

AIR FOR ELIADE – BETWEEN THE ACTUAL TEXT AND THE MUSICAL TEXT¹ – IN DIALOGUE WITH COMPOSER EOIN CALLERY, STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

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- Mr. Callery, *Air for Eliade* is your MA Composition Thesis Concert presented at Wesleyan University in Chapel Middletown CT.² How come you have chosen for your dissertation paper, which is about music, this title having as a starting point Mircea Eliade's work ?

- The title of my thesis concert was *The View From The High Horse*, *Air for Eliade* was one of four pieces my Masters Thesis Concert. The audience did not have a program or know the title of the pieces. The four pieces were performed without interlude. So I guess that the title of the concert somewhat explores privileged information – who gets to see what – and hierarchy.

- Which of Eliade's works inspired you the most in this compositional process?

- In the *Myth of the Eternal Return* Eliade explores the idea of circular time versus teleological historical time. But this book is not a work of criticism it is a work of proselytism. He was not exploring and investigating ideas, he was seeking to justify his own beliefs. I felt that by setting up a musical situation that was difficult for audience members to fully appreciate – a series of stylized, ritualistic yet empty actions – I was creating an analogy to his analysis of non-Judeo-Christian cultures. I think he misread many of the things he saw and I hoped to create miss-readings in the minds of the audience members.

- There are many other musical compositions who are inspired by the religious texts signed by Eliade: Aldo Brizzi (Italy), Șerban Nichifor, Harry Tavitian

(Romania), from the Afro-Brazilian music to jazz. Do you know any of them?

- I'm sorry, they are not familiar to me.

- What are the main characteristics of your composition?

- I recorded several a series of improvisations with Tin-Whistles (An instrument you find in my home country of Ireland) and the sound of me blowing glasses of water. These recordings were then filtered using a program called Spear. The filtering created a glissandi type effect through the spectrum of the recordings. The recording was then played through two very different sets of speakers (the acoustic of the venue – Wesleyan University Chapel – are quite unique too) that were placed around the audiences. On top of this, I combined live playing with similar sections from the unfiltered segments of the improvisations. Meanwhile a further live performer very slowly pushed a piece of concrete across the stage with their feet creating a scraping sound. The only other element was the lighting – focused on the front of the stage – with a blue projection across the pipes of a large pipe organ. No one element is more important than any other, hopefully together they generate idiosyncratic ideas in the mind of each audience member.

- Do all of the four musical sequences have a connection with Eliade's work or only one of them has?

- This was the 2nd of four pieces in the concert. The only thing that they had in common – they all hid or confused certain elements of their

composition or performance, and each tried to generate multiple meanings/readings for audience members.

- *Is your work available on CD for the general public?*

- I do not at present publish CD's. Many of my pieces do not document well just as audio. While I can document pieces with DVD there is a limit to how much can be done – proper video work is expensive to do and you need multiple camera angles. I think many of my pieces, *Eliade* included is best experienced live, although I am not sure if I will have the opportunity to perform it again anytime soon. *Eliade* was made three years ago during my Master studies. I am now a Doctoral student at Stanford with many other musical, academic, teaching commitments. I'm too busy with other things to revive it. But it is one of my favorites projects: I would like some better documentation of the piece.

- *Which other texts from Eliade's work would inspire you to create music?*

- *The Myth of The Eternal Return* offered a particular analogy to musical composition – at least to me, it's quite hard to explain exactly what I mean. None of his other texts have had quite the same impact on me. Perhaps, that means I have a superficial understanding of his ideas? In general I am interested the place of in religious and ritual practice in society but I'm not sure if I would consciously want to write another piece dealing with his ideas in particular: one is enough there are many other things that I would like to explore.

- *How is the Air For Eliade play structured?*

- This will just expand a little on the answer to question 5. There is a little flexibility in when things start and finish but roughly the structure is this. The improvisations/spectral glissandi are 7 minuets long, this is repeated twice more. The live Tin Whistle performers begin moving after about 6 minutes, they do not begin to play until the 11th minute. They play for about 5 minutes then the filtered materials and the performer with pushing the concrete rock continue until the end. The only other structural element concerns the physical characteristics of the Tin Whistles.

