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Sonic Metaphor and Narrative in Dhomont's *Forêt profonde*

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In his epic work *Forêt profonde*, Francis Dhomont creates a series of linked sonic metaphors which in turn serve to build up a complex structure. In *Forêt profonde*, the listener is confronted with an extended and complex narrative presented by a score of speakers, a variety of evocative ambient sounds and quoted music, as well as a richly woven fabric of composed music. Dhomont uses the thirteen sections of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* to inspire his thirteen sections; he also references both the music and psyche of Schumann. Other important references are Dante's *Inferno* and a variety of folk tales as well as the Holocaust and the life and work of Bruno Bettelheim, the psychoanalyst and scholar of fairy tales. Dhomont not only quotes from and references all of these sources but he manipulates the material in complex ways to create startling and subtle sonic metaphors.

In the realm of both narrative and musical materials, the fragment - an open-ended, incomplete morsel of material - serves as a primary building block in *Forêt profonde*; the accretion of these fragments function to establish Dhomont's sonic metaphors. In addition, larger blocks of material often retain an open-ended and incomplete quality. There is no one fragment reflecting in microcosm the whole of the piece, and yet the composer's method of construction is reminiscent of a hologram. A given fragment, by its very nature, suggests other fragments. Dhomont develops the linkage between fragments through a number of means including proximity, repetition, variation and a complex interpenetration of sound-models and musical behaviors. This results in the creation of a complex web of narrative and sound-metaphor successions and associations; a given sound and/or text links itself to various other fragments, each of them capable of evoking a variety of purely sonic associations as well as symbolic and representational images. Dhomont's process of 'composition by linked fragments' allows him a tremendous freedom in the choice of materials and how they are combined.

In discussing selected sonic materials, transitions, narrative devices, and the central sound metaphors of the work, I will be focusing on sections 1, 2, 4, and 6. The 'overture' or Section 1 work is entitled *Chambres d'enfants (The Nursery)* and begins with a scintillating sound texture gently emerging from silence; it displays mixed harmonic and inharmonic spectra with low audible tone-centers of F# and C#. While it spans an extremely wide range with the greatest sound intensity initially occurring in the lowest frequencies, harmonic and non-harmonic elements occur throughout the spectra resembling bell tones; I call this band the 'metallic layer.' A slow pulsing marks its general morphology. A variety of other brief fragments including children's voices and frog croaking are woven into the texture. A IV-V-I cadence in the key of G emerges quietly and very slowly in a medium low register of the acoustic piano layer to end the last thirty-five seconds of the section.

This cadence or really cadential gesture turns out to be a direct quotation from the end of *Kinderszenen*. And it has the effect of a surprising deflection or digression. Complementary to the notion of implication, deflection as defined by Leonard Meyer is an event which interrupts processes, introducing other processes which suggest alternative directions and resolutions. Dhomont here has 'pulled' a serious pun on the listener, who, even without knowing Schumann's piece, must feel curiously unsettled. The earlier chord successions of the piano layers do not themselves progress to this 'cadence,' nor does the cadence function as a release or resolution because there has been no building up of the traditional harmonic tension. In Leonard Meyer's terminology, the cadence has not been implied.

Further, as Jonathan Kramer has pointed out, when tonal quotes are placed in a non-tonal context, they lose their drive and are rendered static by contrast with the various nontonal surroundings. Suspended in time, a haunting nostalgia lingers over this fragment, exaggerated by its unnatural slowness. This cadence assumes a metaphorical character - the ambivalent evocation of a time past, of lost innocence reinforced by the toy piano, children's voices and frog croaks. By using it Dhomont signals us to expect deflections and surprise endings and to suspect that our path through the piece will be devious and complex.

So we have the first section's wordless metallic layer, snippets of evocative samples and a curious cadence. The next two sections introduce the use of narrative in a variety of ways including a fanciful elongation of the Spanish phrase 'hubo una vez - once upon a time' - that emerges out of a variation on the metallic layer. It is near the end of Section 2 that the figure I call the Commentator emerges after a total of 23 adult and child voices repeat 'once upon a time' in various languages and with a few other fairy tale snippets. But the last bit of narrative in the section has a completely different quality. It is spoken by an older man in a beautifully modulated bass voice. His aged voice seems to be the 'Voice of Reason.' He explains: "old castles, dark caves, locked rooms...impenetrable woods," all suggest that something normally hidden will be revealed, while "long ago" implies that we are going to learn about the most archaic events.

With this gesture of narrative cadence, he addresses us as fellow adults, lecturing us on the symbolism of the fairy tale. When he speaks, the surrounding sonic maelstrom recedes and there is a kind of relief in his presumed authority, his glacial calm and omniscience. In the course of the piece, his is the only voice which we come to recognize; every other voice is rendered anonymous by its infrequency and fragmentation. His is also the presumed voice of the composer through whose persona we are invited to perceive the work, a voice which 'elides' with the cited author, Bruno Bettelheim.

