

(The following interview, in the form of six short essays on the topic of 'Musical Truth', was held with Anthony Fiumara and originally included in the booklet *All and Beyond: the music of Peter Adriaansz and Piet-Jan van Rossum*, published in 2010 by *November Music* and *MCN*. The present text is a slightly revised version of the original text)

Music as objective truth – 1

Re: *Objective Truth* (AF: 'How do you feel music and objectivity/truth are connected? Is music about metaphysical concepts such as truth, beauty, goodness?')

PA: In the end, Art – and I take the liberty of writing 'Art' with a capital A again – can never offer 100% pure 'truth' and nothing but the truth because it always hinges on personal interpretation. There are thousands and thousands of ways to present one and the same truth. Say you hand 10 composers the model of a helix and ask them to translate this into music as 'truthfully' as possible. In all likelihood, you'll end up with 10 completely different, yet entirely 'true' versions. So, 'objective' truth does not exist as far as I'm concerned.

Yet, one can still *strive* for it. Be it in a personal way.

In that sense music, like all Art, has a symbolic value. It also represents a *particular way of thinking*.

By this, I certainly don't mean to imply that music is subordinate to anything else. Like all other Art forms, music is a pure and entirely autonomous phenomenon, and can essentially capture the whole world. Just like philosophy or science it can be used to gain insight into certain phenomena, or even into the universe itself. The only problem is that 'the universe', as the sum total of all spirituality and all thinking, is an endlessly larger phenomenon than Art. Viewed from that perspective Art is definitely subject to something far larger and is merely a *medium*.

To my mind every form of Art is thus essentially the expression of a thought, then of an ideal, and ultimately of a belief. The choices you subsequently make are in the first instance ethical, then aesthetical. I view such choices as one of the few ways in which an individual can rise above his or her own intrinsic shortcomings. And in that way Man and his product can often diverge dramatically. (Think of the many, many sublime creations by people far from magnificent themselves...)

Many ancient cultures, from China to India, embraced this 'mediating' function of Art for numerous centuries – just read up in Daniélou. Certainly long before Western Europe put 'Art' – and the artists themselves – on a pedestal, and thereby at the epicentre of a potential

answer. Not for nothing was music considered part of the sciences in many of these old cultures.

And this is, at least to me, where the problems started. For by now, this latter view to a large extent determines the ideal all over the globe, manifesting itself most supremely - and ineradicably, it seems - in the form of the romantic ideal: an ideal where 'personal truth' reigns supreme. Only a fool could believe that the Romantic era ever truly ended!

This focus on the individual - instead of on the universe as a whole, with its inevitable implications of 'questioning' - in practice however means that many aspects of speculation and research within the area of notated concert music, entwined as they so often are with acts of 'translation', have become an oddity or have been banished to 'safe havens' such as electronic music or sonology. In that sense, Music largely appears to have abandoned its mediating role in our consciousness. At least: definitely in the sense of a *collective* ambition.

Abandoning 'the question' and dwelling too much on 'the answer' however does come at a cost, I believe. The biggest being that composed music (as a form of truly autonomous Art) can run the risk of stagnating at the level of nothing more than high-quality entertainment. Only reminding us of our own limitations, through continual historical self-reference, and forgetting to imbue us with a sense of wonder about the rest. As if all questions have been answered...

And I don't think that really was the original idea.

So, yes, based on this cryptic reply you could conclude that to me music has a metaphysical purpose. 'Truth' is an important component because it says something about the credibility of what one does. In addition, I believe that credibility - towards either yourself or the wider world - really is a fairly essential issue.

Within this context of 'shifting the focus away from the individual', the pursuit of 'truth' implies that *finding* becomes more important than *creating* and that the emphasis lies less on expression than on *revealing*, for example. The message being, that mystery may be found all around us, if only we look hard enough.

The advantage of this approach is that elements of personal compulsion or manipulation - feelings that we as listeners immediately pick up on as they enter our system - are reduced to virtually zero. Once that happens, things become 'what they are'. As far as I am concerned, from that moment onwards we can truly start to concentrate - and detach ourselves from unfulfilled desires.

If, as an artist, you have the incredible audacity to subject others to your products, you'd better also have something to say, I think. The world is filled with so much hot air as it is!

Music as objective truth – 2

Re: Sound (AF: 'Why do you think music is mainly about sound? Instead of, for example, about construction or about other music?')

PA: Of course, music is about *all sorts of* things, from purely technical aspects to the unification of human feelings, from provocation to solace and from misuse for therapeutic purposes to the building of multicultural bridges because this is convenient for politicians.

As far as *I* am concerned however, music is about Sound; or rather, about 'listening'.

I should say straight away though that to me 'construction' and 'sound' are essentially the same (in my case, sound is literally an outcome of formal construction). Together with 'notation' and 'research' it more or less amounts to my Holy Trinity.

