

MUSIC AT THE LIMITS:
EDWARD SAID'S MUSICAL ELABORATIONS

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Music at the Limits

More than anywhere else, it was in his involvement with music that Edward Said showed himself to be a man of rationality and passion. Music occupied a privileged place in his life and work, not comparable even to literature. Music was a highly ambiguous art to him. He observed that music was the most inward, most private of the arts, and at the same time, as performance, a highly public event. While seemingly “autonomous from the social world,” he emphasized music also as an elaboration of civic society.¹ To him music was also an ambiguous art in the sense that it requires a highly specialist training,—in Said’s own words “a discipline rather like that of a Jesuit”—, which turns it into a hardly accessible, even mysterious and esoteric endeavor, while on the other hand, it makes a very powerful immediate effect.²

For Said, music was an experience at the limits of thought, social practice and life. First of all it was European classical music which greatly attracted him, a tradition of composing, performing and listening which has a rather small number of dedicated listeners worldwide. It is moreover a tradition which, much to Said’s regret, has lost its former authority among intellectuals and a more general public alike.³

Even within that rarified tradition, Said was enchanted by exceptional compositions of resistance and intransigence, like ‘late works’, and compositions almost at the edge of social context. He viewed these kinds of music as constituting an emancipatory act. In *Musical Elaborations* he speaks of a “relatively rare number of works [...] making their claims entirely *as music*, free of many of the harassing, intrusive, and socially ty-

1 E.W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), xiv.

2 D. Barenboim and E.W. Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 121.

3 Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 15-6.

rannical pressures that have limited musicians to their customary role as upholders of things *as they are*.” These works express

a very eccentric kind of transgression, that is, music being reclaimed by uncommon, and perhaps even excessive, displays of technique whose net effect is not only to render the music socially superfluous and useless—to *discharge* it completely—but to recuperate the craft entirely for the musician as an act of freedom.⁴

Apart from Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, he mentions as a phenomenal example Bach’s *Canonic Variations on ‘Von Himmel hoch.’*

Furthermore, Edward Said was fascinated by music performance as an extreme occasion, concentrated, rarified, often conspicuously discontinuous with ordinary life, in which the highest standards, utter specialization and complex production processes lead to a single event. Again, here too he was attracted by exceptional figures, like Glenn Gould, in whom he noted an elusive inaccessibility to the routine demands of human life as lived by other human beings.⁵

Said placed himself firmly within the secular tradition of rational humanism of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, with its aspirations to universality. This made him greatly appreciative of the rationality of Johann Sebastian Bach’s music. Yet music also brought him to the edge of rationality. Once Said observed about Bach that, while there must be some rational law that explains his music, it was always drawing away at the moment when he actually felt getting closer to it.⁶ Similarly he was fascinated by the music of Beethoven, who, though an Enlightenment man, was inspired by rapturous states of mystical experience.⁷ And again, Said was enchanted by Glenn Gould, who with all his fervor for control was given to ecstasy which Gould himself characterized as “the state of standing outside time and within an integral artistic structure.”⁸ Said even positively confessed to be highly intrigued by works of art and religion, such as by Bach and Messiaen, by Ibn Arabi and Juan de la Cruz, which seem to testify to the powerful conviction to *embody* the divine.⁹

All this is quite striking for a man who claimed to be totally not religious. His secular stance prevented him from really accepting the no-

4 Ibid., 71.

5 Ibid., 21-34.

6 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 123.

7 Ibid., 164.

8 Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 31.

9 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 123.

tion of the divine on earth, since reference to such an extra-human force would bring the experience down a notch.¹⁰ Nevertheless, these musical experiences at the limits led Said at least to acknowledge meta-rationality. And it seduced him into entertaining utopian ideas.

To him, music played a role at the limits also in the political sense. Together with Daniel Barenboim, he took the initiative to organize in 1999 the West-Eastern Divan Workshop, bringing together Arab and Jewish musicians, inspired by Goethe for whom art “was all about a voyage to the ‘other,’ and not concentrating on oneself.”¹¹ The music which Said and Barenboim chose as the center of attention of this workshop has already been characterized above as being situated at the limits: European classical music.¹²

Music was also at the limits of life to Said. His wife Mariam relates that, when faced with death in the life of others as well as in his own life, language stopped being a significant mode of communication. It was music which he needed here most, music about the ‘muteness’ of which he had expressed his wonder time and again, music, which itself is a constant resistance as well as surrender to silence.¹³ So when we speak of Edward Said and music, it is music in a heightened sense, musical composition, performance and listening of exceptional intensity, music *at the limits*.

