

# ...new means(,) old meanings...

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From time to time I hear a categorical commentary about myself that lets me thinking on the limitations of the intellectual capacities of the people who make it; a very irritating situation: “Flo, take care, the tropical tempest of this afternoon will cut off the energy for many hours!” This fact implies in their vision that I cannot make my music as long as we have no electricity. Last time that I’ve heard such a stupidity I did not hesitate – corroborated by the fact that the pianist who talked to me in that manner used glasses and needs a good light to see everything facing him – to punctuate: “My system has no-break, my dear, while you will must actually wait until the energy comes back in order to read your scores!”

In the opinion of such traditional musicians I am not a composer, I am an *electroacoustic* composer. This annoying situation does not simply irritate me; it lets me thinking on the essence of musical composition as well. Clearly it was not the intention of those people, but I am very grateful to these idiots for that!

Have you, dear listeners, ever asked yourself about the essential elements not of sounds themselves, but of *musical composition*? Many times I asked my students on composition in their first meeting with me to write down on a paper sheet the concepts they think as essential for the composition.



Figure 1 – Listed concepts from students’ appointments

Large lists of conceptual definitions, going from aesthetics to perceptual approaches, come to discussion, which process I try to reduce, democratically with the accordance of all involved people, all designed notions to a minimum of elements by either striking non-pertinent concepts or detecting strong similarities between them, as a kind of eidetic *pensée réduite*. Sometimes it takes more than one hour, with many crossovers and cross-synthesis, until we have a consensual mind and until we can finally celebrate a victory, as Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, “against a sea of troubles”. Just arrived at this point, I risk being lapidated by eventual unhappy students after revealing them my deductive strategy: at the end of this process I patiently take out of my pocket a folded sheet of paper – another one – and, unfolding it, show them all what is printed on it: my Compositional 5-Points-Star.

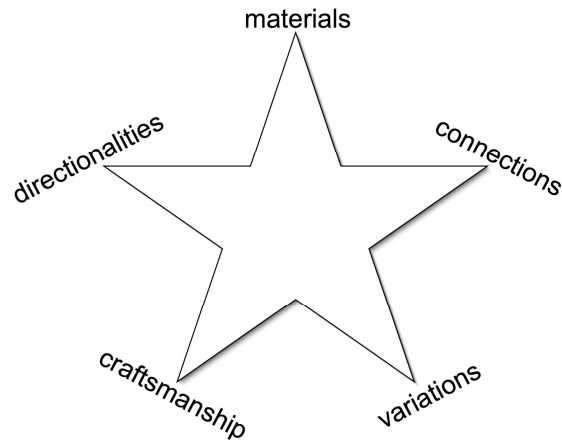


Figure 2 – Compositional 5-Points-Star

Let's have a look at each one of these elements. At the top of our star we deal with *materials*: in its adornian conception the material is everything that relates things structurally and concerns minimal musical ideas traveling through formal architectures in music and establishing, by means of identities and differences, *relationships*. Traditionally the accent of the composer, when writing instrumental music, was on the minimal structural elements of the musical architecture, since the sound palette of the instruments predetermined the constitution of sounds. Paradigm of that fact is undoubtedly Beethoven's works. If we consider for instance the beginning of Diabelli's theme as taken by him for his monumental *Transformations* (*Veränderungen*) op. 120 and listen carefully to its very first motive, which will be repeated once in this passage,



Figure 3 – Diabelli's theme of Beethoven's *Transformations* op. 120 with its first motive

we note without any trouble how Beethoven contaminates a whole variation



Figure 4 – Variation IX of Beethoven's *Transformations* op. 120

or, as if submitting it to a time-stretching procedure, contaminates and *expands* it in another one.



Figure 5 – Variation XI of Beethoven’s *Transformations* op. 120

Sometimes it is useful to discard all apparent superficialities or at least throw away all factors we can in order to keep just the indispensable, as I’ve done with the sketched concepts of my students and of mine. But by doing so, we can face unexpected situations: searching for essences, we must admit the high interest on such a striking passage, surprisingly deprived here and now from any diversity of timbres [sound example: a passage of the four-hands version from Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Springs*]. Of course we could try to go deeper and deeper in listening to that fragment and try to internally perceive with all possible details such a rich texture, for instance by expanding the sound images in our mind [sound example: time-stretching of the Stravinsky-excerpt], but when listening to the original *orchestral* writing of this excerpt we become fully astonished because of its richness [sound example: original orchestral version of the same passage of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Springs*]!

