



Beauty and Life

Exploring
the anthropology
behind the fine arts

edited by
Rafael Jiménez Cataño

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behind the fine arts

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Rafael Jiménez Cataño

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Introduction

Few things unite the authors of this volume, since their fields of activity and interest are all very different, but those few points of unity are very strong. Faced with the prospect of collaboration, they were all captivated by the idea of exploring, each one in their own artistic field, such ideas as the revelation of the human in the work of art; or the translation of this epiphany into a humanizing process; and hence the educational power of the artistic experience and its relational value, because, while always a good for the individual, it is hard to explain without communion. This sensitivity has characterized from the beginning the activity of Poetics & Christianity (an ongoing seminar of the School of Communication at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross), which is the humus in which this volume was born.

Among the many formulations of the hermeneutic principle—the revelation of the human in the work of art—Gadamer’s is remarkable. He claims on the artwork that “we learn to understand ourselves in it.”¹ He places at the basis of his thesis a description in which all the co-authors would likely recognize themselves: “inasmuch as we encounter the work of art in the world and a world in the individual work of art, this does not remain a strange universe into which we are magically transported for a time,” but on the contrary, we discover ourselves in it.²

So it is not a luxury, as Roger Scruton was able to express in many ways, or—as Rob van Gerwen wanted to re-

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 86.

² Cf. Massimiliano Mirto, “L’opera d’arte come epifania della verità dell’ente in Hans Georg Gadamer,” *Ars Brevis* 19 (2013): 355-360.

phrase it—³ it is “a necessity for a life worth living,” which recalls George Lakoff’s well-known title *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), although it is true that there is something more: not simply a reality of everyday life, but a necessity for a flourishing life. “Our favourite works of art seem to guide us to the truth of the human condition and, by presenting completed instances of human actions and passions, freed from the contingencies of everyday life, to show the worthwhileness of being human.”⁴ On a YouTube video of Schubert’s last three piano sonatas, I came across the following comments from 2020: “This music, at this moment, saved my day. It is already a day with sense;” and “I love you Schubert, you are one of the reasons that I am alive and feeling the life in my veins.”⁵

This entire volume deals in some way with this educational power, although we could say that the contributions by Federica Bergamino, Fulvia Strano, and Silvana Noschese are primarily concerned with this. Giampiero Pizzol’s intervention especially highlights the humanizing aspect of contact with living beauty, as humanizing is the experience of dwelling in a city whose creators have not lost sight of the fact that it is built for human life (see the text by Juan Carlos Mansur).

Jaana Parviainen’s and Juan José García-Noblejas’ contributions on the nature of the knowledge that gives reason for artistic creation and its fruition are profound and precise. To do this, they resort to epistemologies that are

³ Rob van Gerwen, “Roger Scruton on ‘Why Beauty is not a Luxury but a Necessity for a Life Worth Living’”, Soeterbeeck Instituut, Ravenstein, June 12, 2009.

⁴ Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford, UK - New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.

⁵ Brilliant Classics, “Schubert: The last three piano sonatas,” *YouTube*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcnrUbSqNuY>, accessed October 17, 2021. Pianists: Folke Nauta, Frank van de Laar, and Klára Würtz.

distant from each other in time, apart from the fact that their fields of focus and application differ: explaining the knowledge of one's own body and movement in dance, or the specificity of telling a story and how it relates to truth and to life. The chapter written by Michela Cortini and Giuseppe Madonna is similar, in that they inquire about what the contact with art offers to human life, comparing it with what science can offer, according to the epistemological proposal of Pavel Florensky, both a scientist and an authority on artistic matters.

Two reflections come from the very heart of the practice of educating with art: that of Giampiero Pizzol, in the world of theater; and the contribution of Silvana Noschese, in the field of music, specifically the impact of choirs in schools and even with the nuance of healing. In these non-academic essays one can perceive the vivacity of art coming alive in people, and in this they share the atmosphere with the reflections on the dynamic encounter with art in museums (Fulvia Strano), which, as in the case of creators, cannot be pure spontaneity.

The term “encounter” has a personal value; it should not be given a purely metaphorical reading. Scruton attributes to the work of art a capacity to donate, which is something characteristic of the person (its effusive character, as García-Noblejas calls it): “My pleasure in beauty is therefore like a gift offered to the object, which is in turn a gift offered to me.”⁶ Steiner also described this event as the encounter of two people, of two initiatives: “Where freedoms meet, where the integral liberty of donation or withholding of the work of art encounters our own liberty of reception or refusal, *cortesia*, what I have called *tact of heart*, is of the essence.”⁷

⁶ Scruton, *Beauty*, 31.

⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 155.

Of course, this set of texts does not pretend to be systematic about the nature of art, and neither will I pretend to be systematic here. It does not seem to me the place to decide whether beauty defines the “fine arts.” In some languages it would seem so by the name (“belle arti”), and although the title of the volume speaks of “beauty,” we do not want to make it a whole aesthetics. In fact, when discussing humanization as we do here, we sometimes prefer to speak of the experience of beauty, not of art, with the understanding that the first noun is broader than the second and includes it. Nor is this the time to clarify whether art is imitation and, if so, of what kind. In my contribution on Schnittke’s music, the idea of imitation does come up, but only because the composer sometimes followed imitative criteria (the symbolic criterion being more frequent). The revelation of the human condition in his music sometimes assumes the form of mirroring, in a way that recalls Octavio Paz’s explanation of the essence of the poetic word: “It is not an explanation of our condition, but an experience in which our condition, itself, is revealed or manifested.”⁸ Before our very eyes something happens about which we can say: I am like this, I am made like this.