Among the musical phenomena that fascinated Said most were polyphony and counterpoint. He used these terms more or less interchangeably. In his writings they rank among the most frequently used musico-technical terms. Viewed in the context of music practices worldwide, the musical possibility of polyphony as elaborated in the compositions favored by Said may in itself be viewed as at the limits. Finally, it is significant to point in this context to a statement by Said that music gave him the courage to develop new ideas in criticism.¹⁴

Polyphony: A Definition

Defining now the concept of polyphony in music, we take it as referring to the simultaneity of two or more ‘voices’ which, in the perspective of simultaneity, differ in their melodic and rhythmic shapes. By voice I mean

10 Ibid., 158.

11 Ibid., 11.

12 To place this initiative in the ‘at the limits’ perspective is a suggestion of Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, personal communication, November 27, 2009.

13 E.W. Said, *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), xi-xiii.

14 Mariam Said, personal communication, Amsterdam, November 30, 2009.

a configuration of pitches in time, with a distinctive profile. Obviously the term is derived from vocal polyphony, but it is used by extension for melodic profiles which are not sung, but played instrumentally. Usually polyphony rests upon the conception of equality between voices. There is typically no domination of one voice over the others, and if there is, it is usually temporary, the role of prominence switching from one voice to another.¹⁵

Polyphony is the result of two interacting shaping activities. One is counterpoint, the other is harmony. The *contrapuntal* activity refers to the simultaneous difference between the melodic and rhythmic profiles of the participant voices. It involves a characteristic variety of melodic relationships between those voices, like counter, oblique and parallel motions (with a preference for the former two), as well as rhythmic disparity. In polyphony in which the voices share the same melodic profile—later to be described as homogenic polyphony—, the instances of this profile are shifted to each other in time so as to become mutually contrapuntal.¹⁶

Yet polyphony does not imply complete independence of the participating contrapuntal voices. Counterpoint is not a matter just of antagonism. In European classical polyphony the participant voices are attuned to each other. This mutual attuning belongs largely to the *harmonic* dimension. The concept of harmony applies to the way in which the participant voices sound together in terms of pitch relationships. These relationships are subject to norms for euphony and variety, for consonance and dissonance, as valid in the particular music tradition. Harmonic is not the same as ‘harmonious,’ for a great deal of dissonance between voices may occur. Another aspect of mutual attuning lies in ways of rhythmic complementarity and disparity between voices, as, for instance, when one voice is temporarily more active, another one may be less so.

Pierre Boulez in his *Boulez on Music Today* uses the expression ‘responsibility’ to characterize the ways in which the voices in polyphony relate to each other, shape each other, and contribute to the articulation of overall textures and processes.¹⁷ He takes the word responsibility in its literal sense of ‘ability to respond.’ Responsibility in polyphony is thus actualized in two dimensions of ordering: the relation between one individual voice

¹⁵ See, however, the discussion about centered polyphony below.

¹⁶ This is an excellent instance of the frequently commented upon self-referentiality in Western classical music.

¹⁷ Pierre Boulez, *Boulez on Music Today*, ed. and transl. S. Bradshaw and R.R. Bennett (London: Faber and Faber, 1971); originally published as *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* (Geneva: Editions Gonthier, 1963).

to each of the others (contrapuntal), and the relationships within the collective of them (harmonic). Together the voices articulate the harmonic framework, and may transgress it individually as well. Boulez emphasizes that it is in the aspect of responsibility that polyphony distinguishes itself from monody, heterophony and homophony.

A consequence of this 'ability to respond' is that the voices may be perceived as transforming each other continuously. Because of their harmonic interference they elicit sonorous aspects in each other that cannot be observed if the voices were sung or played separately. Even *new* voices may be heard which are not performed as such. This happens through the interference between the acoustical fundamentals and overtones of the melodic lines. The same effect may be reached when voices cross each other in pitch position (*Stimmtausch*), thereby partly losing their original identity (at least compared with the situation in which they sound separately). In the latter instance, fresh melodic formations may be perceived, arising out of fragments of these crossing voices.

The effect of sonic interference on voices is to a large extent unpredictable, depending on the performer, the performance space, and the position of the listener. One example of such interference is *resonance*. When in a particular voice, a fundamental pitch with its overtones happens to be harmonically in agreement with pitches in other voices, these pitches may sound more emphatically than others. On the other hand, a dissonant relationship will bring out rich spectrums of overtones, with unforeseen dynamic sonic processes. Mutual responsibility is also heard in the rhythmic sense. By introducing complementarity between the voices—one being temporarily more active than another and vice versa—, these voices are given the opportunity to manifest themselves individually. This is an invitation to polyphonic listening as a practice of mutual respect, as complementarity refrains from the continuous overpowering by one voice over others.¹⁸

