory of Musical Influence," in *Remaking the Past*, 1–20.



(when history perverts the present). The question then arises for composers: “How to avoid the importance of historical determinations (as a certain brand of postmodernism would have us to believe) while at the same time defending a world of music that is autonomous in the fact of hypothetical historical requirements (the least hypothetical ‘laws of History,’ which should be ‘decisive,’ yet without knowing how to achieve that)?”<sup>7</sup> History as the mainstream by which composers negotiate their relation to the musical realm remains the most difficult fact for Nicolas.

Therefore, for Nicolas, presentness is a category to be fostered through its own devices. Although history is an attractive force, it is no longer the focus of a constant break by which composers’ choices are justified: tradition can no longer be burned, as it was in the case of a *tabula rasa à la Boulez*. Yet, as Nicolas demonstrated in the 1990s, musical tradition as an inspiring force can ground something new. In *La singularité Schoenberg* (1997, 123–95), he revealed how *Moses and Aaron* has been an attractive piece for him. In other words, Nicolas as a scholar comes back again and again to the spectre of musical tradition. This double posture seems to be justified through the necessity of understanding his creative inflexion as a composer—witness his work at l’École Normale Supérieure. We are, thus, confronted with a common figure in our contemporary field of composition, because composers are also thinkers and historians. But to say that you must free yourself from history while you plunge yourself daily into a historic field can generate doubts.

With an agenda oriented toward the fusion of composition and scholarship, Nicolas has found a useful weapon, what he calls *intellectualité musicale* (musical intellectualism). Difficult to define, and without avoiding opacity, musical intellectuality tries to position *le musicien pensif*. This second concept can best be translated as the thinking musician, one who configures his musical project under the determinations of an intellectuality applied to music. In *La singularité Schoenberg*, musical intellectuality was designated as “a projection of musical thinking in the language of the musician” and as “an act of naming”<sup>8</sup> for the musician, which I understand as a way to intellectualize the experience of the musician-composer. In the essay reviewed here, Nicolas clarifies the concept through the idea that the musician is not the subject. Rather, it is the music that gives the matter and the subject. *Pensivité musicienne* (musician’s thought), another concept, appears as a synonym for musical intellectuality: “It denotes this musical thinking that is deployed from both inside and outside the world of music . . . , which means in the way it strategically organizes its interiority in relation to the tasks specific to the musician as compared to the musicologist, the latter having a discourse structurally external to the world of music.”<sup>9</sup>

7 “Comment ne pas récuser l’importance des déterminations historiques (comme un certain post-modernisme voudrait nous le faire croire) tout en soutenant un monde de la musique qui soit autonome par rapport à de supposés impératifs historiques (les non moins supposées ‘lois de l’Histoire,’ celles qui sont censées ‘trancher,’ on ne sait d’ailleurs trop comment)?” (40).

8 “L’intellectualité musicale projette la pensée musicale dans la langue du musicien... . Son travail peut être spécifié comme travail de nomination” (1997, 60).

9 “Elle désigne cette pensée musicienne qui se déploie à la fois en intériorité et en extériorité au monde de la musique ... en tant qu’elle ordonne stratégiquement sa pensée propre aux tâches

This last quote reveals the extent to which we are dealing with a dichotomy sustained by a form of Manichaeism in musical intelligibility: a thought from the real world versus a thought from an equivocal position. From this perspective, Nicolas's strategy cannot be hidden: he wants to combine his double position as composer and scholar, a strategy that seems to succeed but runs into problems when musicology is targeted as the troubling outsider for the project. The fact that he separates his work from musicology and music history underlines his strategy to ground his thought in another moral issue—artistic creativity. Who will blame Nicolas for trying to singularize the composer's task as a participant instead of a witness within music history? But things would be less ambiguous and less ideological if Nicolas were to accept in the meantime that he is also playing on the field of musicology, as he demonstrated with his studies on Schoenberg. Thus, his categorization of musical knowledge divided by borders is more porous than that for which he advocates.