Allow me to explain a curious fact. To discuss Alfred Schnittke in one chapter, and Alan Parsons and Eric Woolfson in another, would seem like a strident approach. I note that Schnittke, one of the most relevant classical⁹ composers of the second half of the 20th century, is known for his frequent use of orchestration that recalls the sonorities of progressive rock. What happens is that he was very up to date with the rock music of the time, which, moreover, he

⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre* (The Texas Pan American Series, Kindle Edition, 2013), chapter 7, “The consecration of the instant”.

⁹ What in German has come to be called “E-Musik”, i.e. “ernste Musik” or “serious music”, as distinct from “U-Musik”, which would be “Unterhaltungsmusik” or “entertainment music”. Music that is not “classical” would be “popular”. All designations have their own weaknesses.

listened to every day at home, since his son Andrey cultivated it (as a performer and composer) and collaborated on some of his works.¹⁰

There are many stories of what we could call “social redemption” through art. A well-known one is that of the youth orchestra program in Venezuela that has rescued young people from a life of misery and a nihilistic atmosphere that frequently involves drugs and crime. Known as “El Sistema,” the program has been adopted by other countries with excellent results. A symbolic example is a musician who grew up in this program, who as of this very year is the artistic director of the Paris Opera. In another artistic field, the capillary effect of the cultivation of urban art in some depressed neighborhoods of the Mexican city of Puebla, which are marked by poverty and crime, has been noticeable in recent years. The non-profit organization La Rueda has achieved significant decrease in the rate of violence, accompanied by a social climate that was previously unimaginable: the inhabitants are proud of their neighborhoods, which are now visited by tourists because there are things worth seeing and because there is safety in the streets. These are realities that are in tune with Mansur’s reflections in this volume and in other areas of his work, such as the seminars he regularly organizes on the aesthetics of the city. One of these seminars in 2019 discussed the need for quality city-design, the social effects of the lack of beauty in a neighborhood (gentrification, for example), the right to beauty, and other topics which show us that it is difficult to delve into aesthetics without touching ethics.

This keen eye on dwelling compensates for the relative absence of architecture in this volume, just as the other visual arts are included in the contribution on museum

¹⁰ Cf. Alexander Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 189 and 208.

didactics and other references, in particular the one to Florensky about the icon and its relationship with perspective representation (see the essay by Cortini and Madonna).

On the seventh centenary of Dante, the year in which we worked together on this project, a 2008 letter from Benigni to Dante circulated, in which he lists at length all that he thinks we learn from reading the *Divine Comedy*, where we find the following beautiful and profound remark. We learn:

that, after reading you, we can no longer look at others distractedly,
but as mysterious treasures, repositories of an immense destiny¹¹.

Aesthetics without ethics is, to say the least, inhuman. And thus it is understandable that the first and the last three items that Benigni gives are:

that God needs mankind
[...]
that there is someone who never turns his gaze
/from us, because he loves us;
that beauty is born painfully;
and that art is a gift.

The spiritual dimension of art seems to derive simply from the structure of the human person, this dynamic character by which everyone is always in a process of becoming—to become who one is. And it is possible to deviate. Thomas Merton speaks of the frequency with which an artist can make serious efforts to be someone other than himself. “For many absurd reasons, they are

¹¹ Roberto Benigni, “Lettera a Dante,” *Dante Society London*, <https://dantesocietylondon.com/robertobenigniletteraadante.html>, accessed October 14, 2021; for the English translation: Mary Manning, “Roberto Benigni: Dante is Beautiful,” *Oltre i confini – Beyond Borders*, <https://www.marymanning.net/lingua-e-cultura/roberto-benigni-dante-is-beautiful/>, accessed October 14, 2021.

convinced that they are obliged to become somebody else who died two hundred years ago and who lived in circumstances utterly alien to their own.”¹² Merton presents this phenomenon to apply it to the personal relationship with God that someone may not find by trying to live it according to someone else’s relationship.

We have here one of the cases in which the artistic experience illuminates other areas of human life. This is especially true of those who do not live fully in art, in a professional way, because the poor artist is a man like any other. In fact, he is often more fragile, with the misfortune that what for others is fresh air, a new light, a rest along the road, for him can be the thing he is struggling with every hour of every day. Etty Hillesum, much quoted on spiritual matters, was a writer with all the psychological profile of the artist, and she strongly felt this vulnerability:

There are moments in which it is suddenly brought home to me why creative artists take to drink, become dissipated, lose their way, etc. The artist really needs a very strong character if he is not to go to pieces morally, not to lose his bearings. I don’t quite know how to put it properly, but I feel it very strongly in myself at certain moments. All my tenderness, all my emotions, this whole swirling soul-lake, soul-sea, soul-ocean, or whatever you want to call it, wants to pour out then, to be allowed to flow forth into just one short poem, but I also feel, if only I could, like flinging myself headlong into an abyss, losing myself in drink.

After each creative act one has to be sustained by one’s strength of character, by a moral sense, by I don’t know what, lest one tumble, God knows how far. And pushed by what dark impulse? I sense it inside me; even in my most fruitful and most creative inner moments, there are raging demons and self-destructive forces. Still, I feel that I am learning to

¹² Thomas Merton, “Integrity,” in *Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949), 98.

control myself, even in those moments. That is when I suddenly have the urge to kneel down in some quiet corner, to rein myself in and to make sure that my energies are not wildly dissipated.¹³

This is a development of what Benigni stated when he said that “beauty is born painfully” (*la bellezza nasce terribilmente*). But in addition to this there is also the reality of the gift, pointed out by Benigni himself, and by Steiner and Scruton, who are remarkably bold in recognizing in the work of art the characteristics of a person. It is one of the reasons why the encounter with art, one of those authentic encounters, which do not happen often, has something prodigious, a touch of the other world. It is a thrill that is very effectively conveyed by a page from *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, where a highly intelligent and hypercritical pre-adolescent girl seems to yield to the enchantment of a choir, transforming her venom into tears of surrender:

Yesterday afternoon was my school’s choir performance. [...]