Within polyphony we may make a differentiation according to the shape of the participant voices. If all voices use the same melodic profiles we speak of *homogenic* polyphony. This is usually considered the most exacting form of polyphony. The peak of homogenic polyphony is the

18 See also Rokus de Groot, "Perspectives of Polyphony in Edward Said's Writings," in F.J. Ghazoul, ed., *Edward Said and Critical Decolonization* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 219-40; and Groot, "Edward Said and Counterpoint," in A. Iskandar and H. Rustom, eds., *Edward Said: Emancipation and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming [2010]),.

musical canon, that is the overlapping unfolding of the same melody in different voices. If, on the other hand, each of the voices displays its own melodic profile, we call this *heterogenic* polyphony.¹⁹

It is clear that polyphony requires considerable discipline of composing, performing and listening. Otherwise the articulation, maintenance and mutual attuning of distinctive voice profiles would not be possible.

Said and Musical Counterpoint

From the foregoing discussion of Said's fascination by music at the limits, it will be clear that he is not interested in polyphony and counterpoint just as theoretical notions, but as music's best practices of composition and performance.

Pleasure, inclusiveness, discipline, and invention are the key notions here. For Said the music of Johann Sebastian Bach is the standard of polyphony in this sense. In *Musical Elaborations, Parallels and Paradoxes* and *Music at the Limits*, Said expresses time and again his wonder about the "simultaneity of voices, preternatural control of resources, apparently endless inventiveness" of this music.²⁰ Said is not so much interested in notions of originality or authenticity in Bach's polyphony, as he is in invention, more particularly contrapuntal necessity and inventive freedom.²¹ He emphasizes that Bach was no revolutionary or iconoclast, but used received conventions in such a way as to give them entirely new meanings. With approval he refers to the musicologist Lawrence Dreyfus, who in his book *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, stresses the original meaning of invention as "*finding* in a phrase the possibilities for development that are there to be found."²² Dreyfus underlines that Bach did this

by remaining within the musical environment of his time, but so conscious and so rigorous was his power of working on a piece of music that [...] his works are a kind of musical map, a meditation on those conventions that highlights or elevates them into occasions for new reflection and analysis, thereby transforming them totally.²³

19 H.W. Zimmermann, "Über homogene, heterogene und polystilistische Polyphonie," *Musik und Kirche* 41 (1971): 218-38.

20 Said, *Music at the Limits*, 5.

21 *Ibid.*, 255.

22 Quoted in *ibid.*, 253; see L. Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

23 *Ibid.*, 254.

Therefore, Bach's works are never an affair of mechanical application of rules. As Said notes, the highest skill of the polyphonic technique never overshadows the expressive, liturgical or emotional aim of the piece.²⁴ On the contrary it allows "harmonic audacity, ingenious rhythmical flexibility and constant melodic inventiveness" to unfold.²⁵ Certainly Said must have recognized his own ideals of invention here. Dreyfus continues: what Bach's music "embodies is a neat paradox embracing freedom and necessity, showing how one is inextricably linked to the other, how the exhilarating discovery of new thoughts brings with it severe responsibilities—in short, showing how one assumes risks and draws the appropriate consequences. This inherent respect for music demonstrates nothing less than a respect for the inherent meaningfulness of the world and every manner of *res severa* found [...] in it."²⁶ It is interesting to note that Dreyfus, like Boulez, uses the notion of responsibility in polyphonic invention.

Inventio is a central notion in Said's work at least since *Beginnings* (1975). Here he orients himself by Giambattista Vico's humanism as unfolded in *La scienza nuova* (1725), adopting the term in the rhetorical sense of the finding and elaboration of arguments. To Vico, *inventio* is essentially the human competence for the construction and therefore also the understanding of history. Invention is a form of creative repetition and reliving.²⁷ In adopting this concept, Said underlines his own idea of secularity: "that you don't rely on some outside miracle, outside force like the divinity, but that man makes his own history."²⁸ This seems to tally with Bach's reported self-reflection, "what I have achieved by industry and practice, anyone with a tolerable natural gift and ability can also achieve."²⁹

These observations underline the relation between invention and discipline, between freedom and necessity. Indeed, Said had the highest appreciation for Bach's total discipline in polyphony, and especially its rationalism, which relates to Said's own orientation on the humanly possible.

Yet this discipline brings the beholder to music at the limits, to the limits of the human. Said writes in *Music at the Limits*: "Counterpoint is the total ordering of sound, the complete management of time, the minute

24 Ibid., 252.

25 Ibid., 251.

26 Quoted in *ibid.*, 254.

27 Ibid., 274, 286; M. Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum. Edward W. Said und die Kontrapunkte kritischer Dekolonisation* (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2008), ch. 2.

28 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 73.