Likewise, the main problem for Nicolas is the history of historians; for him, this constraining viewpoint results in a confrontation with the work of musicians because it denies the singularity on which they are working. Then the composer has the task of defining his own conception of history, a conception that does hinder him—from taking a position against history on the side of historicism, but on the side of history inside of musical practice. Nicolas develops his main argument in tandem with the idea of the musician's thought: musical works are the main focus of the intellectualism. Therefore, the issue is not the extent to which the musician must deal with history. Rather, it is how musical works negotiate their presentness in connection with history, into which they enter as part of the world. Each work unfolds in a circular process, albeit rooted by a historical continuum. This is the space where history cannot be burned or put away: "I will limit myself to saying that the musical work is not only a project in action . . . , but that it is also a measure of its own singularity and distance from other musical works . . . A musical work . . . thinks music in action not only by bringing new suggestions, but by adjusting these new suggestions at the 'angle of inflection' they extend beyond the work. That is to say that a musical work never goes by itself, and knows this for certain: each work adds something."<sup>10</sup>

Nicolas, in relation to his contemporary project, interprets the relation between history and the musician as a never-ending rivalry. Whereas music is an autonomous reality governed by its own logic and practice, history cannot be envisaged in the same terms. Far from a cultural practice, the logic of history for Nicolas belongs to a conceptualization of what the past was. Nor can history claim to be a world with its own reality. So the question about the tricky

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intérieures qui spécifient le musicien par rapport au musicologue, lequel a un discours en extériorité structurale à ce monde de la musique" (45).

<sup>10</sup> "Je me contenterai de relever que l'œuvre musicale non seulement est un projet en acte . . . , mais qu'elle est aussi mesure de sa singularité et de son écart par rapport aux autres œuvres musicales . . . Une œuvre musicale . . . pense la musique en acte non seulement en ajoutant de nouvelles propositions, mais en ajustant ces nouvelles propositions à 'l'angle d'inflexion' qu'elles forment par rapport à la trajectoire qu'elles prolongent. C'est dire qu'une œuvre musicale ne va jamais seule, et qu'elle le sait bien: toute œuvre ajoute quelque chose" (44).

bridge between history and music occurs on the side of autonomy: this concept finally provides Nicolas with the tool to underscore the overwhelming presence of history. His last argument highlights the nexus of the problem he wants to solve: historicity carries a logic that misinterprets what music is about. For Nicolas, musicians have to recast autonomy and protect what constitutes the beauty of music as a singular presence. In fact, Nicolas restricts his discourse to the figure of the composer. The tricky fusion between autonomy and historical development is simply switched in the presentness of musical creativity, a solution on which Rancière builds his critical response.

### JACQUES RANCIÈRE'S CRITICAL POSTURE

Whereas Nicolas is concerned with the contemporaneity of musical creativity in addition to past music, Rancière grounds his thought in a holistic approach governed by more than two millennia. The problem for Rancière lies in the exclusive position Nicolas defends, specifically regarding music and history being articulated between two opposing forces: inclusion, through which music establishes a continuity with history in terms of time; and exclusion, in terms of space because history is not, unlike music, an autonomous world. Hence Nicolas's categorization tends towards a distinction between a good and bad history of music, the latter being negative for its promotion of a musical absence. Rancière argues that the opposition of two worlds of music is the result of an arbitrary agenda governed by a simple strategy. By adopting this strategy Nicolas lacks the overview in which his position is rooted: "[This position] appears under the form of a simple opposition: the history is the exteriority, the authority of heteronomy, the music the interiority, the authority of autonomy. Then the problem emerges: through which context does this division operate? We could accept, at least at first approach, that exteriority is opposed to interiority. But things become more peculiar when it has to do with knowing in which space the boundaries between the two are traced."<sup>11</sup> Who will blame a philosopher in asking such paramount questions as these?

