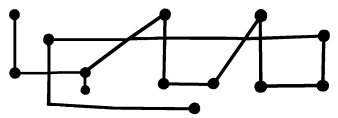
Gyula Csapó, *Handshake after Shot*: Review Essay



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The listener opens the delightfully non-figurative, light-colored paper cover (if she bought the first edition) or the brutally mathematicized cover in which numbers in random order are imprisoned in the unforgiving geometrical frames of a computer keyboard (in case she found the second edition) of Gyula Csapó's CD and begins to read the text written by the composer about the piece: *Handshake after Shot*. The few years that separate these two editions bespeak the rapidly changing time in which this "piece of art" is floating. At the time of the first edi-

Gyula Csapó, *Handshake after Shot* (Budapest Music Center Records, 1999 (Second Edition: 2002) BMC CD 013). ASIN B0000521XX.

tion, still in the twentieth century, in the era of pastoral-dream-colored mysticism of avant-garde music, Csapó's confessionary text sounded provocative. Today, imprisoned in an aggressively dynamic cover of a postmodern chaos, it sounds old—just as our generation (those of us who were born in the fifties) grew old, suddenly and without accepting it.

Here goes the text of the once *enfant terrible*, matching the dramatic title by a no less dramatic exploration or his *ars poetica*:

> The composition is one undisturbed time-continuum, and as such, it is capable of producing a delusion of our sense of time. Its continuity unfolds by 12 notes of a C Ionian scale and their spatial dispersal, resulting in an antifanfare of sorts. The C–G "humming" acts as a gravitational field, which slightly alters any sonic "object" coming in contact with it: all sounds emerge from and vanish into it. It is a black hole, in the process of absorbing all. An antifanfare, removing all gestural, convulsive, articulative remnants of history, retroactively validating silence as "sacred space." Here it is this music from an alien world that proves real, and a previously broken relationship might be put right by it.

This is by no means an unpretentious introduction for a 3'10"-long composition. The piece emerges from this description as a mysterious object mirroring and evoking cosmic laws, black holes, gravitational fields and so on. Csapó promises us that the act of listening to these three plus minutes will remove our mistaken past ("all gestural, convulsive, articulative remnants of history"), restore our sense of time and our "previously broken relationship" with a "silence as sacred space." After one has listened to the beautifully simple and captivating piece, one cannot but confess that there is tension between the grandiosity of these words and the music (as there is an inherent tension between the mystical tone of the text and the photo of the composer sitting at his desk, relaxed and smilingly looking at us).

Are we dealing again with an example of the old-time minimalist approach, with the work of a composer who is out to save us by forcing on us mystical rituals and grandiose philosophies in a few repetitive tones?

Csapó's "Minimalism"

As others in his generation, Csapó was interested in minimalism during the 1970s. Minimalism addressed crucial compositional issues at the

time. It re-evaluated sound as a sovereign musical event, discovering musical meaning in every form of pure sound (single musical note, speech, friction of stones). Minimalism attempted to liberate music from the conventional associations that we attach to themes, keys, passages; its aim was to teach to listen to music as sound and not as series of conventional codes. In some sense, minimalism continued the development that had begun with the Second Viennese School. Schoenberg turned to twelve-tone composition in order to free music from conventional tonal associations, and Webern explored serialism in order to free the musical element from contextual interpretation.

These ideas and musical experiences were decisive in Csapó's development. He soon realized the connection between the minimalist ideals and the aspirations of the Second Viennese School. Indeed, he gradually began to look at the entire repertoire of Western music as a source to discover what he believed was the original, spiritual musical experience.

His concern, however, was primarily not sound but time—time lived through as drama. For him, the passing of time (the reality of time) is, in and of itself, dramatic experience. Drama should be understood here in its traditional sense. True drama is always "real" in the sense that it operates with events, characters, situations that are firmly grounded in life experience. Nevertheless, these real events are meaningful in drama only as the expressions of something more intense and essential than the event itself. In drama, events draw on our memory of everyday reality (history, learned style, experiences) but this associative framework serves only to open up the existential dimension hidden in real-life experiences.

Csapó's aspiration should be understood from this perspective: it is an experiment to grasp the mystery of lived time (the mystery of the drama of lived time) through the rethinking and re-creation of traditional musical gestures. Such a search for existential dimensions, combined with an effort to ground it in the Western tradition, may sound somewhat conservative in the twenty-first century, but the intensity with which Csapó carries out his self-imposed task is formidable, and its outcome (the composition) is captivating.