Eventually we got to the gym, everybody found a place as best they could. I was forced to listen to the most asinine conversations coming at me from below, behind, every side, all around (in the bleachers), and in stereo (cell phone, fashion, cell, who’s going out with who, cell, dumb-ass teachers, cell, Cannelle’s party) and then finally the choir arrived to thundering applause. [...]

Every time, it’s a miracle. Here are all these people, full of heartache or hatred or desire, and we all have our troubles and the school year is filled with vulgarity and triviality and consequence, and there are all these teachers and kids of every shape and size, and there’s this life we’re struggling through full of shouting and tears and laughter and fights and break-ups and dashed hopes and unexpected luck—it all disappears, just like that, when the choir begins to sing. Everyday life vanishes into song, you are suddenly

¹³ Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life. The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: An Owl Book Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 91. [March 17, 1942, 9:00 pm].

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overcome with a feeling of brotherhood, of deep solidarity, even love, and it diffuses the ugliness of everyday life into a spirit of perfect communion. Even the singers' faces are transformed: it's no longer Achille Grand-Fernet that I'm looking at (he is a very fine tenor), or Déborah Lemeur or Ségolène Rachtet or Charles Saint-Sauveur. I see human beings, surrendering to music.

Every time, it's the same thing, I feel like crying, my throat goes all tight and I do the best I can to control myself but sometimes it gets close: I can hardly keep myself from sobbing. So when they sing a canon I look down at the ground because it's just too much emotion at once: it's too beautiful, and everyone singing together, this marvelous sharing. I'm no longer myself, I am just one part of a sublime whole, to which the others also belong, and I always wonder at such moments why this cannot be the rule of everyday life, instead of being an exceptional moment, during a choir.

When the music stops, everyone applauds, their faces all lit up, the choir radiant. It is so beautiful.

In the end, I wonder if the true movement of the world might not be a voice raised in song.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* (New York: Europa Editions 2008), 185.

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Rafael Jiménez Cataño
Rome, November 22, 2021
Feast of Saint Cecilia

Gadamer's quotation of this introduction is found more completely on one of the front cover's flaps. The full references for Emerson's text on the other flap and that of Potok on the back cover (or on the book profile, in the electronic versions) are these:

- Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 278.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Life and Literature, lecture 2: Art*, in *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1843-1871* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 217.

Three Approaches to the Mystery of the Human Person through Schnittke's Music

RAFAEL JIMÉNEZ CATAÑO

My first academic reflection on Schnittke's music was in an attempt to glean a sort of "narrative of redemption" from different art forms and genres.¹ It was the first edition of the seminar *Poetics & Christianity*, 2003. In that study I focused on themes such as fallenness, grace, mystery, need for redemption, afterlife, liberation, etc., divided into six sections: poetry, novels, short stories, films, and music (in two sections, both devoted to Schnittke).² This paper was read by Prof. Alexander Ivashkin (1948-2014), who was a cellist and biographer of Schnittke as well as his personal friend, who invited me to participate in Schnittke Day, a short conference inaugurating the Schnittke Archive in Goldsmiths College at the University of London, which was held on February 25, 2006. On that occasion, in front of musicians and musicologists, many of them friends or close acquaintances of the composer, I presented what essentially constitutes the text that is now published here. The proceedings were not published. Shortly after, in March of 2007, Prof. Ivashkin participated in the third edition of *Poetics & Christianity*, which was organized by the faculties of

¹ "Retoriche della redenzione," in *Poetica & Cristianesimo*, ed. Rafael Jiménez Cataño and Juan José García Noblejas (Roma: Edusc, 2005), 87-108.

² For poetry I quoted Nezahualcoyotl, an Ancient Mexican poet. For romance, *The Silent Cry*, by Kenzaburo Oe. For short stories, "The Little Mermaid", by Andersen as well as the Walt Disney version. For film, *Amores Perros*, by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

philosophy and communication at Santa Croce, with the keynote address “Symbols, Metaphors and Irrationalities in Twentieth-Century Music.”

I. WHAT DOES MYSTERY MEAN?

The two musical sections of my 2003 dissertation were entitled “Seizing the unseizable” and “The ever-open biography.” These titles directly point to the mystery of the human person. Indeed, every person is always more than what we know about him or her. This is mystery. Every person is always more than what he or she is at the present: growth is an essential feature of the human person. This is mystery. The growth of the person introduces the question of sameness and otherness, the question of an “ever-open biography.” This question is very present in Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, throughout the entire drama, and with a significant formulation when the distinction between humans and trolls is explained—the former say to each other, as a maxim for life, “Man, to thyself be true!,” the latter say “Troll, to thyself be—enough!” (“It is enough to be yourself!”)³

A dynamic interpretation of “Be yourself!” is the Pindaric imperative, from the second *Pythian Ode*: “Become who you are!”⁴ But a static interpretation, which is also possible, would be just another formulation of the troll’s maxim. This ambiguity pervades the life of *Peer Gynt*. We have to recognize that the question about what it means to be faithful to oneself pervades the life of all of us. In 1986, John Paul II defined sanctity with similar words. Who are the saints? Those who “have lived with totality their own calling to be fully themselves, in accord with the wonder-

³ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, Act II, scene 6 (cited edition: 70): “Mand, vær dig selv!” - “Troid, vær dig selv-nok!”