Rancière then sharpens his argument within the idea of an aesthetic regime. In that regime, musical interiority results from the repulsion of exteriority, a process that underlines Nicolas's thought: "This interiority is a normative idea that has not always existed. That music defines an autonomous world and that this world in the end is justified in opposition to an exteriority or heterogeneity, such an idea is no older than two hundred years in age."<sup>12</sup> Like Dahlhaus's discussion of musical autonomy, Rancière's conception of autonomy belongs to a certain historicity. To exemplify his argument, Rancière analyses an extract

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<sup>11</sup> "[Cette position] apparaît sous la forme d'une opposition simple: l'histoire y est l'extérieur, l'instance d'hétéronomie, la musique l'intérieur, l'instance d'autonomie. Le problème se pose alors: au sein de quoi cette division est-elle opérée? On veut bien admettre, au moins en première approche, que l'extérieur s'oppose à l'intérieur. Mais les choses deviennent plus obscures quand il s'agit de savoir dans quel espace est tracée la frontière entre les deux" (51).

<sup>12</sup> "Cette intériorité est une idée normative qui n'a pas toujours existé. Que la musique définisse un monde autonome et que ce monde se définisse en opposition à un extérieur ou un hétérogène, cette idée n'a pas plus de deux cents ans d'âge" (51).

from *The Philosophy of New Music*. It is the moment when Adorno, in his thesis on Schoenberg and progress, develops his teleological view of musical matters in the aftermath of Beethoven's last works; Adorno emphasizes the "injunctions" that composers inherit from the Beethoven paradigm. The idea of breaks in art history allows Rancière to conceptualize the novelty of an aesthetic regime from the nineteenth century onwards. This regime is characterized by coexistence, art being divided in terms of classics and moderns. That explains why the arts are subject to a process of autonomy, which means a constitutive distance from heteronomy followed by a strong conception of historicity. Time and space are, too, redefined in terms of autonomy, but also in terms of coexistence.

But the aesthetic regime in its quest for autonomy does not come without difficulties. Rancière points out the large realm opened by autonomy: the boundaries prescribed by exteriority disappear. The result is a situation where artistic definition is governed from the inside. If everything is possible, then the task of the artist who progresses into that world is to define it in terms of limits, of what is possible and impossible instead of simply "anything goes." Adorno's philosophy and Nicolas's intellectuality tend towards this historical determination of limiting and excluding. What defines musical autonomy in the end for Rancière is the new reality in which all the possibilities cohabitate, but are at the same time restricted by musicians' actions. To distance interiority from exteriority, autonomy becomes the law of musical development in the sense of limitational rules. Therefore, the exclusion finds an explanation in the fact that to limit music one must project oneself into the future; one has to define which path music takes and how its essence exemplifies controlling aims.

The autonomy of art reveals two faces in relation to history: everything is possible since we are no longer in the representation regime, but art must be oriented from the inside to avoid anarchy. Normativity becomes the new credo, the one by which artists restrict the arts in terms of a determinate future. In so doing, they try to escape the nature of coexistence at the basis of the aesthetic regime. Hence Rancière describes his central idea for the present time:

This autonomy, thus, finds itself in suspension between two historicities: that of the imaginary museum where everything can enter and that of the tendentious auto-suppression of art. It is perfectly possible to live between the two historicities. But in general, we don't like that. We seek a compromise. The general formulation for compromise has a name. It is called modernism. Modernism is the conceptual setting that tends to reconcile the two contrasting historicities. Modernism wants the autonomy of arts, but it wants it without the conditions under which autonomy becomes imaginable . . . Modernism wants a simple rupture between heteronomy and autonomy, without a change in the regime of historicity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Cette autonomie se trouve ainsi suspendue entre deux historicités: celle du musée imaginaire où tout peut entrer et celle de l'auto-suppression tendancielle de l'art. Il est parfaitement possible de vivre entre les deux historicités. Mais en général on n'aime pas cela. On cherche des compromis. La formule générale du compromis a un nom. Elle s'appelle modernisme. Le modernisme est le montage conceptuel qui tente de concilier les historicités opposées. Il veut l'autonomie de l'art, mais il la veut

As a project, modernism has developed an infinite dialectic between history as coexistence and history as exclusion. It is why Rancière sees contemporary art as being conflicted by two regimes of historicity, something Nicolas misinterprets because he does not see to what extent he is part of the historical determination that forces him, in the end, to oppose music and history.

