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Jazz and Poetry: Passage with Modulations

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Panel: Literature and the Other Arts

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Jazz and Poetry: Passage with Modulations

There are common laws both for poetry and for music. They also can be found in not so closely related disciplines: we search and find formal music connections with architecture, fine arts or even with exact sciences. Moreover, using modern sound spectrum analyzers, it is possible to discover, explore and even write down in notes such difficult sound combinations as human speech or the noise of the railway station clusters.

Music is different than noise primarily in the higher level of organizing, like poetry is different than everyday language. Formal and plot logic is necessary and exists both in poetry and in music: no matter what the rules of the game are – sonata form or dodecaphony, sonnet or free rhymes. If we simplify that formal logic, it can be put in to one general scheme: exposition, development, final. Of course, consequently, the structure is more complicated in more complicated forms. Often completely new musical or verbal information, separated constructional segments are introduced; however, that doesn't change the main idea. Exposition, development and final perfectly match the three human perception stages: to see, to scrutinize, and to understand (concerning music, we should probably use the term “to hear” and “to listen”).

Ritual music called **Bugaku** was popular in Japan in the eighth century. Later on, based on that music, the No theatre was formed. It was the top of the art synthesis at that time. Instrumental music, poetry, singing and movement were involved in the No theatre. The most important composition law of **Bugaku** music was called **zio cha kiu**. **Zio** – a slow introduction, **cha** – medium tempo theme development, **kiu** – fast tempo end, based on music material of the start. There was thought that every piece of art, like every natural phenomenon, was under the law of **zio cha kiu** – birth, growth and the death process. Every sound arises, grows and fades away – whether it is a piece of art, or sounds made by insects or a blow of the wind. **Zio cha kiu** – universal law. It is an expression of cosmic rhythm and existence content, a metaphor of birth, life and death. So, looking for the way to the synthesis of poetry and music, we should think not about innovations, but more about a long return backwards – when a poet and a singer was the same person; not only singing but also reciting. Homer, in his “Odyssey,” introduces an autobiographic character – singer Demodok. Muses gave him both good and bad – he was blind, but had a wonderful voice. We can only guess why these two arts – music and poetry – separated, as once they were one subject. Well, that's not the most important thing. We have two models of that art synthesis left: melodic – when music dominates and recitative – when text dominates. And we still use them in some ways. I believe, here – in the contact of music and poetry – we can look for the sources of pure – lyric and epic – poetry. In that case, we can impudently say: a poem is a text for a musical composition full of pauses.

The roots of modern poetry are often said to be rituals. Whether it is true or not, incantations hardly can help modern man, who has lost his saintliness. Only strange movements are left. Sometimes they can arise in distinct memories. Paraphrasing Dostoyevsky – if there is no God, everything is allowed, but nothing from that.

The idea of merging itself has certain charm and even eroticism, but it is hardly possible to create something different, something new than has been before. Still, we will get back to the old models. We can only play with exterior effects – synthesize exotic sounds, use

quadrophony. But will it be a synthesis of poetry and medicine, if I go to read poems dressed in pyjamas?

In, poetry like in music, the most important thing is to have an ear – both inside and outside. Minimal skills of composition and orchestration are also advisable. The skill not to ‘overload’, not to exalt too much, not to make the composition ‘dirty’ (inexperienced composers often think that the more instruments that are playing at the same time, the more “gravely” it should look), knowing how to crystallize the melody to get ready for the climax, also some practical musical experience in order to start with the proper note – are these simple things useful not only for musicians? Finally, taste training. The perception, that dissonance in the second octave played by five trumpets is neither expressive nor witty, just unreasonable. Before becoming a big original, a little bit of exercise would be useful. If there is no training, then there is only ‘jazzing’ left, but it has nothing in common with the real jazz. The term ‘jazzing’ some time ago was popular among so-called academic youth. Now people in Lithuania have started to use it again. The amorphy of the text and specific ignorance is often covered with ‘jazzing’. Not every chaos can be jazz.