⁴ Pindar, *Pythian Ode*, II, 72: “genoi’ hoios essi”.

ful originality the Creator had put in them.”⁵ He said “be,” but there is a call and a response, and therefore a process of becoming. In this connection between being oneself and having to become another, love is essential, as Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* also eloquently shows in the figure of Solvejg. After John Paul II we can quote his successor, who writes: “This process is always open-ended [*ein Vorgang, der fortwährend unterwegs bleibt*]; love is never ‘finished’ [*fertig*] and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself.”⁶

This is a reality of daily life. A very concrete manifestation of this peculiar aspect of the human condition—although it could sound like something that comes from a sitcom—is the question all married people can ask to their spouses, especially after a long life together: “Did you know who you were marrying?” Maybe all possible answers can be reduced to these two: “I did... and yet I did not” and “I did not... and yet I did.” This could be called the “metonymic structure of the person,”⁷ a structure we can also recognize in the works of the person, especially in work of art. In persons and in works of persons the reality goes beyond what we grasp, beyond the here and now.

2. SOME INDICATIONS OF THE AWARENESS OF MYSTERY

We see from the above that all of us live in a mysterious stream of life, and that artists in particular deal with mystery. My impression is that Schnittke lived an especially harmonious unity in the face of mystery, a unity of *being aware* of it, *expressing* it, *living* it. There are, in my opinion,

⁵ John Paul II, *Angelus*, November 1st, 1986.

⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus caritas est* (2005), n. 17.

⁷ Cf. Rafael Jiménez Cataño, “Wishful Thinking and Argumentation through Metonymy,” in *Language, Culture, Rhetoric: Cultural and Rhetorical Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Cornelia Ilie (Edsbruk: Akademityck, 2004), 36–46.

four indications of this: hints at transcendence (the reality beyond this world) in almost every type of work; the conception of good and evil; the personal way of living love; and the way of conceiving the process of musical creation.

2.1. *Mystery, not for fun*

In years of searching, Schnittke had felt attracted to anthroposophy, cabala, I-Ching and other esoteric currents of thought,⁸ and the disappointment with the answers of this search pushed him to seriously embrace Christianity.⁹ The basis for his rejection of those doctrines was their pretension to solve the mystery—the “mystery” of the esoteric is not authentic mystery; it is a sort of rationalization of mys-

⁸ On the presence of numerical games and symbols of various kinds in twentieth-century composers, a phenomenon that is different from esotericism, but in a way shares a sensibility, cf. Alexander Ivashkin, “Symbols, Metaphors and Irrationalities in Twentieth-Century Music,” in *Mimesi, verità e fiction. Ripensare l'arte. Sulla scia della Poetica di Aristotele*, ed. Rafael Jiménez Cataño and Ignacio Yarza (Roma: Edusc 2009), 70-72; on the special case of Scriabin's theosophy, see 72-73; 2016 edition, 416-418, 418-419. Cf. Victoria Adamenko, *Neo-Mythologism in Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007); A. Ivashkin, “The Schnittke code,” in *Schnittke Studies*, ed. Gavin Dixon (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 197-207. On codices of faith expression and other religious allusions within the Soviet prohibition, cf. Victoria Adamenko, “‘Faith through scepticism’: Desacralisation and resacralisation in Schnittke's First Symphony,” in *Schnittke Studies*, 162-168.

⁹ Cf. Alexander Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 156-158; see also Adamenko, *Neo-Mythologism*, 262. However, “according to Irina Schnittke, the composer's widow, ‘God was there [in Schnittke's life] from the beginning’ [Interview, February 27, 2006, London]. She confirmed that Dostoevsky, with his constant search for God, deeply influenced the composer. Other facts also prove that the concept of God was not at all foreign to Schnittke's philosophical and religious views and made its way into his compositions,” Adamenko, *ibid.*, 252.

tery.¹⁰ The spirit of the time is probably not of much help for us to understand how relevant and serious this position was, as the demand for cheap mystery is currently high, and so is the desire to experience “inside knowledge,” although one usually becomes the insider of an eclectic, “do it yourself” religion, that which Umberto Eco called on *The Daily Telegraph* “the birth of a plethora of new idols, [...] from strange pagan cults and sects to the silly, sub-Christian superstitions of *The Da Vinci Code*.”¹¹ This is like playing with the mystery, a sort of mystery fiction, quite in contrast to living the mystery, as Schnittke says:

If one starts with Jesus Christ and takes the Gospel of Saint John, the writings of Saint Augustine, Meister Eckhart, or Saint Francis, in every case we are dealing with a mystery that will always remain a mystery, even when it is manifested through the naive and sunny disposition of Saint Francis. It is a mystery you cannot explain.¹²

2.2. *Good and evil*

Schnittke's music reflects a conception of divine omnipotence that, rather than involving the elimination of evil, involves obtaining good even from evil.

¹⁰ “As soon as the mystery is systematized, as soon as it becomes a question of mysticism being measured out, as in the case of Rudolf Steiner or anyone else, I lose interest completely. I lose faith in it right away. As long as human beings hold on to the feeling that the mystery is truly limitless, they never reach the stage of relative systematization, and one can always place reliance on what they say. But as soon as they begin to systematize, they immediately fall into one of the many errors caused by knowledge that is relative only, and I'm no longer interested,” A. Schnittke, “From Schnittke's Conversations with Alexander Ivashkin [1985-94],” in *A Schnittke Reader*, ed. Alexander Ivashkin [Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002], 7-8).

¹¹ Umberto Eco, “God isn't big enough for some people,” *The Daily Telegraph*, November 27, 2005.

¹² Schnittke, “Schnittke's Conversations”, 7.