Indeed, with the exception of a few pieces (such as the *Labyrinth*), he does not purify sound of its associative framework. For instance, in *Handshake after Shot*, the tonality of the opening motives (F–E, B–C), which are superimposed on the sustained C–G, suggest Dominant–Tonic closure, a feeling reinforced also by the gesture-like half-note motion of these motives. As if the instruments were ready to meet in harmony, but somehow they miss each other, even though they continuously respond to each other.

It is essential to hear this association, for this is the conceptual theme of the piece. The piece is the drama of things being ALMOST finished, actors being ALMOST together, ALMOST in harmony, while constantly listening and responding to each other—preparation for handshake after shot. In a more general sense, the piece is an essay on musical suspension and closure and on polyphony (in the sense of Bach's two-part inventions and of the slow movements of Bartók's String Quartet No. 5).

What makes the piece so intense is that these dramatic-musical associations do not appear on the surface. The material is abstracted to such a degree that it no longer has precise character and style—at least not in the sense of Classical-Romantic music. Although the motives derive from traditional melodic and harmonic gestures, the performing instructions require the gesture quality of the motives to be neutralized: the melody should be played without stress, accentuation, the feeling of bar line, crescendo and diminuendo. These "purified gestures" appear against the uniform pulse that is occasionally made audible by percussion beats. In this manner, gestures (though full of associations) are transformed to non-emotional sound fragments responding to the uniform beats of time.

We are at the edge, like players at the periphery of a field of action populated by the intensity of a drama of a mass of people; we are neither outside nor inside. We are lonely in the multitude of the intense memory of once-real events, people, desires, and fates. It is impossible to respond and impossible to act, for response and action would destroy that delicate field of periphery where everything is ALMOST. Action and response would be resolution and solution, and thus: end. The field of intensity is created by this ambiguous state of existence between life and death, passivity and action, time and timelessness.

What makes this experience believable for the listener is precisely the simplicity and the brevity of the composition. It is impossible to prolong the moment of ambiguity on the periphery, since it is an eternal state of mind that can be captured only in the moment. Brevity and simplicity multiply the ambiguity of periphery, making even this (the ambiguity of periphery) ambiguous. The piece is a miniature, a musical *bagatelle*; it is simplicity itself, and if you wish, it reflects none of the above metaphysical things. But for me, this ambiguity that extends even to the "meaning" of the piece (metaphysical statement? light bagatelle?) is what opens up the field of music to enter that domain of which Csapó could say that "it is a black hole, in the process of absorbing all."

Intensity, Drama, and Time: A Moment from *Krapp's Last Tape*

In order to understand the interaction of drama and time in Csapó's work, it is enlightening to look at the beginning of *Krapp's Last Tape*. The composition opens with an electronic tone that, similar to the "anti-fanfare" of *Handshake after Shot*, remains in the background throughout the piece. When the curtain rises, we see a violinist sitting in the center of the stage at a table on which there is a tape recorder and a stopwatch. The violinist plays an ascending melodic line on the notes D - A - E, that is, on the open strings of the violin, as if one would try out timidly the sound of the violin, waking up after a long dream.

But the spontaneous gesture of awakening is "distorted": the instructions in the score require that the notes be played pianissimo, muted, without vibrato and dynamic change, and furthermore they should exactly match the seconds of the stopwatch. Throughout all this we hear the continuous electronic sound from the background. Like the violinist who is imprisoned into the mechanical world (sitting in the cage of spotlights facing mechanical instruments), so the would-be spontaneous sound of awakening is imprisoned by the monotony of time and by the muted, vibrato-less performance.

This micro-scene is an example of the kind of "dramatic complexity created by minimal means" that is characteristic of Csapó's works. Csapó rejects conventional dramatic-musical types, but he draws on the expressive resources of dramatic expression. He searches back, digs out from the memory an original event, something extremely simple that nevertheless contains tension.

The scene is loaded with traditional symbols. A lonely violinist on the stage facing a tape recorder and a stopwatch—one could explore the meanings hidden in this image ad infinitum: lonely actor on stage in the spotlight, the lonely voice of the violin, stopwatch, and so on. And yet the concrete situation is simple; almost nothing happens on stage or in the music.