The central point that Rancière wants to make at the outset of the discussion is that by avoiding the principles of the regime to embrace what they see as another history, artists prescribe new exclusions. In sum, they misunderstand the whole picture. The fact that Rancière's field of study is politics forces us to take into account the political resonance behind his ideas. What Rancière as philosopher seems to avoid—and he acknowledges that he speaks on the side of philosophy—is the musical education through which a musician becomes composer. Likewise, historical and contextual determinations appear in this text as an authoritative concept that envelops the entire realm of artistic output. The concluding idea in relation to the aesthetic regime seems to be that artists are subjugated to injunctions and forces over which they have less control, or none at all. What a sad and annoying situation, if this is the case! Is this a post-Marxist conception of arts telling us that the regime of arts is governed by compelling and historical patterns that no one can stop? I do not want to caricature Rancière's thought, because in fact he is asking relevant questions for art history. But when tracing certain critical issues, he inevitably underscores the reduction of such a holistic approach. To interpret artists as prisoners of the replication of infinite rules can generate frustrations. The problem in Rancière's position lies in the overdetermination of history in understanding what art is about.

Nonetheless, at the end of his essay, the lover of arts overlaps with the philosopher in a refreshing position:

To leave this discourse between two versions of the same narrative, we must deconstruct both the simple conception of history and the simple conception of autonomy. When François Nicolas opposes the historicist history of music with a history of “music alone facing its destiny in all its autonomy,” this autonomy is itself already twice historicized: in the idea of assuming a destiny and in the idea of a “solitude” attributable to the music as art. To obtain this solitude and this destiny of art, two conditions are necessary. First, it is necessary for music to exist as a commonplace including Palestrina and the *Ars Nova* as easily as Lachenmann or Sciarino . . . Second, we must push the idea of the existence of history as an achievement of a unique destiny of historical agencies. We must have a co-belonging that denies all superiority of one time over another.<sup>14</sup>

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sans les conditions qui la rendent pensable . . . Il veut une rupture simple entre hétéronomie et autonomie, sans changement de régime d'historicité” (57).

<sup>14</sup> “Pour sortir du renvoi entre ces deux versions d'un même récit, il faut défaire à la fois la conception simple de l'histoire et la conception simple de l'autonomie. Quand François Nicolas oppose à l'histoire historiciste de la musique une histoire de ‘la musique seule face à son destin en toute autonomie,’ cette autonomie elle-même est déjà deux fois historicisée : dans l'idée d'un destin à assumer et dans l'idée d'une ‘solitude’ propre à la musique comme art. Pour qu'il y ait cette solitude et ce destin d'un art, deux conditions sont nécessaires. Premièrement il faut que la musique existe

Through the reconciliation of what art history is and where we come from, it becomes possible to construct a new order in terms of openness to a common space. Again, the political philosopher is never far from the aesthetic philosopher, and we can question in the end whether either author tends towards a utopian project, Nicolas or Rancière? In sum, Rancière wants to show Nicolas that to reach his goals he is in fact missing what the contemporary world requires, a reality that cannot be animated by exclusion.