I need to start from the assumption that the world of spirit is ordered, structured by its very nature, that everything which causes disharmony in the world, all that is monstrous, inexplicable and dreadful—and this is something which Ivan Karamazov could not understand—is also part of this order. And the formula for the world harmony is most likely linked not to the blurring of evil but to the fact that, when drawn into a harmonious picture of the whole, even evil changes its function. By complementary interaction the negative elements cancel each other out, and as a result something harmonious and beautiful is born.¹³

Based on this statement about the role of evil, one might think that Schnittke viewed it with ambivalence or even considered it somehow necessary, but such a Gnostic position is quite alien to Schnittke; in fact, this was a sensitive point for him. An answer he gave in an interview leaves no room for doubt; while narrating an episode of hypnosis that upset him, he said: “Two intelligent, eloquent people were trying to prove that there is no boundary between good and evil... It was the kind of Manichaeism that immediately reveals the Devil at work.”¹⁴

To me, a very striking thing in reading Schnittke’s biography by Alexander Ivashkin was the presence of mystery in Schnittke’s personal journey. Reading the biography and listening to the works I was touched by the anthropological depth of the latter and its openness to transcendence and not only in sacred works. All of his music, Ivashkin says, “deals with doubt, self-analysis, temptation, repentance and the conflict between good and evil.”¹⁵

¹³ Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke*, 155-156.

¹⁴ Schnittke, “Schnittke’s Conversations”, 32. Cf. Adamenko, *Neo-Mythologism*, 258.

¹⁵ Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke*, 152. And Dmitri Smirnov: “Everybody knew Schnittke’s strong interest in the subject of God and religion, the subject, which has always been highly important for Russian intelligentsia and always forbidden in Soviet time. This theme was raised again and again as a form of protest against communist ideology, for the freedom of conscience and for the choice to believe or not,” “Schnittke’s

He also declares in a booklet about the *Concerto Grosso n.2*: “The sphere of virtuosic concertizing is becoming the field of conflict, fight of the personal and beyond the personal, transient and eternal, creative and destructive.”¹⁶ “His music,” Adrian Searle writes, “makes appeals to dark spaces, to mysteries, to enduring things, certainties.”¹⁷ And Andrew Marr notes: “More often than not, I hear faith, or at least faith in the midst of doubt, in much of Schnittke’s music.”¹⁸

2.3. *Love in human life*

I will make a very short remark concerning the way to live love. Being sensitive to faithfulness means being sensitive to the growth of the person, to the ever-open biography. In a person there is matter to deepen the entire life, and here we can recognize that “underwater” life which Schnittke sees in good music.¹⁹ Therefore, something in Schnittke’s life confirms his intuition about the mystery of the person. It is what Ivashkin attested to with disarming simplicity: “Alfred and Irina have always been in love.”²⁰

Choral Music of 70-80s,” September 2001, *Dmitri N. Smirnov & Elena Firsova*, Home page, - 17.7.2014 - <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/dmitrismirnov/Schnittke1.html>). Consider the touching letter Schnittke wrote in 1990 to firmly request that he not be awarded the Lenin Price (cf. Ivashkin, *A Schnittke Reader*, 41-42).

¹⁶ A. Ivashkin, CD Gramzapis 10-00068, Russia 1992.

¹⁷ “Voices in the Dark,” January 12, 2001, *The Guardian*, - 17.7.2014 - <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/jan/12/artsfeatures> .

¹⁸ Andrew Marr, “Alfred Schnittke,” *Alfred Harrievich Schnittke (1934-1998)*, - 23.3.2021 - <https://alfredschnittke.wordpress.com/2007/09/17/168/>. Andrew Marr is a Benedictine Abbot of the Episcopal Church in the US.

¹⁹ Cf. *Alfred Schnittke*, 135.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

2.4. *Carving music*

The way of conceiving the creative process is also a field in which Schnittke manifests awareness of mystery. Contrary to what anyone who observes a creator from the outside might think, it did not seem important to him to “keep control” of the process, but just the opposite, because it is the work that directs everything. “It is as if you do not belong to yourself. As long as you have this feeling, your work is never a burden. You are not the one prescribing, you are doing something prescribed for you by someone else.”²¹ It is an experience that is found in several areas of artistic creation. In the face of his own texts, Octavio Paz asked himself: “who writes this that I read?”²² “to whom writes the one who writes in me?”²³ And George Steiner attributes to the work itself a freedom of donation,²⁴ so that our encounter with the artwork is an encounter of freedoms.

The artwork thus seems pre-existent. Michelangelo claimed that he already saw the figure within the piece of marble. Several anecdotes on this subject originated from the sculptures of the Medici Tombs in Florence, especially *The Night*. A sixteenth-century French traveler reconstructed the words of the master from eyewitness accounts:

I had a marble on which was the statue you see, and I had no more work to do than to remove the pieces that surrounded it and prevented it from being distinguishable. Take any marble or stone, large or small: there is not a single one that does not contain some effigy or statue, but it is necessary to know how to recognize it properly so as not to remove more than what prevents it from being seen, for there is danger in removing too

²¹ Schnittke, “Schnittke’s Conversations”, 12.

²² *El mono gramático* (Seix Barral, Barcelona 1988), 55.

²³ “Escritura,” in *Libertad bajo palabra* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), 66.

²⁴ Cf. *Real presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 155.

much as well as in removing too little. But for those who know how to do it, there is nothing easier.²⁵

This task of *removing* is characteristic of sculpture, at least as Michelangelo conceived it. There is another element in his description: the work of art, which is already there. This is an aspect that also occurs in other arts. Novelists and screenwriters testify that they cannot do whatever they want with their characters.²⁶ When Dostoevsky wrote *The Demons*, he had to obey the human profile that faced him, and explained it as follows in a letter:

A new character came onto the scene who claimed to be the real protagonist of the novel, and so the previous protagonist (an interesting character, but one who really did not deserve the role of protagonist) retreated into the background. This new protagonist fascinated me so much that I began writing all over again.²⁷

An anonymous prince of pre-Hispanic Mexico praises the king of Huexotzinco (15th-16th century) for his talent for preserving the beauty of the poems he *receives*: “From within the heaven come / These beautiful flowers, these beautiful songs: / They are made ugly by our numen, they are made ugly by our art. / Except by you, O king Tecayehuatzin!”²⁸

Schnittke also describes his creative experience as an effort to remain faithful to something that already exists: “The whole of your work is not at all a putting together and carrying out of technical instructions; it

²⁵ Giovanni Papini, *Vita di Michelangiolo nella vita del suo tempo* (Milano: Garzanti, 1949), 324.