29 C. Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York and London: Norton, 2000), 10.

subdivision of musical space, and absolute absorption for the intellect.” This earned polyphony “a particular prestige within the musical universe. For one, its sheer complexity and frequent gravity suggest a formidable refinement and finality of statement.” “One cannot say more in music [...] than in a strict fugue.”³⁰ Contrapuntal development produces “the result almost as a matter of natural logic.”³¹ In this way an “unusual importance is given the music. [...] Its authority is absolute.”³² All this is still within the limits of secular humanism. But Said goes on.

He typifies polyphonic discipline as the *preternatural* control of resources. In the same work he writes, “the rules of counterpoint are so demanding, so exact in their detail as to seem divinely ordained. [...] To master counterpoint is therefore in a way almost to play God.”³³

This notion is only strengthened by the striving for perfection in Western classical music, as well as by what Said calls “a contrapuntal mania for inclusiveness” in the polyphonic tradition from Palestrina through Webern. Indeed, he comments repeatedly on Bach’s penchant for contrapuntal excesses. It leads him to consider that the contrapuntal mode seems connected to eschatology.³⁴ Again this connects Said’s enchantment by polyphony with his own utopian ideas.

However, the alleged divinity of polyphonic discipline is highly ambiguous to Said. He designates the elaboration of polyphonic discipline by Bach as *fiendish*. In his essay “Cosmic ambition” about Bach’s polyphonic art, Said wonders whether the composer, well aware of his creative powers, had an unconscious desire to rival God’s creation in a music which seems to have assumed the outlines of a separate world altogether. He writes,

Yet there is something unmistakably demonic and frightening about his fervor. [...] One can’t help wondering whether all the piety and expressions of humility before God weren’t also Bach’s way of keeping something considerably darker—more exuberant, more hubristic, verging on the blasphemous—at bay, something within himself, which his music with its contrapuntal wizardry also communicates.³⁵

30 Said, *Music at the Limits*, 5.

31 *Ibid.*, 253.

32 *Ibid.*, 279.

33 *Ibid.*, 5.

34 *Ibid.*, 5.

35 *Ibid.*, 288.

Obviously, these considerations reinterpret the allegedly divine fundamentals and overtones in polyphony in a context of secular humanism, even though they are entertained at the border of it.

Edward Said is quite aware of the risks of converging the aesthetic with the critical and political, when musical polyphony with its inclusiveness would be transferred as a model to the domain of dialectical criticism and politics. Referring to the 'polyphonic' German artist Adrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, he speaks of a Hitlerian version of a pact with the devil. When the composer as speculator puts himself in the position of creator, engaged in what Mann calls 'die elementa spekulieren'—to speculate the elements—, the polyphonic practice of music may fuse with theology and mold ideas about social and political processes in a totalizing, dehumanizing way.³⁶

Polyphonic composition needs polyphonic performance and polyphonic listening. Edward Said found the polyphonic artist *par excellence* in Glenn Gould. The same key notions as in polyphony reappear: pleasure, inclusiveness, discipline, and invention. In *On Late Style*, Said notes: "What [his performances] consciously try to present [...] is a critical model for a type of art that is rational and pleasurable at the same time, an art that tries to show us its composition as an activity still being undertaken in its performance."³⁷ It is Gould who, to Said, enacts polyphony like no one else as a never-ending process of invention, that is, reinterpretation, reinventing, elaborating, rethinking, offering new modes of apprehension. I note in passing the musical reverberations in the rhythmical recurrence of the prefix 're-.' According to Said, counterpoint, when performed by Gould, "seemed to speak to you directly, intelligently, vividly, forcing you to leave your ideas and experiences in abeyance," resulting in "complexity resolved without being domesticated."³⁸ As an antidote to the tendency to sacralize polyphonic composition, there is something in Gould's performance which is very much to Said's taste. He observes with glee that Gould "never recoils from the comic possibility that high counterpoint may only be a parody, pure form aspiring to the role of world-historical wisdom."³⁹

36 Ibid., 5, 285-86.

37 E.W. Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 132-33.

38 Said, *Music at the Limits*, 20, 10.

39 Ibid., 6.

Said and Counterpoint as Metaphor

Having heard as a boy the famous Egyptian singer Umm Kalthoum in Cairo, Edward Said reacted by becoming acutely aware of the importance to him of counterpoint in Western classical music. In an interview conducted for Dutch television in 2000 he remembered having hungered for it more and more.⁴⁰ There are a number of testimonies that point to his special sensitivity to polyphony. He experiences identity as basically a polyphonic texture, “a set of currents, flowing currents, rather than a fixed place or a stable set of objects.”⁴¹ His *Out of Place* is quite eloquent here. He became aware of the contrapuntal potential of being a non-Western in relation to the totalizing schemes like those of Adorno’s negative dialectics.⁴² In fact, in *Culture and Imperialism*, he professes the idea that the global subaltern would have a privileged consciousness of counterpoint.⁴³ Indeed, we may point here to the mode of polyphonic listening which is typically nomadic and migratory, moving between voices, as well as constantly in-between voices.⁴⁴

