

«Golden Silence».

Music and Surrealism, 1917-2017

Foreword by the guest editor / Prefazione del curatore ospite

This special issue of *Gli spazi della musica* arises out of a study day held in Montréal on April 26, 2017. The event was organised under the joint auspices of the Schulich School of Music (McGill University) and the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, and the day's activities were divided between the two institutions.¹

Both the study day and this issue call attention to an important centenary that fell in 2017. The première of the ballet *Parade* on 18 May 1917 was a cardinal event for many reasons, not the least of them that, in his programme notes to the work, Guillaume Apollinaire wrote of its embodying what he saw as «une sorte de sur-réalisme».² Thus May 1917 marks the date when a potent neologism first entered the artistic lexicon – one that has both shaped and been shaped by the intervening turbulent century and, primarily in its adjectival form, “surreal”, now frequently arises in everyday discourse.

It is noteworthy that, given the context of Apollinaire's first coining of the term, music was fully present as an important partner amongst other arts – choreography, set- and costume-design (but, significantly, neither poetry nor prose) – that were seen as embodying surrealism at its birth. However, it rapidly migrated to the obscure margins of surrealist activity where it has largely remained over the course of the last 100 years. This is despite Apollinaire's assertion, shortly after the *Parade* première, that «choreography and music are [intrinsically] super-realist arts because the reality they express always transcends nature».³

¹ Financial support was generously provided by the Schulich School of Music as part of its scheme for Distinguished Visiting Chairs. As the holder of that title for the academic year 2016-2017 I am happy to have this opportunity to record my personal gratitude for this and all the other areas of support provided by the School throughout the period of my appointment.

² For the text of Apollinaire's programme note in French, cf. GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, 3 vols., ed. by Pierre Caizergues - Michel Decaudin, Paris, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1977-1993, II (1991), pp. 865-866; for an English translation, DANIEL ALBRIGHT, *Modernism and Music. An Anthology of Sources*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 320-321.

³ «La chorégraphie et la musique sont des arts sur-réalistes puisque la réalité qu'elles expriment dépassent [sic] toujours la nature». Guillaume Apollinaire's letter to Léonid Massine, 21 May 1917, cited by PETER READ, *Apollinaire et "Les mamelles de Tirésias". La revanche d'Éros*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2000, p. 140.

“Surréalisme”, as construed by Apollinaire in 1917 (by the time of his second public usage a month later, with reference to his own *Les mamelles de Tirésias*, he had already dropped the hyphen) was simply one of a constellation of labels whose collective coordinates nevertheless defined a radical and purging novelty of which Erik Satie stood at the time as the strongest musical exemplar. However, when the word was appropriated to define the Surrealist Movement proper, under the heavily controlling hand of André Breton, the younger poet’s natural partisanship for his own art-form and lack of real feeling for music helped to ensure that poetry and literature, along with the visual arts and cinema, would become the prime media through which the artistic identity of surrealism was expressed.

Breton responded to the visual image in a way he found impossible in relation to music. The very first page of *Le surréalisme et la peinture* makes this clear when, in contrast to the distinct and precise spiritual realisations he feels in response to painting, he confesses: «By contrast, I shall always be resistant to musical expression, the one which is the most profoundly confusing of all [the arts]». ⁴ While one individual’s predilections cannot completely shape the entire course of an art movement’s development, Breton’s strong conception of surrealism, and his tight control over the use of the term and membership of the movement, went a long way to achieving this. Although he acknowledges the possibility of other manners of expression, his very definition of surrealism in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) does not disguise its privileging of speech and text: «Pure psychic automatism through which it is proposed to express, whether verbally, in writing or by any other means, the real functioning of thought». ⁵

If music has therefore been largely condemned to a «Silence d’or» ⁶ in the history of surrealism’s first 100 years, this phenomenon is, in itself, an interesting subject for analysis and debate. Having such a discussion was the declared purpose of the study day and we were fortunate to gather an international group of presenters and performers united in their interest in the subject and readiness to explore it. Scholarly presentations were complemented by lunchtime and evening concerts, with the whole event being rounded off

⁴ «Par contre je ne cesserai de refuser à l’expression musicale, celle-ci de toutes la plus profondément confusionnelle», ANDRÉ BRETON, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, Paris, Gallimard, 1965, p. 1.