This timbral richness was nevertheless sacrificed and in spite of that we did not loose our interest. What does keep our enormous interest on that sound example in which the orchestra was drastically reduced to a four-hand piano writing? In this context we must remember of the words by Pierre Schaeffer in his *Solfège de l’objet sonore* when he spoke about the *suprématie des hauteurs*. We displace our insight on our star and notice now that the timbre, that is the inner constitution of sound spectra, was commonly related in the instrumental music with *craftsmanship*, *métier*, *artisanato*, which can be defined as the meticulous elaboration of internal as well as of external appearances of sound objects in the composition.

In instrumental musical the *constitutive* aspect of materials tends to be displaced to the craftsmanship axis of the star, while we clearly notice inside the double face of materials, that is in its structural or *relational* aspect, a given hierarchy going from harmony through rhythm to the lowest level of elaborations: dynamics.

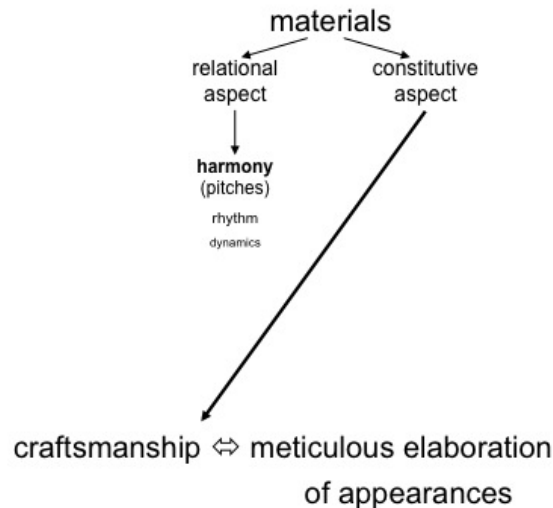


Figure 6 – Displacement of constitutive character of materials from the materials-axis to the craftsmanship-axis in instrumental music

Not by chance the musical writing, when historically born as a sonic departure of the verbal transcription and keeping the prosodic aspects of language, put its emphasis on the graphical representation of pitches and rhythmic values and only much later began to describe, even if always in a very rudimentary manner, the dynamic levels.

When Lévi-Strauss wisely pointed out in *Le cru et le cuit* that “emotion in music consists on the fact that in every single moment the composer either takes off or adds more or less than expected by the listener”, he was speaking about *memories* and *expectations*, which provide to the listeners the capacity to establish *identities* and *differences* between musical ideas. Both terms belong to a new axis of our star, which comprises the unique permanent musical form along the whole history of music, including our days: *theme and variations*, in modern era transplanted to the couple *materials/variations*. Variations mean that materials are partially transformed through maintenance of part of their characteristics but at the same time through metamorphosis of their complementary aspects too, by means of new musical ideas. By introducing new aspects of the sound objects, something is necessarily left behind. Going back to the

Beethoven example, the heterogeneous disparity of values given by the small *appoggiatura* – if related to the other rhythmic values – in the very beginning of the motive gives place later (in Var. XI) to an extended rhythmic homogeneity, a new idea, in which the shape or *profile* of the figure is kept while the former diversity of values simply disappears. The second appearance of this material seems to be simpler than its initial evocation. Heterogeneity being subtly transformed into homogeneity by suppression of a single value implies nonetheless a high level of complexity and shows us how simplicity in art is a pure illusion, since complex formulations can be done not only by what ideas present us, but also by what they “forget” to present! Images of sounds are kept *in absentia* in our minds as it happens with binary oppositions between pairs of phonemes in the verbal language. By this way we notice the crass stupidity of such phrases that refer to a pretentious simplicity of... Mozart’s music!

Variations need to be consciously controlled and imply recurrences and an unforgettable desertion of ideas in an inexorable timeline. *Hearing* sounds is a purely physiological state. *Listening* to musical objects, nevertheless, reveals us an intentional and therefore *directional* factor of our more or less conscious perception. Listening to musical objects means hearing *directions* of sound objects. We access then the other axis of our star, in which transformational processes are promoted to the main formal strategy in composition. A teleological perception takes place and music definitively departs from general sonic events. Music can then be defined as consciously elaborated *directionalities*. The paradigm of Beethoven claims to be evoked once more in this context: the liquidation process of motives in a sentence structure of a classical theme is a clear example of directionality, but directional processes can be heard as involving other parameters such as registers as well – a thought which anticipates in more than a century the total serialism!