Although I have been a pretty turgid constructivist for most of my life, sound has only started to play an essential part in the last six years or so, largely alongside my development from a purely instrumental composer to a mostly electro-acoustic composer. From that moment on, my development also suddenly became evolutionary. Until then, I was more of a Fox, to borrow Stravinsky's analogy.

But the real issue here is 'listening'. I use the word in a literal sense; using your *ears* and not some kind of inbuilt gramophone record (which has more to do with *referencing*, i.e. to derive meaning based on a shared linguistic model; 'if 'A' is this and 'B' refers to 'A' the meaning will likely be 'C'... and then guess whether the intention is ironic, sardonic or cynical, and so on). This latter form of listening, which I really do consider to be a second-hand form of listening, is the one we most commonly tend to base our sense of interpretation on. (In the Netherlands, we even have a special variety hereof, codified in the concept of *Het Grote Luisteren* (*The Big Listening*). When hearing that term I always find myself thinking, "what do you mean, listen 'big', if the ears are already completely filled"? A strange misconception, but that aside). In any case: not this variety.

In my case I think that everything can eventually be explained from a quest that has occupied me for as long as I can remember. Namely: the desire to really understand how music 'works'. In this pursuit, my own stupidity is my most important advisor. I want to understand what it is all about. In a *fundamental* way. What *is* music? How does it *work*? What are the *universal* characteristics of music? And when I say 'fundamental', I mean "that from which all superfluity and inherited culture has been stripped" (but more about this later).

At that 'fundamental level', not much remains I can tell you. But that which you *are* left with, is truly crucial. On top of this, a strange logic comes into play. As the scope appears to narrow, the potential increases exponentially. Suddenly, new and substantial riches open up. No sobriety or meagreness. At the basis, you find an infinite universe that is infinitely abundant.

Of course, one of those fundamental elements is *Sound*. The fact that music exists by the grace of vibration.¹ I am strongly convinced that at a certain level these vibrations affect people more deeply than all inherited 'language'. Not least because they automatically and without any constraints evoke a natural kind of beauty. It is one of the first things that speak to us. Once I finally found a way to turn 'sound' into a truly composable element, through the use of microtonality, there was no stopping the floodgates from opening. From that moment on sound was no longer 'orchestration', 'tone colour' or 'timbre' but the simple outcome of a very large number of infinitely small intervals.

Although in reality, these processes are not really that 'simple'.

Therefore it is at this level that the compositional argument really takes place. A level where, to my opinion, only 'free' ears really work.

¹ Incidentally, there remain still quite a few misconceptions regarding the definition of *Sound*, and what it actually means 'to compose with sound'. Misconceptions which sometimes lead to people being accredited as 'sound specialists' when they are in fact occupying themselves with forms of refined instrumentation. There is however a huge difference between 'composing with sound' – and the tradition it arises from – and the act of devising sophisticated instrumental combinations. Just as there is a fundamental difference between 'instrumentation' and 'orchestration' in purely instrumental music.

On a scale of increasing abstraction, the correct order in my opinion is as follows. *Instrumentation* (the distribution of *notes* over instruments, be it idiomatic or non-idiomatic) -> *orchestration* (the translation of *timbre* on to instruments; *essentially* non-idiomatic) -> *composing with sound* (composing with the *intrinsic characteristics* of sound, be they acoustics, micro-acoustics, or psycho-acoustics etc; almost by definition non-idiomatic, while not by definition instrumental; equally tied up with other parameters, such as *duration*). For me, this is also the correct hierarchy.

Obviously, I am not under the illusion that the above will solve everything once and for all, but there is no harm in trying.

Music as objective truth – 3

Re: Nature (AF: 'what is the connection between sound and nature? Do you think nature is an absolute phenomenon? Or are you trying to be in accord with nature, in 'her manner of operation'?"')

PA: Considering that I am someone who rarely if ever ventures into nature but prefers to work undisturbed in his study all day – albeit with a spacious garden on the other side of the ocean, something that is far harder to come by in the Netherlands – it may come as a surprise that nature plays such an important part in my work. Of course, that quote about being in accord with nature, 'in her manner of operation' stems from John Cage. A man who was very much 'in accord' with nature and frequently proved himself capable not just of coming up with the most remarkable music but also of making very meaningful statements.

If he says something, it's time to prick up your ears.

In itself, the word 'nature' does not say much... unless it is juxtaposed with 'culture'. Only in that context does 'nature' acquire any real significance. One phenomenon is produced by humans, whereas the other is a product of, well, who exactly?