Since the Commentator hears and knows everything in the universe of the piece, he shares with the listeners the same *point of audition*, a concept of the film music theorist Michel Chion. The Commentator's position in the piece is similar to the traditional role of the narrator in a novel, where

the narrator knows everything that the reader knows. It is particularly interesting that we quickly recognize the Commentator in his empowered role despite the fact that he does not utter a word until the very end of Section II and his later interjections are relatively rare. In fact, his speech contextualizes and frames all of the surrounding narrative. His speech could perhaps be designated as *textual speech*, a category Chion created to specify “speech in a film having the power to make visible the images that it evokes.” In *Forêt profonde* the Commentator is a lifeline thrown out to us in the maelstrom of fragmentary narrative disorder.

In Section 4 Dhomont composes, in a very ingenious way, a forest for us. This section is entitled *Il cammin di nostra vita* or *The Journey of Our Life*, and we immediately hear a brilliant swirl of sound, an effervescent evocation of bird song which rapidly floods the mid and upper registers of the spectrum. We had first heard bird song in a brief naturalistic guise in Section 1.

Dhomont has employed a granulation technique here whereby a sound is sliced into tiny fragments and reassembled and processed in a variety of ways. Dhomont orchestrates this bird song with a variety of timbres-- a rather neutral generic synth timbre, piano, and string, including a frantic granularization of a Schumann quote. This section is followed and complemented by a passage in which male narrators intone three different texts: firstly, selected fairy tale fragments; secondly, the words of the opening of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Italian and French and which give this section their title; and thirdly bits of commentary drawn from Bruno Bettelheim's work on the psychological function of fairy tales. The men's voices are processed in a way to emphasize a certain rough texture and grittiness. They heterophonically entwine with each other like gnarled tree roots. They remind us: “In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear. So bitter it is that death is hardly more.”

With the bird music and then with Dante's words, Dhomont has found a way to ‘compose’ the forest, from its earthy roots to its skyward branches in a complex sonic metaphor. His forest is deep and dark, both forbidding and yet beckoning to the listener.

Moving to Section 6, one has the impression not only of suspended motion, but of an almost aural ‘witness’ - a living presence, somehow manifest in the sum of the section's sounds including a disembodied ‘ethereal choir,’ the mechanical clackings, and eerie liquid drips. All of these sounds seem to impart a presence, even though no narrative is used. This perception of anthropomorphism has been explored by M. Chion¹. He has proposed a category which seems to “arise from figuritivation, notably the concept of the “thing”, and in the particular case where this thing is living – the concept of “*étricule*”:

At the same time sound is both a sound object and the sound of a thing. This thing, to which we cannot necessarily attach a name, can be represented as an imaginary body occupying the three spatial dimensions, and it has volume, walls, mass, density, and speed.... Sound is the manifestation of states and activities, and sometimes the life of things.... We can quote two typical cases of “things” in musique concrete. The first is what one can call the “étricule”, in other words, the small being. It is Pierre Henry who has most often employed this in his music. He evokes a living organism of small dimension, always changing and always identical, heard against a background of the cosmos The thing might sometimes be regarded as a sound character, in the sense that Messiaen talked about ‘rhythmic characters.’

Trevor Wishart'sⁱⁱ analyses of music gestures dovetails with this view in the following way. He emphasizes the aspect of gesture which he calls “imposed morphology,” that is, the action directed upon the sounding body's “intrinsic morphology,” or naturally occurring sound produced once the sounding body is set in motion. Thus, the percussionist imposes a particular articulation upon a bell, which continues to sound according to the intrinsic morphology of a metallic body. The electro-acoustic composer, in her imposition of the sense of gestural action onto a given sound can impart the aura of a motivating being.

Everywhere in *Forêt profonde* then there is the presence of the human and animal, not only in the narrative, but particularly in the varieties of *brassage* textures. And the listener may imagine a variety of ‘source’ beings – for one, the Commentator, who from my earliest auditions of the work I imagined as the Composer/ Prime Mover and voice of the hero, Bruno Bettelheim. The dramatic enactment of this authority figure constitutes the most striking characterization in the work. What crazed winged creatures animate the piano sound flurries/furies that transgress sound boundaries, destroying the sense of Schumann but offering up a kind of mad delight in that rupture! This work allows and encourages the personification of sound energies in a particularly potent way. Narrative buttresses other sound elements to create a web of associative sound metaphors which, linked together, engage the listener in imaginative participation.

ⁱ Michel Chion, “Du son à la chose, hypothèses sur l’objet sonore” in *Analyse Musicale*, 11, 52-58 quoted in François Delalande, “Music Analysis and Reception Behaviours.” In *Journal of New Music Research* 27, No. 1-2 (1998): p51.

ⁱⁱ Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, Edited by Simon Emmerson. The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH, 1996.
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