The concepts of polyphony and counterpoint are widely used by Edward Said as a metaphor in his literary and cultural criticism. Looking back on *Beginnings* in an interview in 1987, he comments: “I felt it important to work through a number of genres, critics, voices. I’ve always been taken with choruses, with polyphonic kinds of writing as well as singing.”⁴⁵ *Beginnings* treats textualities as multi-layered forms of production and transmission.⁴⁶ Interestingly, *Orientalism* does not engage in discussions of counterpoint and polyphony, while in *Culture and Imperialism* they abound. Said’s metaphorical contrapuntal readings also include musical works. A case in point is his analysis in *Culture and Imperialism* of the composition and production of *Aida* by Verdi, intended as an imperial spectacle for Cairo in 1871.⁴⁷ It is not about music or libretto, but about the conditions of its genesis, in particular its performative function

40 Edward Said, interview by Michael Zeeman, conducted in 2000 and broadcast by Dutch television, September 28, 2003.

41 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 5.

42 Said, *Musical Elaborations*, introduction.

43 See the analysis in Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 302.

44 Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 105.

45 I. Salusinszky, ed., *Criticism in Society* (London: Methuen, 1987), 134, as quoted in Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 103.

46 Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 103.

47 Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 290.

as an instrument of imperial spatial discipline. As Said puts it: "Aida is an aesthetic of separation."⁴⁸

It is obvious why polyphony should be so attractive to Said. It meets his basic humanistic mission of the preservation of difference without desire to dominate.⁴⁹ As polyphonic listening to polyphony is inexhaustible, it does justice to Said's orientation of being more interested in what cannot be resolved and in what is irreconcilable.⁵⁰ The polyphonic concept of mutual responsibility of voices meets his burning question of "how, beyond the ultra-individuality of existence, does one give it resonance beyond itself?"⁵¹ Polyphony seems also an antidote against that to which Said resisted most strongly: totalizing schemes with no room for alternatives, whether in music the coercive sonata form,⁵² or in critical theory 'the disciplinary society' of Foucault, or the 'inescapable historical teleology' and 'totally administered society' of Adorno in which 'no person is exempt from ideological exertion.'⁵³ He strongly resisted the theories of Mann, Foucault, Adorno which elevate admittedly discernible patterns in Western society of the modern period to the level of the essential and the universal.⁵⁴ To adhere to this stance would mean monophony to him, not polyphony.

We could replace the word 'secular' with 'polyphonic' when Said writes that "a secular attitude warns us to beware of transforming the complexities of a many-stranded history into one large figure, or of elevating particular moments or monuments into universals. No social system, no historical vision, no theoretical totalization, no matter how powerful, can exhaust all the alternatives or practices that exist within its domain. There is always the possibility to transgress."⁵⁵ Transgression is a key notion here: the interaction between voices enables one to develop an attitude of "moving from one domain to another, the testing and challenging of limits, the mixing and intermingling of heterogeneities, cutting across expectations [...]. Once the totalizing tendency is refused an unquestioning ascent, a whole series of transgressions both by and involving Western classical music proposes itself [...]."⁵⁶ Polyphony is also in accordance with Said's

48 E.W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 129.

49 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 154.

50 *Ibid.*, 168.

51 *Ibid.*, 156.

52 Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 100.

53 *Ibid.*, xx.

54 *Ibid.*, 51.

55 *Ibid.*, 55.

56 *Ibid.*, 55.

preference for a geographical or spatial idea as “truer to the diversity and spread of human activity” than a unilinear dialectical temporal one.⁵⁷ In contrast to the classical sonata, for instance, polyphonic pieces do not impose on the listening discipline an unequivocal temporal direction.

In accordance with musical polyphony, Said’s metaphorical elaboration relates to both the contrapuntal and the harmonic dimensions. This is what Said observes about counterpoint in *Culture and Imperialism*: “My point in this contrapuntal reading [of novels and operas] is to emphasize and highlight the disjunctions, not to overlook or play them down.”⁵⁸ In *Parallels and Paradoxes* he adds, “So the idea of different but intertwined histories is crucial to a discussion—without necessarily resolving them into each other.”⁵⁹ As to the harmonic dimension, we read: “I shall proceed on the assumption that whereas the whole of a culture is a disjunct one, many important sectors of it can be apprehended as working *contrapuntally* together.”⁶⁰ In the context of the latter dimension, Said also uses the term ‘integrative.’ It is noteworthy that he conceives of the harmonic dimension in this metaphor as arising out of this ‘working together,’ and not out of an external principle. This is in agreement with his view on musical polyphony. In the same work he writes: in polyphony “there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work.”⁶¹ I should add that this is an idealizing interpretation of musical polyphony, which does involve harmonic principles prior to, and transcending, individual compositions.