The most popular structure of jazz is a square - something like a quatrain. It’s a strict structure rhythmically and harmonically divided into a certain number of bars – usually twelve. Every extra chord introduced, every digression from the usual standards made by the first radical jazz innovators – beboppers – was considered to be almost a personal insult. If we compare all structure of jazz composition, jazz ‘standard’, with, for example, Beethoven’s twelve variations for the piano, we would find defined similarities. Rules are the same both in jazz and in classical variations: theme exposition, a certain number of variations, and final – repetition of the theme. We shouldn’t be surprised, because the roots of jazz and classical variations are the same – folklore. Only the geography is different.

Jazz improvisation itself isn’t a kind of sound anarchy. There are certain jazz improvisation schools, certain styles with necessary attributes and strict canons. The first serious changes in jazz turned up only in the 1940’s, when beboppers, which I have already mentioned, took an unexpectedly brave step – they enlarged the square with several bars. Of course, it was out of the question that the square could be broken – boppers only twitched its sides. If it is possible to say, so – they dared asymmetry. Jazzmen give appropriate honor to the traditional form and not without a reason – the square I mentioned came from folklore and is universal. Using this form, musical time is natural and logical and there is enough spare room for improvisation. When the square is like a brother to you, when a performer, like Gershwin said, ‘has a rhythm,’ it’s hardly possible to make any mistakes. And only when you feel ‘at home’ in the square can you leave this safe territory and try more free forms – free jazz, ‘wilderness of individuality,’ gain right to find and to get lost, experiment to synthesize. No one started from free jazz. Even Miles Davis started from playing scales, but muses didn’t fly away, did they?

We can learn to create music and poetry and that’s not new, just jazzmen accept the importance of training, while poets speak about muses and inspiration. However, even if you know the basis, you may not become a poet or a jazzman. Knowing the basis lets you create under the rules, which are good and right, but that’s not enough. It’s enough only to create ‘right’ and normal composition, which has no other indications, except its normality. For a composition – no matter whether it is a sonata or a sonnet – to be worth something, not only the mastering of technique but also intuition, ability to see the whole complexion, and ability to pick up essence are necessary. A certain mistake and an amazingly simple solution to it are needed.

About fifty years ago, a group of American music scientists began to study the records of improvisations of several great jazz masters. The aim of the project was to find the nature of that rhythmic peculiarity which we can find only in jazz music. Mathematical calculations showed that all music samples they had were absolutely not rhythmic. For some reason, performers were a little bit late or a little bit fast. When music scientists put these rhythmic digressions back to where they should be, an amazing thing happened – jazz was gone. There was only banal dance music left.

How to learn to make that positive mistake, that arrhythmia of master?

Unfortunately, you won't find a word about that in any methodic literature. Just using the right of classical sonata form of side theme, I will remind you of one little word you have already heard: drive. This non-Lithuanian password sometimes works, sometimes not, however, that's better than squatting behind the door and shouting: open, sesame!

Besides, one of the No theater initiators, Zeami Motokio, also clearly and simply spoke about similar things. In his book about training the actors for No theater, he wrote about the necessity to obey general rules, then he says that the experienced actor may not obey them, and at the end he states that the master actor forgets even about the existence of any rules, because he just won't need them at all.

However, this slippery rule about rules is important for those who just need to write a good poem or a composition of music. Nowadays other, more pragmatic rules are popular. Besides, some of us also fall asleep when we reach some kind of cocoon phase – when we become a literary person. As though being a literary person was a treasure itself. In the world of musicians, everything is much more simple: you play good (the highest evaluation: 'you play like a God!') or you play bad, or you don't play at all. We can only imagine what musicians would say about their colleague if he decided to call himself 'a music person'. Here you can blow your trumpet as much as you want – if you do this without a purpose to hear 'do' of the third octave – you are nobody. On the whole, jazzmen are persons who don't speak much. They don't shed a few tears now and again just because the bigger part of the nation listens to the cheapest pop music, not to them. They would rather play – that's what they do and like the best. What more? And so in this enormous 'orchestra of all countries and all times jazzmen,' we can unexpectedly hear a bright solo of Vaizgantas - a famous Lithuanian writer of the twentieth century: *'Art is not a bacon business; crises are absolutely impossible in the art.'*