In essence I think it boils down to where you want to place your belief. As the term itself implies, 'culture' has a lot to do with cultivation. Although culture often appears to evolve organically, much also depends on agreements and understanding, plus – if you like – a whole list of bad habits. It is therefore not surprising that 'Culture' is closely associated with 'tradition'. A lot of the political turmoil taking place in the Netherlands these days basically revolves around the preservation of tradition, or 'culture'. Nothing wrong with that if the latter is really under threat. But what if this culture – or tradition, and feel free to transpose this to music – has been as good as dead for years?

Keep it alive artificially? Or change?

These types of questions never occur when talking about 'nature'.

Nature simply *is* what it *is* – there is no other option. Once you believe that 'sound' and the act of 'listening' are central to 'music' – and that music does not just revolve around some sort of comparative consumer report, based on a whole range of cultural agreements which have acquired the status of an unchallenged canon over a long period of time – 'nature' starts to make far more sense as a source of inspiration.

Culture is finite, yet nature is infinite. And in nature, you can find some of the profoundest mysteries imaginable.

Also for Music.

Merely in my own specific field, the research of vibrations large and small, of the characteristics of sound waves or how different materials reflect upon each other the parallels are *literal*. Not just in a manner of speaking or as some kind of absolute symbol. 'Vibrations' are after all not a cultural event but a natural phenomenon. Sound itself – and I am not talking about orchestration, tone colour, or timbre – is also a natural phenomenon. Every truly organic form that exists, is: a natural phenomenon.

I could go on and on and on.

In the end though, the real point is that nature is devoid of 'culture', that its character is universal and therefore fully trustworthy. Nature will run its own course; it is the fountainhead, infinite in all respects. The mysteries of its 'operation' – its *literal* operation – are so intriguing and astonishing that for the time being nothing remains but to continue studying it!

Music as objective truth – 4

Re: *Disappearance* (AF: 'Why not just depart for the North Pole armed with a microphone? Is a human being (artist) a 'medium' and should he subject his own imperfect ego as much as possible to that truth?')

PA: Well, I'm not *that* conceptual, Anthony, but I could have seen that question coming!

To answer this properly I can only resort to the philosopher John Rawls' summary of the 'Aristotelian principle' as quoted in Chapter 18 of Charles Murray's *Human Accomplishment*, a book we both admire greatly:

Other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.

I absolutely agree with this, however little sympathy I may have for Aristotle for the rest.

What I recognize in this 'Principle' is the urge to master complex matters, whether ideological or technical. In this respect 'the challenge' itself also plays an important part. To randomly head for the North Pole and plant a microphone simply wouldn't satisfy my internal need for the making of a 'product'. Even though, from an ethical standpoint, I have to admit I do rate

the utterly egoless positioning of that microphone more highly than my own propensity to want to define everything in writing and on paper. I still see that as a childish predilection.

But *noblesse oblige*: my own specific talent, linked to what is left of my professional sense of responsibility towards performing musicians requires that I capture these things on paper. Only then will I maybe start to believe that I am beginning to understand some things.

All in all, I think there's only one really fundamental choice when making Art. Either the product is about yourself, or it is a reflection of something else – from which you subsequently eliminate yourself. I think the latter is possible to achieve both by way of that aforementioned microphone as well as in a codified manner. Only to arrive eventually at that single brush stroke – prepared many thousands of hours in advance: the brush stroke that contains everything else (think of Sesshu).

Finally, that's all that really matters to me: music is part of something larger. Individual preferences, emotions, or the need to express should play no part in this.

You get all of that for free anyway... no need to even think about it.

Music as objective truth – 5

Re: Responsibility (AF: 'What is the artist's role/responsibility nowadays?')

PA: Oh boy, well...

Now that we may have concluded that simply planting a microphone on the North Pole will not really satisfy me – and perhaps some of the above may also have demonstrated that I do try to think things through as thoroughly as possible – I hope at least that the perception of my *own* 'role' as an artist is more-or-less ok!

But what *the* Role of the Artist is, is far less easy to say.

Not that I don't have certain ideas about it, mind you. Yet in the end, 'the role' is probably just as varied as there are different types of artists. And this probably applies equally to their sense of responsibility. One need hopefully only cast a glance in my scores to see that all is – often neurotically – Ok with regard to my own sense of responsibility. But defining 'the role' is a good deal trickier.

Without drowning in grandiose theories on this subject – and *trust me*, these can be found in abundance – I could also simply refer to a letter I wrote to the editor of the Dutch national newspaper *de Volkskrant* that was published in the spring of 2010.

“Challenged’ to this by a pretty cogent article by a certain Mr. Fernhout under the heading *Why should art be subsidised?* I pursued to shine my well-meaning and clear light on this issue. Mr. Fernhout stated it was high time that artists took the trouble to explain the ‘value’ of their activities. Which was indeed an apt appeal; witness the quality of most ‘art justifications’. They always seem concerned with matters of secondary importance.