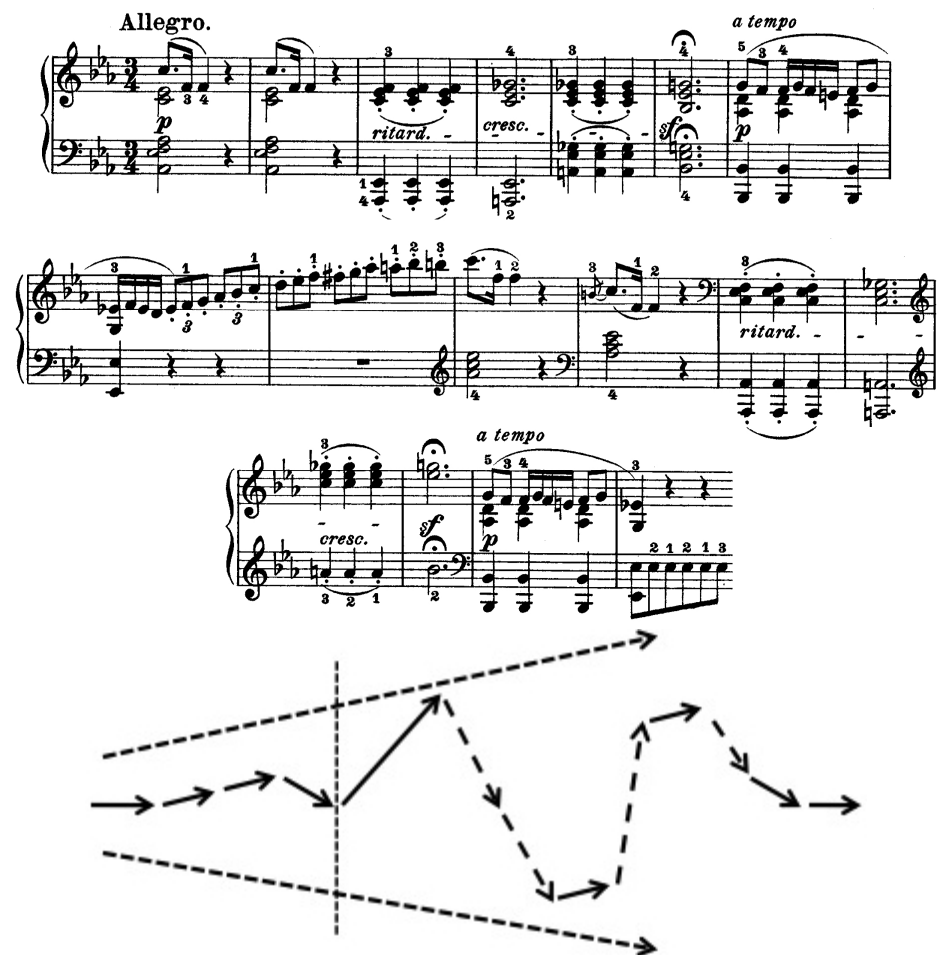


Figure 7 – Enlargement of registers as directional process in the theme of Beethoven’s *Sonata Op. 31, n. 3 (I)*

Directionalities over larger portions of time need connecting elements: anticipations of coming ideas or resonances of former musical structures that either sew or last throughout the musical weave, in any case interlacing musical ideas in the real time of composition. Those elements consist of intersection points and passages between musical ideas. Please listen to the pulverization procedure of orchestral sounds in the next sound example: during this directional process, in which two solos of oboe and clarinet outside the orchestra are live-transformed and spatialized, crossing the orchestral space, an *A* in the middle register interlaces all multiple events of the texture. At the end of this process, when points replace lines or curves, a trumpet enunciates the displacement of this connecting element, jumping the pitch *A* one octave upwards [sound example: a passage of Flo Menezes’ *Crase* (2005-06) for large orchestra and electronics].

And so we have completed our 5-points star: *materials* are submitted to *variations*, through which *directionalities* are strategically projected in time; the perceptual nexus of such strategy is assured by the interlacing given by *connections*;

control over all details, related internally as well as externally to musical objects in their final appearance becomes the focus of an outside, critical overview of the composer, whose *craftsmanship* will make in this sense his/her efforts more or less successful, linking carefully the listening back to the elaborated *materials* as elected pillars of the musical architecture. Materials stay on the top of this notwithstanding very “democratic”, I would even say quantum, almost mystic Fibonacci-star.

