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“«Romantic» Transmutations”

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On April 19th and 20th Pedro Amaral's music came back to the Grand Auditorium of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation with the premiere performances of his new work for orchestra, “*Transmutations pour orchestre – La bibliothèque en feu*” (n.º 5.3), commissioned by the Matosinhos Municipality in 2005 and inspired by a painting of Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, “*La bibliothèque en feu*”, which belongs to the collection of the Foundation's Modern Art Centre. “*Transmutations pour orchestre*” was performed by the Gulbenkian Orchestra, under the young French conductor, Lionel Bringuier, within, so to speak, a “classical” programme: “*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*” by Claude Debussy and *Symphony no. 1* by Johannes Brahms.



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, “*La bibliothèque en feu*”
[“*The Library on Fire*”], 1974

To write a review of a premiere performance is neither simple nor straightforward task. Apart from the excitement, which it provokes, as a result of the curiosity to explore “the new and unknown”, it also includes the risk of “misunderstandings”, or “wrong interpretation” of the composer's intention. Music, particularly when performed live, is an ephemeral matter, which “appears while immediately disappearing” in space and time, leaving one with just a sensation, with which, at times, one does not know how to deal (not mentioning all the nuances of performance, of the “risk” of error, among many other aspects, putting one in an uncomfortable situation). Nevertheless, it is worth trying, since critique constitutes one of the elements of the huge machinery, which puts new works into circulation, emphasising the admiration on the one hand, or creating polemics on the other.

Therefore, describing “the adventures of my own soul” in the sound universe of this concert (with the focus given to Pedro Amaral's new work, obviously, for strategic and statutory reasons of this “New Music Review Lounge”), I have to emphasise that I had some objections to what concerns the programming, which presented “*Transmutations pour orchestre*” between two works from the “classical” repertoire. Perhaps I would prefer to listen to it during a festival of new music with an atmosphere, as one might say, “more experimental”, which attracts a quite different audience than the regular visitors of the Foundation's halls. On the other hand, discovering the sources of inspiration of this work, which apart from the referred painting by Vieira da Silva also include Anton Bruckner, Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner (as the composer himself reveals us), I understood the logic of the programmers of the concert, not only at a punctual level but also in a wider context of the Gulbenkian 2011/2012 Concert Season, which includes various works by romantic masters of orchestral practice (Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, among others). In order to make a short digression, I would like to emphasise that even though the “polite” repertoire, proposed by the Gulbenkian

2011/12 Concert Season is, as always, replete with celebrity-concerts of the highest quality, as a member of the audience I feel lack of some challenges, of music performances, which would cross the boarder from the “polished” to a “more provocative” or “more experimental” side (not mentioning the “shortage” of Portuguese musical creation in this repertoire, with the exception in form of Pedro Amaral’s new work constituting precisely the proof of this rule).

[«Transmutations pour orchestre – La bibliothèque en feu»] is a work with a long course, which crossed [20 years] of my existence”, reveals Pedro Amaral. The “departure point” was a piece for three pianos, written when the composer was still studying at the Lisbon Superior School of Music, “Música para Três Momentos do Espaço” (“Music for Three Moments in Space”), which never came to be performed. Later, already at the IRCAM in Paris, the composer used some aspect of this initial material in order to compose “Transmutations” for piano and live electronics (no. 5.1), which “explored spatiality as a compositional parameter”. In 2005 Pedro Amaral received from the Matosinhos Municipality a commission for a work for orchestra and he came back to the same “caudal”, developing a series of versions of this common material. However, it was the experience of teaching Orchestration at the Évora University (since 2008), which in a certain way transformed his manner of thinking of large instrumental formations, as well as the concert proposal of Risto Nieminen, director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (few months ago), that gave Pedro Amaral a definitive impulse to finish the manuscript created at that time. “This knowledge and pedagogical practice made me change a considerable part of my manuscript, rewrite lots of passages and even create unexpected bridges with some of the key works of orchestral thinking”, emphasises Pedro Amaral.

Pedro Amaral’s musical language “maturates” within the permanent expansion of various nucleuses of musical material (of a genetic base, in a manner of speaking) in the melodic and harmonic space – the form evolves through these zones of expansion, whereas the material is submitted to transformation in time. This technique of composing creates a tendency to join the works in cycles, in which the nucleuses of the primary material give origin to its various “transmutations”. In this context the inspiration in the painting of Vieira da Silva, “La bibliothèque en feu” (1974), makes all the sense, “through the concentration of forms and the chromatic palette, through the notable reduction of vocabulary, through the admirable deepening of gesture in a series of consequent variations”, in which simpler forms give origin “to developments of extraordinary richness”. It is precisely this process, which Pedro Amaral aimed to reproduce in his music.