My response was of the most integer and high-principled kind. I did not shrink from playing for the highest possible stakes.

Once sent, the letter was eventually published. Abundant signs of appreciation poured in from various colleagues. Subsequently, *de Volkskrant* put it on the Internet.

Well, then I had it coming...

Straight away, approximately 40 reactions came up. Including all told, one single expression of support, by ‘a colleague’ naturally (‘lots of sympathy for the endeavour but it’s *‘pearls before swine’* – something along those lines) and a very interesting e-mail from an economist. As for the rest, I am ashamed for the Dutch People.

So, I think I will spare you my views on the ‘role of the Artist’.

Music as objective truth – 6

Re: *Art and Culture Politics* (AF: ‘your pursuit of objective truth bears testimony to intense idealism. Imaginably, everyday life (society, politics, culture policy, policies pursued by grant-giving bodies) may well often be an albatross around your neck. To quote the Flemish poet Willem Elsschot (‘The Marriage’): “Between dream and deed, laws get in the way and practical obstructions”. (To what extent) is it possible for you as an artist to withdraw from quotidian reality?’)

PA: Hmm, I will have to approach this subject with some caution I’m afraid, you never know who will be reading this!

It’s certainly true that a yawning chasm exists between idealism and pragmatism, and that it is often hard to bridge this gap. Yet I feel that an artist can hardly afford to avoid playing a part in society as a whole. What you do is not just aimed at meeting your own needs but also at responding to what you feel society – or culture in general – is actually in need of. In any case, this is something *I* feel strongly.

This idea of 'what society needs' is of course an extremely arrogant tendency that is hard to explain, but even harder to resist. You think you can discern something. Consequently, you feel you are obliged to play a part in promoting this.

It is therefore not for nothing that I repeatedly say that what I do is subject to a mission. My initial impulse to compose barely seems geared anymore to satisfying some inner need. Rather, it *has to be done*, as far as I am concerned, in order to arrive at a cultural landscape I can really identify with.

As a composer and in the various other capacities we're often expected to fulfil (whether as a programmer, or active in cultural politics and other such organisations) I have therefore always tried to give meaning to this purpose: to advance a *specific* culture.

In practice this can of course often clash with existing or prevailing views on culture; sometimes it is hard to imagine a more tricky issue than the relationship between artists and prevailing culture politics. Especially when it comes down to matters of content. And all the more so once you realize how far-reaching the impact of cultural politics is on the essential content and freedom of the product itself (i.e. the actual music).

In the end, it is less the practical than the ideological obstacles that can sometimes make life difficult. But that's the way it really *should* be in a healthy, thriving culture.

A 'Healthy culture', I have learned, largely flourishes on the basis of two phenomena: diversity and rivalry (between ideas, I should add, not among silly stuff like 'style' or in the context of such empty vessels as 'pluriformity' – and with minimal centralisation as far as I'm concerned, which is a pretty tricky issue in the Netherlands just now). The moment that either of these is threatened is the time to get seriously worried.

To those in doubt of this proposition I recommend careful reading of the article *Why they hate the Jews* by Albert Einstein, written in 1938. Although the title is almost perverse to refer to as an analogy in this context, I have rarely read a more lucid description of the preconditions for a liveable culture. But truth tends to manifest itself in the extremes after all.

In this respect, at the moment of writing this we do seem to have arrived at a crisis period in Holland, as far as the arts are concerned. (Reading Peter Schat in the 1980s however one gets the impression that such crises are simply permanent, but never mind). Fortunately, in times like this, when the entire value of any kind of non-commercial endeavour is treated with contempt, enlightened figures sometimes emerge out of nowhere to help remind us of what is important. Such as Rob Riemen of the *Nexus Institute* in Tilburg for example. In his wonderful book *Nobility of Spirit. A forgotten ideal* he lucidly explains how dangerous culture relativism can be.

It is however impossible to escape these issues unless you totally pull back from the fray. I've noticed that the tendency is becoming stronger in me but I don't think I have reached that point yet. Perhaps in musical terms, yes, but not with regard to society as a whole. I guess it's also in this area where our 'role' lies, to hark back to your last question.

On this note, 'society as a whole', and for anyone who really wishes to uphold some semblance of truthfulness in Art, it might be good to just close with my *top five of all-too-obvious tips for a healthy culture*:

- 1) Fewer managers, more responsibility for the artists themselves.
- 2) Far, far less centralisation.
- 3) More Art education in primary schools.
- 4) Far more attention to serious culture critique.
- 5) No politics or marketing in areas where depth and quality of music itself should prevail.

Of course, these are antiquated truths and really only apply to our present situation in Holland. I have learned however that some things just need repeating.

Over and over again, if necessary.