²⁶ Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1991), 485-486, 531-532.

²⁷ Letter to Nikolaj Nikolaevic Strachov, Dresden, October 9 (21), 1870. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Lettere* (Milano: Il saggiaiore, 2020), 839.

²⁸ *Cantares Mexicanos*, f.II r^o, lín. 27ff., in Ángel María Garibay K., *Historia de la Literatura Náhuatl* (México: Porrúa, 2007), 347.

is a kind of listening in to something that is already there.”²⁹ He specifically denies the idea of “putting together,” because that is what the word “composer” suggests. In his description the artist does not appear as master of his invention. His creature stands before him with an identity that he has to respect, like the effigy that Michelangelo saw inside the stone. That is why Schnittke goes on to say that this circumstance is decisive, “this predetermines everything—the significance of the details and the rational interpretation of them,”³⁰ from which he could come to the conclusion: “I am just fixing what I hear... It is not me who writes my music, I am just a tool, a bearer.”³¹

3. FIRST APPROACH: VELVET DEPTH

Unlike the rationalization made by the esoteric, in Schnittke’s music the mystery is present as such, as a truth that has to be *lived*. Ivashkin speaks of a *velvet depth* of his mature style, which refers to the “density of the sign,” “symbolic depth of the enunciation.”³² Schnittke asserted that “all the exact technique, all what remains ‘hidden’ in music—acronyms, symbols, proportions, signals and references—is perceived in some way. A work without such an ‘underwater’ dimension cannot leave a long-lasting impression.”³³ This interaction

²⁹ Schnittke, “Schnittke’s Conversations”, 12-13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ Schnittke’s words quoted by Ivashkin, “The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty,” *The Musical Quarterly* 76-4 (1992): 546.

³² Cf. A. Ivashkin, “Alfred Schnittke: la musica e l’armonia del mondo,” in *Schnittke*, ed. Enzo Restagno (Torino: EDT, 1993), 118. This formulation comes from the Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili (cf. *ibid.*, 84).

³³ Schnittke’s words quoted by Ivashkin, “Alfred Schnittke”, 125; cf. 119f.

between underwater and surface perfectly matches the description Luigi Pareyson made of the nature of revealing language:

The word reveals the truth, but as inexhaustible; therefore, it is eloquent not only through what it says, but also through what it does not say: what is explicit is so significant that it appears as a continuous irradiation of meaning that is continuously fed by the infinite richness of what is implicit, so that understanding means going deeper into what is explicit to grasp there the inexhaustible richness of what is implicit.

This takes place in

revelations that, no matter how numerous they become, cannot be fully manifested, which is impossible in itself.³⁴

In Schnittke's music the density of the sign is indeed remarkable, especially due to the image that it offers of the human condition, as "the thematic function corresponds not only to the expositive stratum of the musical material, hearable and 'overwater', but also to the non-expositive charge, implicit and 'underwater', of associations, analogies and indirect correspondences."³⁵ The presence of symbols, signals, quotations, etc. in music gives rise to the objection of its comprehensibility ("what if I don't know the quoted work?"), but the same phenomenon is recognizable in our acquaintance with any person. If one of my friend's gestures come from his grandfather and I do not realize it, this does not justify anybody in concluding that I do not know him. Certainly, if I recognize the origin of the gesture, maybe I will be able to appreciate more of his traits. Furthermore:

³⁴ *Verità e interpretazione* (Milano: Mursia, 1971), 115. Translation mine. Pareyson distinguishes between revealing and expressive language (*rivelativo* and *espressivo*).

³⁵ Schnittke's works quoted by Ivashkin, "Alfred Schnittke", 113. Ivashkin highlights that "just this 'underwater' and implicit stratum is the greatest lexical element of Schnittke's music," *ibid.*

due to the essentially personal character of these relationships, even the same detail of a person is never exactly “the same” for two people who know him or her.

4. SECOND APPROACH: ENDING WITH THE DOTS OF SUSPENSION

The human person is always “under construction.” In the field of one’s spiritual life this has received different formulations, all of them more or less based on St. Paul.³⁶ For example, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes: “They [*those who go towards the Lord*] never stop rising, moving from one new beginning to the next, and the beginning of ever greater graces is never limited of itself.”³⁷ Secular thinkers have pointed out this feature of human beings as well. Octavio Paz explored it in his poetics as a type of otherness, enlightened by the analogies with the otherness of love and that

³⁶ *Letter to the Philippians*, 3, 13-14: “Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 3, 18: “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

³⁷ *Commentary of the Canticle*, sermon 8: PG 44, 941 C; cited edition: 256-257. Another famous text, maybe even better known, is that by St. Augustine: “I am still following, still forging ahead, still walking, still on the road, still extending myself; I haven’t yet arrived. So if you too are walking, if you are extending yourself, if you are thinking about the things that are to come, forget what’s past, don’t look back at it, or you may stick there where you turn to look back. [...] Always be dissatisfied with what you are, if you want to arrive at what you are not yet. Because wherever you are satisfied with yourself, there you have stuck. [...] Always add some more, always keep on walking, always forge ahead,” *Sermo 169*, 18: PL 38, 926; cited edition: 234-235. Among more recent spiritualities, a good example is what St. Josemaría Escrivá writes in an aphoristic style: “Your interior life has to be just that: to begin... and to begin again...” *The Way* (Chicago, IL; Dublin; London: Scepter, 1960), n. 292.