“Transmutation pour orchestre” is a work, which evokes the tradition of the romantic orchestral potential, in a language of micro-motives, threading a dense musical flux with culminations appearing from the interior of the sonorous magma. The work’s formal construction, based on the interaction between various instrumental groups of the orchestra, can be divided into three sections (yet without obvious formal divisions, since it constitutes an almost continuous flux of tension, drama and energy) – the first one, full of energy and abrupt culminations, which presents the motivic nucleuses (for example the “Morse Code signal” of the horns) reappearing in various moments of the piece; the second one, which distinguishes itself through the appeasement and rarefaction of the sonorous texture; and finally the third one, which emerges directly from the second one recalling the energy of the initial part sustained by a constant pulsation of the bass drum and double basses, conducting the discourse to the final “noise”. Even though not recurring to direct quotations, “Transmutations pour orchestre” pays tribute to great masters of classicism, romanticism and post-romanticism, in what concerns melodic gestures and strategies of combining instruments – Anton Bruckner (the orchestration from the beginning of his Symphony no. 7 is almost literally reproduced in the transition to the last part of “Transmutations”), Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner regarding the “symbolic evocation of a composition mechanism” for a large orchestra, which in this case includes an expanded section of wind and brass instruments as well as an enlarged percussion set. Pedro Amaral also reveals that in the final of “Transmutations” there is also a blink of eye to Claude Debussy, “to one of his most emblematic pages” (“La Mer”), what is, perhaps, one more reason to dispel my doubts concerning the coherence of the concert’s repertoire. And even more... in an interview given to Antena 2 on April 20th, after the second performance of “Transmutations”, the composer also mentions a symbolic evocation of the final “euphony” from the second act of Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro”, which in his work gives a sensation of an “acoustic peace” in the last compasses of the score. These are, in fact, various “evocations, “inspirations” and “allusions” in a piece

which lasts, more or less, 20 minutes.

Regarding the performance of the Gulbenkian Orchestra led by the young French conductor Lionel Bringuier, I would like to emphasise two aspects. In a way I had that strong sensation that the Orchestra possesses the capacity to be a “solid instruments” (especially in the case of the string section), what in fact is one of the best compliments, which an orchestra can receive, yet on the other hand, I felt the lack of getting to grips with the details (in which, they say, the devil is hidden, at least according to a Polish idiom). In Debussy’s “Prelude”, one of the most emblematic works in the history of 20th century music (and therefore so difficult to be (re)interpreted, again and again), even though one maintained the ephemeral atmosphere of the “French impressionism”, at some points one would desire a clearer distinction of the timbric plans, from which, actually, depends the subtlety and richness of this music, and what, as a matter of fact, also happened in the case of “Transmutations pour orchestra”. The variety of orchestral plans, the distinction of textures, of colours, of lights and shadows, and above all the rhythmical precision (since “Transmutations” employs complex rhythms, such as for example the combination of binary and tertiary units) are qualities, which create the flux in Pedro Amaral’s new work, carrying, in a certain way, the orchestra’s sonority to its own limits. These are precisely the qualities, which in the interpretation of the Gulbenkian Orchestra under Lionel Bringuier could be more elaborated and “audible”.

And as for my conclusions of more personal and, so to speak, “emotional” nature, I think that Pedro Amaral’s new orchestral work has an expressivity, which attracts attention, precisely through the “simplification” of musical language, giving us (the listeners) clear points of reference, just as, by the way, did Witold Lutosławski 20 years ago in his emblematic Symphony no. 3. There are no doubts that “Transmutations pour orchestre – La bibliothèque en feu” belongs to the tradition of orchestral composition since romanticism of the 19th century, passing through the “lessons” of the 20th century – Claude Debussy (colour), Igor Stravinsky (rhythm) and Karlheinz Stockhausen (space). Nevertheless these “transmutations” seem to me somewhat discontinuous and reserved in gesture, not taking advantage of the sonorous capacity of the orchestral apparatus and not encountering this “extraordinary richness” hidden in the image of the “Library on Fire”, which certainly constitutes a departure point for creating exceptional narratives (even if more abstract). As a listener who, feeling a bit intimidated, approaches the orchestral apparatus I would like to have an opportunity to follow a great narrative, such as, for example, Brahms’ Symphony no. 1, which filled up the concert’s second part, or such as, in a more extreme case, Bruckner’s Symphony no. 7, to which Pedro Amaral makes reference, or still, such as Messiaen’s hypnotic “Turangalia”... Nevertheless, in order to conclude, I “bow my head to” Pedro Amaral for his courage and capacity to master this demanding mean of expression, which in the form of “Transmutations pour orchestre”, without any doubts, makes up a subtle dialogue with tradition, and I look forward to his next “adventures” in the domain of orchestral music.

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