### FRANÇOIS NICOLAS'S RESPONSE

As a response to Rancière, Nicolas's second essay reveals a victimizing posture, which the title of his text ("Comment développer [et non déconstruire] l'autonomie si contestée de la musique?") reflects through the idea that we might develop autonomy instead of deconstructing it. But Rancière was not aiming to de-legitimize autonomy. Rather, his argument concerned what autonomy is about. On the other hand, coexistence and cohabitation could be seen as the weakest points in the philosopher's conclusion, a situation in which composers are greatly indebted to the context in which they live. In any event, Nicolas blames Rancière for the result in which the driving force of music (i.e., its autonomy) is neutralized and deconstructed. As we have seen, for Nicolas, this project of autonomy has to be renewed and rethought. Nicolas thus strengthens the main ideas in his first essay. Through the idea that presentness is the category that matters, monographic enterprise—as he calls it—should concern the present moment rather than the past: the present makes it possible to target in the past what could be significant and imaginable for the development of the arts.

Again, Nicolas appears as the champion of new concepts and terminological devices. We saw earlier how he increases his reflection by separation and opposition through the tools he develops. His new dialectical outlook focuses on two concepts, contrasted by systematization: music-world and music-art, conceptualized by the fact that "music names both a world and a part of this world: the musical art."<sup>15</sup> Whereas music-world indicates how music becomes an experience, a constitutive reality, music-art betokens how music under aesthetic comprehension reveals beauty. The latter is more problematic insofar as it denotes the sensible truth in the order of the arts. Indeed, though the two worlds are normally unified, they are divided here to show what is at stake in the autonomous world of art. And again, this arbitrary dichotomy emphasizes the exclusion that Rancière observed in his essay.

From this perspective, Nicolas focuses his second argument on a hierarchical perspective, with music-world at the bottom and music-art at the top. Hence his response gets to the heart of the matter: the separation between music-

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comme lieu commun où Palestrina et l'Ars nova entrent aussi bien que Lachenmann ou Sciarrino ... Deuxièmement il faut qu'existe l'idée de l'histoire comme accomplissement d'un destin propre des êtres historiques. Il faut ... une co-appartenance qui récuse toute supériorité d'un temps sur un autre" (58).

<sup>15</sup> "Musique nomme à la fois un monde et une partie de ce monde: l'art musical" (66).

world and music-art is propelled by the deconstruction of musical autonomy, a process that, according to Nicolas, Rancière fosters. The fusion of the two worlds of music represents for Nicolas the only possible way of engaging musical autonomy in a contemporary world: music-world cannot achieve its goals without the presence of music-art, because music-art nurtures the world of music. In other words, Nicolas seeks to prove that without its aesthetic quality, music as a world fails to produce the sensible reality it can bring to humankind. It is noteworthy that, again, the logic of this argument crosses a dichotomy through which one side appears as the sole factor to free the world of music.

Later in his response, Nicolas points out what the deconstruction of autonomy is about: the musical works are being neutralized by this deconstruction, and herein lies the problem. It's hard to find such attacks in Rancière's text. Without naming it, Nicolas seems concerned in his response by the way contemporary music is devalued in the current climate. From this perspective, Rancière appears as a symptom of what happens on the side of inclusion and openness, while the authority of Nicolas as composer is negated by this kind of posture. His defensive argument shows the extent to which he finds legitimacy in what the present world of music allows him to judge in his critical overview: tutelage and function are identified as the danger music faces. For Nicolas, the action of music is limited by outward forces that try to govern its endings; he provides examples with disciplines such as psychology and sociology, or with cultural practices such as ritual and solemnity. The confusion between what belongs to musical knowledge and what musical autonomy is about muddles the argument.

Yet Nicolas asks relevant questions about the shift in praxis that such subordinations can impose on composers. If everybody shares the view that music should be about pleasure, how does this orientation impose prerogatives on what we call contemporary music? Henceforth, developing musical autonomy for Nicolas is justified by these terms, which is to say: "Against the trusteeship of the world of music, to develop its self-determination. Against the functionality of music-art, to develop its emancipation. Against the discrepancy of music-art and music-world, consolidating, one by the other, self-determination (of the world of music) and emancipation (of musical art)."<sup>16</sup> The project of defending and developing autonomy is reinforced with two attractive words (rich in political resonance as a way to challenge Rancière on the same battlefield): *self-determination* and *emancipation*. Therefore, music-art has to be emancipated in its aesthetic gestures, otherwise it cannot be appreciated for what it is.