A further, very instigating question concerns how far new means interfere on these old, archetypal meanings. Obviously each new musical resource will inevitably cause translations of given elements inside the star energy. In this context, the arrival of electroacoustic music is decisive in two senses: firstly the possibility to internally *constitute* the sounds transfers the timbre, commonly circumscribed in the instrumental domain in the spheres of the craftsmanship, to the top of that hierarchy, emancipating timbres as the constitutive aspect of materials; secondly, in the place of timbres, composers will have *spatiality* as one of the most fundamentals aspects of craftsmanship, through which relational aspects of materials become explicit.

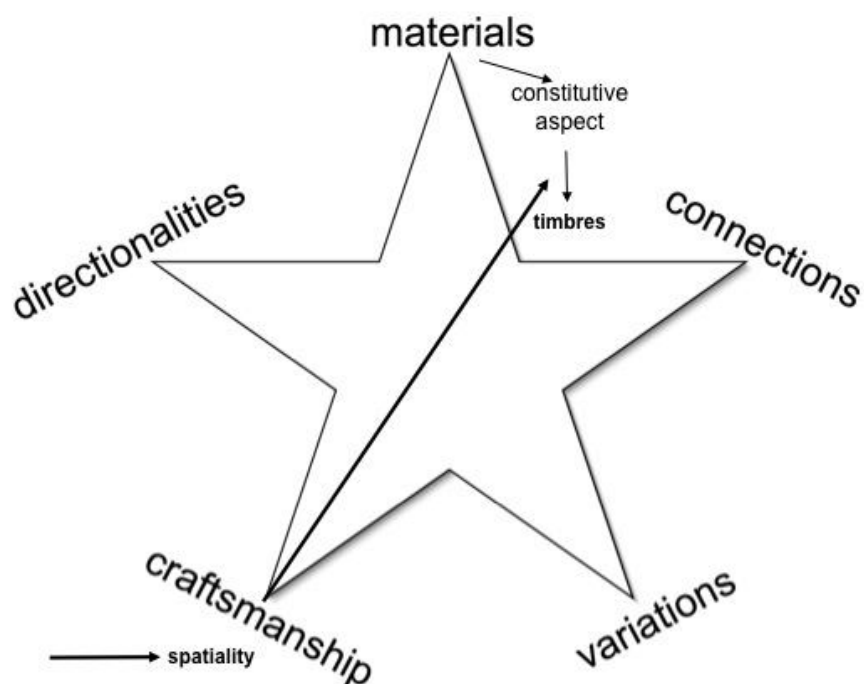


Figure 8 – Consequences over the star with the arrival of the Electroacoustic Music

In this context we feel ourselves considerably nearer to Leibniz than to Newton, for space does not exist independently of things, but on the contrary as relating objects, for as Leibniz says, while “time is the order of existing things, space is the order of co-existing things”. Last but not least, spatiality functions as multiplicative factor of the listening and assimilation of simultaneous layers, one of the most incisive traces of speculative music in its confrontation with the cultural industry and its musical sub-products.

*Harmony*, the most important aspect of composition along the history, may not be forgotten! In constituting the material, the electroacoustic resources offer the composer a special gift, usually either disregarded or dealt in an absolutely unconscious way by composers who work exclusively at the studio without any previous substantial experience with the instrumental writing: without leaving their relational role, pitches go towards timbres and vice versa, even if both aspects of sounds keep their autonomy. Harmony acquires, besides its relational capacities, substantial constitutive potentialities. Despite of all rearrangement of forces, the proclaimed *supr matie des hauteurs* is therefore not destroyed!

In the axis of the variations, which is in instrumental music predominantly determined by diversities of figures, enhancing the relational aspect of materials, the constitutive force of materials acquires an especial accent, through which composers tend more and more to give a certain privilege – if we consider both basic pillars of sound constitution since the emergence of the electroacoustic music in its early days: on the one hand, the *treatment* or *processing* of sounds; on the other hand, the sound *synthesis* – to the first procedure more than to the second one, which in its turn is related above all to the constitutive aspect of materials *before* they are submitted to further variations.

We see how *materials* are immediately submitted to *variations* and, mostly in a final stage of composition, to *craftsmanship*, while in between strategies of *directionalities* and *connections* of musical ideas determine substantially *formal* elements in time. By means of such “segmentation” of our star we deal on one hand with constitutive, on the other hand with relational forces.