The most important character in *Krapp's Last Tape* is Time. Time is the main theme of Beckett's monodrama. An old man realizes (or rather: hopes not to realize) that "his time is over" and he can no longer tell even whether he ever had "real time" at all. He searches through old tapes to recall the time that WAS. But Time does not allow one to treat it as an object. The tape conserves sound but it cannot re-create the reality of the moment that has passed. The joyful singing from the past sounds grotesque when it comes from the tape recorder, and the old man wonders whether the joy was ever sincere. The reality of the past slips

away and the reality of the present is violated by forcing it to re-live the past—no reality exists any more.

To this theme of Beckett's play—which is symbolically played out in the music—Csapó superimposes further Times. Throughout the piece, a stopwatch controls time. The stopwatch is the metaphor for the mechanical time of the modern era—time as the straightjacket of modern existence. For me, the most tragic aspect of the piece is that it does not allow us to step into art's really real time but makes us suffer through the loss of time at every moment.

But the function of the stopwatch is not merely to personify mechanized time. It is of primary importance that we do not hear the watch clicking, only become aware of its seconds through the music. Instead of traditional rhythmic notation that would signal the *inter-relation* of length and stresses, the rhythm here is notated as disconnected durations—durations are measured against the latent clicking of the stopwatch, as if *against cosmic time*. The seconds of the stopwatch are inaudible but they control every musical event. They are like the monotony of eternal time: time is unaffected by and outside of everything and yet present in everything; it is neither positive, nor negative—a sonorous nothingness that is, nevertheless, alive. This "sonorous measured existence" is the main theme of the work.

Time and Philosophy

The work of an artist is always more than philosophy. The basis of an art is not something intellectual and verbal, but rather an attitude, a feeling of reality. "In real culture," wrote György Lukács in a youthful work, "everything is the expression of the only important thing: the manner of reaction to life, the manner with which the total self of the individual turns toward the totality of life." Accordingly, the technical aspects of music, such as tonality, form, tradition, and style, are less the basis of a work than a challenge to it: one does not compose *in* a tradition but rather *against* a tradition, as if standing opposite to it, facing it—as one faces another being.

All this is particularly true for the works of Csapó. He has deep knowledge of the repertoire of Western music (he is an excellent teacher and analyst), and his vocabulary and grammar derive from this tradition. He knows the meaning of phrase, form, drama, silence, climax, and development (or lack of development). However, his sense of time is radically different, and as a result he contradicts the tradition even when he uses its elements.

When I asked Csapó to summarize the most burning problem behind these pieces, he answered with the sentence of Jean Baudrillard (that he decided to choose for the motto of the CD): "Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality." It seems to me that what preoccupies Csapó the most is the fact that we lost the feeling of time as the context for existence. In our world, time has become an asset, an object of convenience about which one can bargain. "We do not have enough time," "time is money," "we waste time," "we can buy time." We converted time from an existential phenomenon to a social concept: time is given to us in order to accomplish and to achieve, to fulfil our duties and satisfy our desires.

But in its true sense, time is a cosmic concept: it is the awareness of existence. It is no accident that in our century, philosophy turned intensely to questions of time and existence. Bergson liberated the ancient concept of time whose flow is, in essence, pre-destined in a world in which nothing is new. He taught us the spirituality of novelty. It is with Heidegger, then, that one arrives at a notion of existence that is no longer passive, the concept of "to be" as an action in time. Building on these philosophies, Levinas created his concept of *il y a*, the sensation of time on the borderline of existence. For Levinas, time is not deadly silence but a constant "noise" (*bruit*), as if one would listen to the noises in an empty seashell.

Csapó's music is directly related to these philosophies, even if he has never read them (or at least not all of them). The philosophical dimension of his music (as of any real music) does not mean that he was "influenced" by these works or that he aspires to "express" these ideas in music. The connection is deeper: there is a common awareness, an anxiety that touches many in the modern world and connects his music to these philosophical thoughts.

Stepping out of everyday time into imaginary time is the basis of every art. This shift occurs when art demands concentration and devotion: the reader-viewer-listener leaves behind—"forgets about"—real reality. In Csapó's works, however, stepping out from everyday time is not the spontaneous result of our concentration on the musical flow; rather he *demands* that we concentrate on time. The difference is subtle but crucial. For instance, in a Classical composition, we listen to developments, gestures, contrasts and resolutions, and these events, by force of their dynamism and complexity, force us to concentrate on them, and as a result, forget everyday reality. Although at the final analysis, Beethoven's pieces are also about time, his path is different: we are able to experience imaginary time by forgetting about "real time" rather than by being reminded of it.