⁵ «SURREALISME, n. m. Automatismes psychique pur par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée», available online at, for example, <https://inventin.lautre.net/livres/Manifeste-du-surrealisme-1924.pdf> (accessed on June 12, 2018).

⁶ ANDRÉ BRETON, *Silence is Golden*, trans. by Louise Varèse, «Modern Music», XXI, 3 (1944), pp. 150-154.

by a performance of *Parade* in which the version for two pianos was combined with the relevant percussion and “sound effects” from the orchestral score.

Much of the history of surrealism and music has been expertly documented by Sébastien Arfouilloux in his monograph, *Que la nuit tombe sur l'orchestre*.⁷ We were very fortunate to have Sébastien as keynote speaker for the event. His lucid exploration of whether, despite music's relatively poor showing to date, surrealism could nevertheless be seen as providing a new paradigm for dialogue between the arts was both a masterful précis of many of the ideas from his book and a further extension of some of them. Sébastien has adapted and expanded his presentation to form one of the articles in this issue.

As seen above, psychic automatism was identified by Breton as the key characteristic of surrealism, as he chose to construe the term. Nicole Marchesseau's presentation, and the paper she has developed from it for this issue, goes in search of automatism in a wide range of musical contexts and finds some evidence, although much of it, as she herself argues, equivocal, for its manifestation in music being at least a theoretical possibility. In particular, she explores both the relationship and the distinction between what goes on in improvised music and true automatism.

The remaining three articles each deal with more specific cases and composers. My own article takes us back to the years between 1917 and 1924 and, more properly therefore, to the period before the formal founding of the Surrealist Movement, when its more capriciously anarchic forerunner, dadaism, was prominent. Taking its cue from a statement of Jean Cocteau, it argues that a superficially disarming aesthetic of simplicity can be a strongly subversive force. It proposes a reading of Poulenc's *Cocardes*, composed in 1919, in which the undoubted simplicity of these early songs emerges as a tactic for destabilising and disconcerting the listener and thereby inducing something akin to the frisson that was sought by the surrealist poets and artists in their works.

Caroline Potter reviews the music and the statements of Pierre Boulez and, in doing so, makes a compelling case for surrealism being a more important and enduring aesthetic in both his works and his thinking than has perhaps previously been recognised. Her article marks the first articulation of a line of enquiry which she is continuing to pursue and shows that music and surrealism can indeed find meaningful common ground and, moreover, may do so in the context of one of the foremost musical figures of the twentieth century.

⁷ SÉBASTIEN ARFOUILLOUX, *Que la nuit tombe sur l'orchestre. Surréalisme et musique*, Paris, Fayard, 2009.

Drew Massey has for some time been finding surrealist connections in the work of Thomas Adès and exploring the ways in which this label has been used, helpfully and otherwise, to characterise aspects of the composer's approach. Unable to attend the study day for the very good reason that he was interviewing Adès on the occasion of the London première of the composer's opera *The Exterminating Angel*, based on surrealist film-maker Luis Buñuel's film of the same title, Drew has contributed to this issue with an article examining what he calls the «dilemmas» of musical surrealism. With his article, the questions surrounding music and surrealism are brought into a truly contemporary context.

I and my fellow-contributors hope that these articles will be of interest to readers and will provoke further consideration of the mutual compatibility or otherwise of music and surrealism as the latter begins its second century. I am very grateful to the editors of *Gli spazi della musica* for their enthusiastic taking up of the project and, in particular, to Federico Lazzaro (chief editor of this issue) for making the initial approach to them and for working so dedicatedly on all the processes necessary to bring a special issue such as this to successful fruition.

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