For Nicolas, the development of autonomy urges musicians to think *par-delà* (beyond) the idea of a present moment handled by history. In his conclusion, Nicolas addresses his credo to composers, musicologists, performers, and *mélomanes*: "We can compose today with what we have. We can think today

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<sup>16</sup> "Contre la mise sous tutelle du monde de la musique, développer son autodétermination. Contre la fonctionnalisation de la musique-art, développer son émancipation. Contre la déconnexion de la musique-art et de la musique-monde, consolider, l'une part l'autre, autodétermination (du monde de la musique) et émancipation (de l'art musical)" (67).

with what is there. To develop autonomy not only means experimenting to conquer, but also to occupy new territories currently available, making music with them. Because the heart of the question today belongs to music, the idea is to count on the strengths of music.”<sup>17</sup> Who can reject this invitation? Who would stand against such an appeal? In fact, Nicolas knows exactly how the project of autonomy can be re-thought in terms of solidarity with other arts and forms of intellectuality. Meanwhile, the difficulty for readers lies in constant dichotomies, the world of music being cut in different parts, whose distinctions are hard to catch. Whether in pop music or in classical music, music should always be judged as an art, whether or not autonomy is concerned and achieved. Nicolas says that the two worlds must be unified, but who will share with him the idea that a part of the world of music is in the troubling position of being eradicated, in terms of both tutelage and function?

## CONCLUSION

This debate deserves attention for many reasons, beginning with the new concepts the authors promote and the stimulating intersections of music, history, aesthetics, and philosophy. But as we have seen with Kaltenecker’s historical transpositions, Nicolas’s dichotomies, or Rancière’s overdetermination of history, the debate has been unable to avoid certain pitfalls one encounters when a specific agenda is applied to music history. This consideration opens the door to the critical absence of a pre-existent literature; witness the Dahlhaus quote on the back cover of the volume while the author himself is awkwardly absent in the questions addressed through the debate. Moreover, following Lydia Goehr (2007, 205–42), something else at stake here is the work-concept that leads musical creativity in an aesthetic regime. This work-concept belongs to a specific history, and we never come to know in this debate if this legacy should be thought as an end, or should be challenged by other musical conceptions. Such possibilities are also part of the nexus that interprets an inescapable relation to history.

Notwithstanding these critical comments formulated here, we have to acknowledge the difficult task of considering musical creativity in terms of presentness, and for that, Nicolas deserves appreciation. It is noteworthy that, insofar as he seems to anticipate such critics, he presents his reflection as a work in progress. Nicolas’s thought reminds us that what was possible in the past—to define musical creativity under present values—is always possible if we take the time to see how much musical creativity can correspond to our current world. In the end, even though Nicolas and Rancière don’t agree on their conclusions about music and autonomy in the contemporary world, both open the hope for new projects in the changing direction of music. And perhaps a lesson can be drawn from this debate! To see autonomy as something that has

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<sup>17</sup> “On peut composer aujourd’hui avec ce que l’on a. On peut penser aujourd’hui avec ce qu’il y a. Développer l’autonomie n’est pas seulement expérimenter pour conquérir mais aussi occuper les nouveaux territoires actuellement disponibles, les musicaliser. Puisque le cœur de la question relève aujourd’hui de la musique, il s’agit de compter sur les forces de la musique” (69).



to be redefined highlights the fact that we take too many things for granted in the legacy of music history, broadly conceived. Autonomy as something that must be defended? Why not? Yet, in doing so, we face the same problem we encountered at the beginning: a world so shaped by the past that with, without, or against history subjects us to an incessant backward projection.

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