Of the four qualities of polyphony highlighted by Said—pleasure, inclusiveness, discipline, invention—it is certainly the necessity of inclusion which is underlined time and again in his polyphonic metaphor. In *Culture and Imperialism* he writes: “Instead of the partial analysis offered by the various national or systematically theoretical schools, I have been proposing the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together [...] in which the literature of one commonwealth is involved in the literature of others.”⁶²

For the sake of discussion I should like to further discern two types of musical polyphony, a centered one, and a decentered one. As an example of the centered one, we may listen to a composition from Bach’s

57 Ibid., xviii-ix.

58 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 146.

59 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 27.

60 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 194.

61 Ibid., 51.

62 Ibid., 318.

Orgelbüchlein on the chorale melody 'Hilf Gott daß's mir gelinge.' It offers a complex form of heterogenic polyphony. As we have noted earlier, this means a polyphony resulting from simultaneous voices with different melodic profiles. However, in this case, one voice is usually highlighted in organ playing as a *cantus firmus*, with a prominent sonority choosing specific stops. Moreover, this prominent voice is itself played in canon in the musical sense, that is, it is 'doubled' to two versions, mutually shifted in time, as a kind of musical self-reflection and self-sufficiency. The other two voices each have entirely their own profile and timbre. The polyphony in this case is centered, as it is composed around a canonical melody-in-canon.

This is the model I should like to bring forward for certain of Said's metaphorical uses of polyphony. These uses relate to readings in which the metropolitan canon of literature occupies a certain centrality. Some examples will illustrate this point. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said proposes the rereading of the cultural archive

not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and those of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.⁶³

The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded [...].⁶⁴

We must therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented [...] in such works.⁶⁵

From this perspective Said develops a reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*. His reading in terms of a centered polyphony, with a canonical voice and contrapuntal heterogenic ones, has led Markus Schmitz to observe in *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum* that Said does not denounce or deconstruct canonic European modern works, but completes them by means of bringing them back to the temporal-spatial background of their origin, which they deny.⁶⁶

63 *Ibid.*, 51.

64 *Ibid.*, 66-7.

65 *Ibid.*, 66.

66 Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 286.

The other model from music would be decentered heterogenic polyphony. It implies an interplay between voices with different melodic profiles with no one dominating. An excellent example is the first movement of Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941), "Liturgie de crystal," for clarinet, violin, violoncello and piano. In this music there is no more opportunity to discern a canonical 'self' and 'other.' In *Culture and Imperialism* we meet this type of polyphony as well, as in the exhortation,

we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.⁶⁷

In fact, this type of polyphony is the most utopian one in Said's work, both in his musical and critical writings. He considered the elaborative style of Messiaen as an 'alternative formation' in music, a contrapuntal and dialogical mode, in which the "nonlinear, nondevelopmental uses of theme or melody dissipate and delay a disciplined organization of musical time that is principally combative as well as dominative."⁶⁸ This is a music which offers an aesthetic of "being *in* time, experiencing it together, rather than in competition, with other musics, experiences, temporalities," "another way of telling, more digressive and contemplative."⁶⁹ Katherine Fry points to the spatial and divergent temporal structure of this ideal.⁷⁰

Utopian does not mean unattainable to Said. Contrary artists within the European classical music tradition such as Messiaen offer a perspective in which music "becomes an art not primarily or exclusively about authorial power and social authority, but a mode for thinking through or thinking with the integral variety of human cultural practices, generously, non-coercively, and, yes, in a utopian cast, if by utopian we mean worldly, possible, attainable, knowable."⁷¹

The metaphorical use of polyphony is deeply rooted in Said's personal life as an image of self. A striking feature here is that he emphasizes within polyphony the contrapuntal activity much more than the harmonic one. One should realize though that to observe a great deal of dissonance in

⁶⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 32.

⁶⁸ Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 102.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁰ K. Fry, "Elaboration, Counterpoint, Transgression: Music and the Role of the Aesthetic in the Criticism of Edward W. Said," *Paragraph* 31 (2008): 265-80, esp. 274.