In Csapó's compositions, the opposite is the case. Gestures, contrasts, developments are important, but there are always some other aspects of the structure that draw our attention directly to the question of time. The unusual ideas serve this purpose: uniform measurement of seconds, sparse musical events that strike us as something unexpected and new (think of Bergson's spirituality of novelty), the continuity of background noise (think of Levinas's *il-y-a*). We are reminded and made to suffer through the eternal slowness of time, a cosmic peacefulness that we deny ourselves in everyday life.

Time Unresolved: The Compositional Problem

In most musical traditions the musical material creates imaginary time (our time-perception of music): we sense the time as we follow musical events. The time- and pulsation-creating capacity of Western music is well known, but this feature is basic to all musics. For instance, the slow improvisatory section of Hindustani *raga* (*alap*) is in free rhythm: the melody flows without any regular beat and there is no rhythmic background. Nevertheless, the listeners develop some time feeling, even a feeling of pulsation. This feeling is created spontaneously, solely by the inner dynamism and micro-rhythms of melodic motives.

In most of his pieces, Csapó rejects this natural pulsation-creating capacity of melody and rhythm. Of course, some feeling of pulsation and periodicity unavoidably occurs; however, Csapó does everything to neutralize this feeling. He tries to avoid musical events creating their own time—for he wants time to be the utmost creator. Listening to his music, I often feel as if he would be almost hysterically afraid that the musical material would behave "normally," so to speak, that motives would develop at their own pace, that the music would take on its own life.

In Csapó's pieces, musical material does not have its sovereign time. Time belongs to the large-scale structure of the piece; it grows from the global concept to which the individual motives are subjected. Thus although the length of a piece is not arbitrary from a higher point of view, it is arbitrary from the point of view of the independent musical gestures. (This is another reason why motives are performed unlike traditional musical gestures—by means of such "de-humanization" they become assimilated, so to speak, to the uniformity of cosmic time.)

An indication of the unresolved problem of time (that time is not inherent to but superimposed on the material) is that Csapó often needs to "frame" his compositions in order to counteract the natural beginnings and ends, the inner flow that his musical language does not have.

(A typical framing device is the background sonority in both of the above pieces that begin before and end after all other sounds.) It is as if the composer would have to "cut out" the time for the piece from cosmic time, instead of allowing the music to develop its time.

Is this, then, a compositional problem, a domain where Csapó failed (as it seems to me sometimes), or the artistic message (as it seems to me at other times)?

Post-Modern and Romantic

It is clear from the accompanying text that Csapó has no doubt about the mission of (his) art, and firmly believes that people *should* be deeply concerned and preoccupied with the questions his compositions raise. For him, art is THE PATH to the exploration of existence. One should listen to his compositions, simply because it is ART.

I do not think Csapó would be pleased to hear that this attitude is Romantic. Paradoxically, while his compositions challenge Beethoven's concept of form, his artistic ideal is entirely Beethovenian. Romanticism trusted art to be the main truth-providing agent, and many modernist and avant-garde artists of the twentieth century (especially the Second Viennese School) inherited this belief. Accordingly, art is not merely one of many products of human life but the only framework that is capable of revealing truth. Like Csapó's attitude, the arrogance and aristocratism of Romantic artists derive from their unconditional belief that only they (the artists) may endow the life of a society with meaning.

In the post-modern era, the conviction that only art—meaning only high art and mostly Western art—reveals truth became suspect. Whereas the generation before the Second World War was confident to draw the line between high art and mass culture, our generation is more cautious to pronounce such judgements. Especially after the era of Communism, where the party decided what the people needed, many of us feel uneasy with any prescription as to what people should listen to. The disintegration of culture and its lowering to the level of merchandise, and, at the same time, the discovery of many hitherto unknown cultures outside of the Western tradition, made people hesitant to decide what true art really is.

But this cultural chaos made others even more passionate in defending the traditional view of art. Csapó, for all his avant-gardism, belongs to the latter group. And perhaps he is right. It may be that true response to deeply lived anxieties—and thus also to our anxieties—has to derive from an intense self-searching, from obeying an almost dictatorial demand of

the WE MUST FEEL THIS AND FACE THIS. But perhaps it is precisely this uneasy combination of new anxieties with old attitudes that is post-modern. It is the matching of the certain (past) with the uncertain (present): inherited beliefs with the fragmented masses of nightmares of the present—one possible connection in our collective chaos.