The instrument has eight playing positions and each performers materials focuses on one of these playing positions. It's a very simple way of constricting the possibly materials of each player, since there was not a lot of rehearsal time and only one performer other than myself had played a wind instrument before.

- *I think that your composition would make a great soundtrack for a movie or a play based on a text from Eliade's fantasy literature (there is actually a movie from 1995, that has a soundtrack signed by Adrian Enescu and is part of the same genre as your work, and not to mention the work of Șerban Nichifor based on the same text). Do you have any interest in making soundtracks?*

- Yes I think it is an unashamedly atmospheric piece. But some people who saw it were afraid, others found it meditative, others boring, other felt it lacked a coherent structure, and yet others found that the length of the piece was much shorter than 21 minutes, other felt it was very moving.... I got ever reaction – good and bad – that you can think of, and for me that is what I like to hear.

- *Is there any connection between the sets from Eliade's text and the sets and stage movement in a play?*

- Yes, as I said before I feel that Eliade misread some of his own research. Setting up a dichotomy between history and myth, or teleological versus circular etc. is something I find hard to deal with. I wanted to make a piece that was like a false-ritual, akin to one the many examples he points in his works. I wanted the audience to be Eliade trying to rationalize these slightly irrational actions and gesture (sonic and physical). I think Eliade did not want to see that many people can operate in both worlds simultaneously – the same person who partakes in a mythic attempt at recreating a heroes death, then goes and trades for some daily essentials – they have both a circular and linear existence. Does this make sense?

The same can be said of most Judeo-Christian practices, without mythic thinking they get taken as literal truths- the beauty of their stories and their important lesson, which they might impart get lost.

I know that this is a very superficial and quick answer to this question, I'm afraid it would take me many evening and (ironically) several bottles of wine to properly and more coherently explain my thoughts on Eliade! He was a brilliant scholar, but very much of his time in looking for both an academic and non-academic universal truth.

- *Do the main stage actors try to suggest the movement, the passing, the transcendental ritual of time or the myth of eternal rebirth?*

- Ritual transcends time – sometimes perhaps. In the ideal maybe, but I am not sure that everybody who participates in rituals does so at the same level. Further, people move in and out of concentration during ritual experiences. In a similar way audience during performance experience multiple levels of temporal phenomenon and engagement. Actual in my own experience this happens throughout most of our daily lives not just during ritualistic practices.

- *What role are the lights playing in the set as far as the contrast between light/shadow, night/day is concerned? How come two contrasting elements coexist in the same time and at the same place?*

- While during this piece it is mostly to create and general atmosphere, or maybe it's better to say dimming the light offers move of an opportunity for immersion. Having a blue light project on the pipe-organ pipes creates a textured surface (not just a flat plane) and again offers a further point of entre for an audience member. But since the four pieces on the concert moved from one to the other without interval, the lighting offers another element of a contrast (since there was no concert program) between each piece. Eventually a projector screen moved

in front of the light for the final piece of the concert, which used some interactive video technology.

- *Have you adapted /adopted any other texts by Eliade?*

- No not yet, I have been reading "rites and symbols of initiation" in conjunction Jung's Alchemical texts – they are an interesting complement to each other. I don't think I will write/compose anything specifically about these texts, it's more for my general interest. But ideas sit and ferment in your mind so who knows what will come out in a year or two. At the moment I'm also obsessing over Tarkovsky films. Again who knows what will come out of that.

- *Thank you!*

- Thank you very much for you interest!

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Endnotes

1. Romanian version: Cristina Scarlat, *Air For Eliade. Între textul scris și textul muzical*, convorbire cu compozitorul Eoin Callery, Stanford, California, in *Nord Literar*, year XI, no. 11-12 (126-127), November-December 2013, p. 18. From the doctoral thesis: Cristina Scarlat, *Transpunerea operei lui Mircea Eliade în alte limbaje ale artei*, 2013, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iași.
2. Electronics - Eoin Callery. Movement - Miles Tokunow. Tin Whistles - John Burke, Eoin Callery, Andrew Colwell, Glenn Henshaw, Joy Lu, Marcello Rilla.