⁷¹ Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 105; in this particular case Said speaks about Richard Strauss' *Metamorphosen*.

one's life, as Said does, requires a sense of consonance, and both concepts belong to the domain of harmony:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I'd like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. [...] With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.⁷²

Concluding Observations

With polyphony and counterpoint as a metaphor, Edward Said did not offer a consistent theory or method of reading. Also, polyphony would not do as a panacea to domesticate the oft-observed contradictions, tensions and inconsistencies in his work. Yet there is such fervor in his musical and critical elaborations of polyphony as to deserve further study.

While the determination of musical practices by social processes has been amply studied, cases of the inverse effect have also been described to a certain extent. For example, the musicologist Leppert has studied music as enforcing class and gender divisions.⁷³ Said stresses the novelty of this approach: to think about these effects as an invasion by music into non-musical realms, rather than the other way round. He points to the significant role of music in the schooling and channeling of romantic love and religious sentiment.⁷⁴ So why not investigate the possibilities of *contrapuntal* schooling in a postcolonial world? Why not propose a *polyphonic* attitude in criticism through music?

Before entering into these questions, I should like to stress that there are no indications in Said's work of the idea that music would be *subsumed* under politics, or politics under music. Art to Said is ideally a domain of resistance. It can only function that way when it is allowed a certain distance from socio-political processes. For artists, like intellectuals,

72 Edward W. Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir* (1999; New York: Vintage, 2000), 295.

73 *Ibid.*, 56-7.

74 *Ibid.*, 56-8.

“there must always be room for dissent, for alternative views, for ways and possibilities to challenge the tyranny of the majority, and [...] to advance human enlightenment and liberty.”⁷⁵ In *Parallels and Paradoxes* he emphasizes: “if every aesthetic phenomenon could be somehow recuperated to a political one, then in the end, there’s no resistance; whereas I think that it’s useful [...] to think of the aesthetic as an indictment of the political, and that it’s a stark contrast, forcefully made, to inhumanity, to injustice.” Music “is perhaps the final resistance to the acculturation and commodification of everything.”⁷⁶ This thought is clearly developed in line with Adorno.

Returning to the question about the transgression of the aesthetic into the social and political, we meet daunting problems. While in music, polyphony is a highly elaborated and theorized practice, how precise a concept is polyphony as a metaphor? Can it be re-worked and re-invented with a similar kind of precision? What would count as discipline? What would be the equivalent of the harmonic dimension, and the mutual responsibility between voices? Do we have to look here to Said’s universalist vision of a critically decolonized rational humanism, as a worldwide polyphony in a ‘humanistic concert’? Are we, however, able to have insight into, or even have control over, the larger context of cultural voices? In music one may acquire polyphonic proficiency in creating and handling voices, since it works with a limited set of elements within homogenic systems like scales and metres. However, textualities, let alone cultural traditions, evidently offer a lot of resistance to being viewed—let alone treated—as voices in a similar way.

This is the gist of the criticism in Schmitz’s *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*. He points to a basic ambiguity in Said’s position. While his cultural criticism is part of a counterdiscourse rejecting and impeding the independence of Western systems of representation, it belongs at the same time to a global system of cultural translation of which the hegemonic center is located in the Western metropolises. Thus there is an ambivalence between the condition of production of postcolonial writing and the consummation of cultural difference. This would result from the domestication of the process of postcolonial de-exoticizing at Western or Westernized universities.⁷⁷ The basic question arises: how to decenter the space of polyphonic interaction? What would be the equivalent of Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, ‘the quartet for the end of time’?

75 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 181.

76 Ibid., 168; see also Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 12-17.

77 Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 367.

It is essential here to understand how Said's contrapuntal reading is received in the Arab political and cultural world. Kamâl Abû-Dîb's translation of *Culture and Imperialism* into Arabic is important in this respect; different literary voices are now enabled to resonate with this text, extending the corpus of reference, and transversing, transgressing, undermining the alleged independence of a Western system of reference.⁷⁸ However, Ahmad Baydûn, in his *idwârd sa'îd wa-l-baht fî-l-imbrîyâlîya*, makes us aware of the fact that Said invites the critical revision of historically generated identities while assuming a degree of freedom which the conquered do not have.⁷⁹ Apparently not all can, or want to, join the utopia of a decentered heterogenic polyphony. Referring to this, Schmitz poses the question: What are the conditions of the (im)possibility of cultural decentralization, given the tension between competitive positions and the unequal power of (self-)representation?⁸⁰

It is important to realize here that the ideal of rational humanism is very exacting. It is music, in this case Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, which brings Said's thought to the limits, a realm beyond fixed identity. In an interview with Jacqueline Rose, in *Edward Said and the Role of the Critic* (2000), Said confessed, "I've become very, very impatient with the idea and the whole project of identity. [...] What's much more interesting is to try to reach out beyond identity to something else, whatever that is. It may be death. It may be an altered sense of consciousness that puts you in touch with others more than one normally is. It may be a state of forgetfulness [...]"⁸¹ This may well count as an indication in the worldly domain of what would be the simile of harmonic dimension in musical polyphony.