of religious experience.³⁸ This poetics focuses poetry in the first place, but in fact is suitable for the entire field of artistic creation. The basis for all three directions of otherness is the human condition: “*Otherness* is above all the simultaneous perception that we are others without ceasing to be what we are and that, without ceasing to be where we are, our true being is in another place.”³⁹

On this idea of otherness Paz based vital aspects of human life⁴⁰ and of artistic experience, such as inspiration.⁴¹ Of course, similar formulations can be found in many authors,

³⁸ “In the experience of the supernatural, as in that of love and in that of poetry, man feels uprooted or separated from himself. And this initial sensation of rupture is followed by another of total identification with that which seemed alien to us and to which we have become so closely entwined that it is now indistinguishable and inseparable from our own being. [...] The three experiences are manifestations of something that is the very root of man. Latent in all three is the nostalgia for a former state. And that state of primordial unity, from which we were previously separated, from which we are constantly being separated, constitutes our original condition, to which we return again and again. [...] In the amorous encounter, in the poetic image and in the theophany, thirst and satisfaction are joined together: we are at once fruit and mouth, in indivisible unity,” *El arco y la lira* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986), 135-136. For English text, here (chap. 69 and in other quotations from this book, *The Bow and the Lyre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, s.d.), Kindle.

³⁹ *El arco y la lira*, 266 (chap. 13).

⁴⁰ For example, the notion of vocation: “Vocation is the call that we make to ourselves one special day and to which we unavoidably must respond if we want to really be. This call obliges us to go outside of ourselves. The vocation is the bridge that leads us to other worlds that are our true world,” Octavio Paz, “La espuma de las horas,” in *Al paso* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1992), 126-127, translation mine; this essay is devoted to the vocation of Paz’ wife to the *collage*.

⁴¹ “Inspiration is a manifestation of man’s constitutive ‘otherness’. It is not inside, within us, or behind, like something that suddenly sprouted from the slime of the past, but rather it is, so to speak, ahead of us: it is something (or rather: someone) that calls us to be ourselves. And that someone is our very being,” *El arco y la lira*, 179 (chap. 8).

including Schnittke. He stated that it was not him who actually wrote,⁴² and in a description of the process of composition, he spoke of a division of the artist in two spheres:

One of them is yourself in the narrow sense, the other is what is revealed to you through yourself—what is considerably larger than you are. And it is this larger sphere that is in control, not the narrow sphere of yourself. In fact, a person's whole life is an attempt to be not oneself but an instrument of something outside the self. This is what dictates form, words, and your conditioned response to what is outside you. It is as if you do not belong to yourself. As long as you have this feeling, your work is never a burden. You are not the one prescribing, you are doing something prescribed for you by someone else. 'Someone else' is to put it very crudely: it is something more important than you are.⁴³

These words open some very important horizons. What is immediately relevant for our second approach to mystery is the extension of the self over time. What any one of us calls "I" is his/her entire biography; this means that we cannot possess ourselves *all in one go*, but through the whole of life. (Therefore, we cannot totally give ourselves *all in one go*, but through our whole life. This is why the long-lasting love of the Schnittkes is significant for our subject!) This also mean that we are an *open* reality, something similar to what in the field of arts is called "incompiuto," *unfinished*. Good examples of this are the unfinished sculptures of Michelangelo.⁴⁴

Every musical work is an *incompiuto*, at least because a performance is still needed, but in many works by Schnittke there is another incompleteness that belongs

⁴² Cf. A. Ivashkin, "Alfred Schnittke", 87.

⁴³ "Schnittke's Conversations", 12.

⁴⁴ Cf. Carlo Ossola, "Speranza dell'incompiuto," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, March 16, 2003, 27.

to another dimension, as “all often disappears with the dots of suspension;”⁴⁵ the musical work and its understanding are “a process in perennial evolution, open like life itself.”⁴⁶ The connection between these open-ended finales and the *incompiuto michelangiolo* is very powerful.

Human meetings do not usually end with fireworks. “Nor do real miseries often end with a curtain and a roll of drums,” observes C.S. Lewis.⁴⁷ Dots of suspension in music highlight this aspect of daily life; they are very isomorphic in mirroring a feature of human life that is decisive for realizing exactly how much an open-ended work of beauty is suited to the harmonies of the spirit.

Sure enough, such a positive interpretation is not suitable for every open work. Lack of a conclusion can also come from a loss of sense, as Schnittke himself affirms about the modern difficulty to really bring a work to completion. It “appears in an age of atheism, when the certainty of belief in God has been lost,”⁴⁸ he says, but his situation is that of a non-atheist in an age of atheism, and this explains, at least partially, his meaningful finales that allude to mystery, hope, and free will.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Schnittke's words quoted by Ivashkin, “Alfred Schnittke”, 139.

⁴⁶ “Alfred Schnittke”, 83 (Ivashkin's words).

⁴⁷ *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78.

⁴⁸ Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke*, 166. He is speaking of Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony. See Ivashkin, “The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty”..., 554; Dixon, “Polystylism as Dialogue: Interpreting Schnittke through Bakhtin,” in *Schnittke Studies*, ed. Gavin Dixon (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017), 93-97 (section “Openness and unfinalisability”).

⁴⁹ “Both cello concertos end with intense expressions of overwhelming, even defiant, hope. This suggests to me that Alfred Schnittke spent his musical life waiting in hope, and that the hope with which he waited was stronger at some times than at others,” Marr, “Alfred Schnittke.”