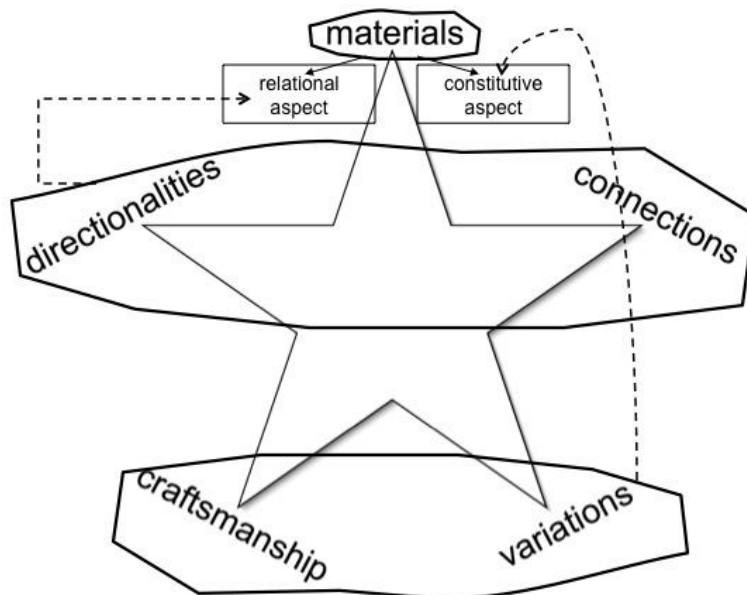


Figure 9 – Consequences over the star with the arrival of the Electroacoustic Music

Let's take a musical example, now in the domain of an octophonic acousmatic music, here reduced to a stereo version. In the very beginning of the work we listen to dramatic materials derived both from treatment (of a spring inside an old stove) and from synthesis as well [following sound examples: passages of Flo Menezes' acousmatic piece *Motus in fine velocior – in memoriam Stockhausen* (2008)]. About 4' later the stove sounds reappear with variations, displacing in time higher and dry synthesis sounds, which will be drastically superimposed by a spatial cloud of lower sounds, which cause consequences in the synthesis layer: it acquires a resonant quality. The whole process directionally run into heart beats evoking maybe the last moments of a dying person (actually with sounds not derived from heart, but from a harp followed by a vowel, both transposed radically some octaves below). Another directionality then takes place: metallic resonances emerge from those tonic periodic beats polarizing a low *C*, becoming more and more independent of them. Variations of those beats enhance the autonomy of the resonances, until varied stove sounds reappear and lead the whole texture to a new cloud of synthetic sounds, which in their turn will run into a transformed quotation of the final moments of *Kontakte* by Stockhausen.

This metalinguistic reference, even if strongly metamorphosed, is indeed anticipated by a high sound layer some seconds earlier as connecting element. But if we listen carefully please to that passage again, we perceive that, interlacing all these elements and directionalities, a sound layer lasts as a kind of shadow too, establishing the formal connection between these two big clouds of spectra.

What a paradox! I am labeled by traditional musicians as an *electroacoustic* composer and, among my dear "electroacoustic" colleagues, took so long speaking about Beethoven, Stravinsky, and giving examples of instrumental and mixed electroacoustic music as well... The reason for that is no longer a secret: in my opinion, any musical composition, if dealing with instruments or electronic devices, should consider the essential elements of my star, which should be viewed not as a model or a systematic approach to composition, but rather as a quantum field of musical meanings which are of universal validity. It is a pure illusion to think that electroacoustic music can be considered apart of these problems.

After elaborating all the elements of a musical work, even if some of them are worked on a rather unconscious way, the composer should then try to reconsider all general concepts inscribed in the broad lists I mentioned at the beginning of my exposal, since a masterpiece must imply also extra-musical meanings in order to last and survive over the rigorous sieve of History. Musicians are connecting points between past and future, and this in both senses of connections: resonances of past and anticipation of future. What sense does it make if one performs Bach after Glenn Gould? A rather difficult task for pianists, I would say. But any new performance is legitimated, since by doing so interpreters extend resonances of past works in the present. Composers, on the other hand, have a greater responsibility towards future. They remain avant-garde poles, may we agree or not with this term. They carry societies locomotives looking forward. They anticipate new ideas. In this sense, composers may be "pretentious", if they wish to be *good* composers. If not, please allow me to say: try other occupations in life! Firemen, taxi drivers, engineers and physicians are also very important for our societies! But if a taxi driver has no much things to speculate around, in those cases such as the work of a physician or of a physicist, which implies *researches*, the lemma of Ezra Pound remains valid: "Make it new". For as Freud once pointed out so well, even if referring to the anal speculations of a child: "*Nur die Neuheit kann die Bedingung des Genusses sein*", that is: "Only the Novelty can be the condition of pleasure"!

Novelty means renewed old meanings. If everyone acquires such consciousness, maybe some day I can have a good chance to come to a doctor, restore the health of my ears and become free of my perturbing tinnitus. Thank you very much for your patience!