However, even if for Said, the center remains the Western metropolises as privileged places of critical decolonization, and even if the center remains the Western canon and Western sources of doubt and resistance, as Schmitz has it, this does not invalidate the *idea* of a decentered heterogenic polyphony. Said was well aware that we are all constrained by socially and intellectually determined conventions making it impossible to go beyond certain norms, and that there is an interplay between the individuality of the reader and 'the whole history of decisions, consensus, and

78 *Ibid.*, 295-6.

79 Quoted in *ibid.*, 295; see A. Baydûn, *idwârd sa'îd wa-l-baht fî-l-imbrîyâlîya* (Beirut: Dâr al-Gadîd, 1997)

80 *Ibid.*, 363.

81 "Edward Said talks to Jacqueline Rose," in *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*, ed. P.A. Bové (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 25, as quoted in Fry, "Elaboration, Counterpoint, Transgression," 274.

transmission of a text.⁸² So in that sense, all polyphony will be centered, as it is clear in music when we listen to Bach and Gould. There is no problem here, unless a particular centering becomes dominant. This would go against the spirit of polyphony.

Another criticism leveled against Said's polyphonic metaphor is the aesthetization of the world. We are speaking of a particular kind of aesthetization, that is, musicalization, with its very strong emphasis on formal organization.⁸³ For one thing, how to escape the coerciveness of polyphony and counterpoint as a metaphor which Said has so eloquently analyzed in his criticism of Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*? At several occasions he has criticized the perspective of making music—in particular the Austro-Germanic tradition—to represent the complete coincidence between aesthetic and socio-historical time.⁸⁴ Said has read Thomas Mann's musical narrative in *Doktor Faustus* as directly symbolic of totalitarianism. Leverkühn struck a pact with the devil, in a fable “for a musician whose technical interests replicate the parallelism possible between the least denotative and most formal of the arts, music, and life conceived in a Nietzschean mode, amorally, beyond good and evil.”⁸⁵

Would Said's concept of polyphony and counterpoint invite the same criticism as Habermas formulated against Nietzsche's recourse to the aesthetic, in particular music, as it presents “a chasm of forgetfulness against the world of philosophical knowledge and moral action, against the everyday”?⁸⁶

Katherine Fry has amply reflected on this question. She draws the attention to Said's emphasis on the “critical potential of formal processes over representations and ideology in artworks,” in particular in the case of polyphony.⁸⁷ In her view, the significance of Said's thinking on polyphony and the temporal structure of certain musical works or performances is “an aesthetic paradigm for undermining fixed identity and linear or totalizing narratives.”⁸⁸ It is important to realize here that for Said polyphony did not amount to fixed structures of composition, but essentially included performance. That is why his book *Musical Elaborations* ends in a vein of both utopia and attainability. Again, invention is a central no-

82 Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, 117.

83 Schmitz, *Kulturkritik ohne Zentrum*, 283.

84 Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 100.

85 *Ibid.*, 46.

86 Fry, “Elaboration, Counterpoint, Transgression,” 278.

87 *Ibid.*, 277.

88 *Ibid.*, 265.

tion in polyphonic performance: It is a “present-centered process of continually incomplete invention as a major constituent of [Said’s] notion of humanism.”⁸⁹

Edward Said makes us aware that polyphony is part of human intelligence. Polyphony is a human privilege. It has been developed in a particular way in Western classical music. This music may be considered—as a heritage to humanity—open to all. For this we need to transgress the conventional ideas about that musical tradition as elitist. At the same time, we may explore ways to translate the concept to other musical traditions, foremost in listening. Probably all musical traditions of the world have polyphonic aspects.

Said, as a contrapuntal intellectual, invites us to not let our polyphonic competence go waste, but to develop it as a basic mode of thought and action in a post-colonial, globalizing world. If this competence has been brilliantly proven in music, its transgression to other domains may well be envisaged. Polyphony as a mode of thought and action would be instrumental in coping with manifold, often conflicting interests, in undermining dominant narratives, and in going beyond fixed identity. In that sense, he considered polyphony not only as a human possibility, but also as a possible humanism. Indeed, if music is playing such a prominent role in the schooling of love and religion, why not in the schooling of our multifarious existence and coexistence? Why not explore the equivalents of polyphonic qualities here: pleasure, inclusiveness, discipline and invention? In fact, Edward Said’s writings press upon us that we need our shared polyphonic competence now more than ever. If his musical models Bach and Gould were at the limits of thought and rationality, it was because Said realized that life itself is an extreme occasion.

89 Ibid., 276.