5. THIRD APPROACH: FINALES THAT TRANSCEND TIME

The third approach is a special case of the second. I will focus on two very representative human dynamics that do not end with fireworks: Christian liturgy and conjugal love. For the comparison I am in debt to the Belgian theologian André Léonard. I needed a long time to appreciate the slow finales of Schnittke. As soon as I began to listen to them from this perspective, I experienced something like an epiphany. The penultimate movement is often the most important. It is constructed along the lines and is followed by a coda that comments, remembers, enjoys, etc..., usually in a calm atmosphere, without a sharp closing but rather with a *disclosure* to a “vastness that the glance cannot contain.”⁵⁰

If we think of a solemn ceremony (for example a Sunday Liturgy), we do not notice any distinct finality in the procession, in the organ that fills up the house of worship, in the parishioners who slowly exit; or the queue to kiss the cross and to take the blessed bread, the conversations that begin while others are still doing just that, while the prayers of thanks come from behind the iconostasis. It is rather a gradual return of the waters to the riverbed that they left. Just as during a flood, the riverbed does not dry up.

André Léonard considers the Eucharistic liturgy as having a parallel structure with the conjugal union. In both cases there is a) an initial phase of listening, dialogue, play, followed by b) a culminating time of communion, of deepest fusion, and, at the end, c) “a period of rest, of simple mutual presence in the common gratefulness for the pleasure and the joy given and received,” or “the time of the thanksgiving, of the mutual rest of Jesus in us and our rest in Jesus, in which we thank Him for His presence,”⁵¹ in other words, a

⁵⁰ Ivashkin, “Alfred Schnittke”, 158. Ivashkin calls this structure “open circle” or “spiral-like swirl” (ibid.).

⁵¹ André Léonard, *Jésus et ton corps* (Paris: Mame, 1996), 31-32.

time in which the evocation of what was given and received is enjoyed, a time in which the remembrance of what was shared is shared.

This is the case of the last movement of the *First Concerto Grosso* and of the last and longest movement of the *Second Concerto Grosso* (which lasts twelve minutes!). This is also the case of the end of the *Concerto for Piano and Strings* and so many other works. In such finales, the themes come with infinite calm from the first movement, from the third, from the second, from the third again..., always like phantoms of the original themes, like the memory of them, thanking, enjoying, remembering, reminding. There is intimacy and intensity, overcoming time; like the thanksgiving after communion; like the time together after making love. With the words that the Eurydice of Claudio Magris uses in recalling her conjugal life with Orpheus, it is “that sleep in which [love] goes on and on and gently fades down without ever really going out—otherwise it is just a flicker, a friction, a jolt, after which you immediately feel like standing up, getting dressed, and going off on your own.”⁵²

Alexander Ivashkin makes an important clarification: these finales are not entirely new in twentieth-century music. And he wonders about the codas found in Mozart's music.

They are an attempt to cross all the previous development, to use a pedal point, to let us enjoy, by irrational repetition, something that has already been accomplished. From the structural point of view, such a coda means nothing, but often, these codas are the most important and expressive sections of Mozart's music. Later in the nineteenth century even the finales of symphonies are merely contemplative codas; their traditional functions of ‘explanation of everything’ and successful conclusion are transformed into something different.⁵³

⁵² Claudio Magris, *Lei dunque capirà* (Milan: Garzanti, 2006), 44. Translation mine.

⁵³ Ivashkin, “The Paradox”, 554.

The description is very similar to Schnittke's. Obviously the function is different, but it leads us to retrieve an element of sense that, if it continued to be missing, would leave us with a vision that is often offered of Schnittke's music (gloomy, negative), which instead many of his best connoisseurs do not share and which is not supported by what we have set out here. On that Schnittke's Day in 2006, I had the occasion to discuss these issues with Irina Schnittke, the composer's widow, who said she was deeply displeased with those who speak of "pessimistic music." "Certainly it is often dramatic, but this is a whole other thing," she said.⁵⁴

"It is very sad," a friend told me when speaking about the *Concert for Mixed Choir* (1984–85), whose text is, significantly, "The Book of Mournful Songs," by Saint Gregory of Narek, and in particular it was the part entitled "Collected songs where every vers is full of grief."⁵⁵ Of course it could not but be sad.

Schnittke's description of the Finale of his ballet *Peer Gynt* is quite significant:

Compared to the first three acts, there is no new music at all in the Epilogue. What you hear here are all the themes of the previous scenes. But now you hear them not in succession, but piled one on top of the other—like clouds. While one theme is still being played, you can hear another one. And it is this ignoring

⁵⁴ "If the classical models cannot be repeated, neither can their ethos (the heroic, optimistic, reverent, or victorious). This is how Schnittke expresses his tragic sense of the loss of an entire musical and ethical sphere, a loss he felt was already apparent in the work of Stravinsky, 'who was among the first to understand this [tragedy],' Adamenko, "Faith through scepticism", 165; the quotation comes from Schnittke's article "Paradox as a Feature of Stravinsky's Musical Logic," in *A Schnittke Reader*, 170. Adamenko points out that Stravinsky's use of the term "tragedy" is well justified.

⁵⁵ This is the title found on many recordings. Sometimes you will find another one that appears to be the *incipit* of the text: "I, an expert in human passions, composed this collection of songs, where every verse is full to the brim with black sorrow."

of the boundaries of the numerous themes that creates a picture beyond reality, no matter how loudly the orchestra plays. It is still something beyond reality.⁵⁶

In Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* the figure of Solvejg embodies the redemptive virtue of love and is decisive for the drama's end. I would like to conclude with a remark by Andrew Marr:

The epilogue, where Peer Gynt continues to try to find his elusive self, is another of Schnittke's seamless structures where all the themes in this ballet float in and out, somehow reconciled in the mystery of Eternity and in the human questioning that still persists as we seek to live under the judgment of Eternity.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ "Schnittke's Conversations," 36-37.

⁵⁷ Andrew Marr, "Alfred Schnittke."

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