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Trem

กระดิ่งหัว
Ricochet

Sound (บท)
for Violin

interpreted by

Hight bell

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Virtual Implosion (2022): Reflexivity, the ‘Everyday’ and a Music of Philippine Reality (for Ensemble Mosaik)

Jonas Baes

*“...look at you, now look at me,
how you like that?”*

Blackpink, 2020

*“...the sound of fate knocking
at the door...but those
are only for the first two
bars [!] A movement
emerges from then, not to
demonstrate ‘fate’, but to
cancel, preserve and
elevate...”*

Theodor Adorno (1998, 166)

Abstract

This paper attempts to present new perspectives on the nexus between art and everyday reality in the Philippine context. With Hegel’s dialectical principle of sublation as its conceptual backdrop, I will explore how a theoretical framework can be formulated from reflexivity by foregrounding the processes of creation and production in my musical work “virtual implosion” (2022), which allude to the nature of composition and performance within the enclaves of late capitalist modernity and its impact on the Philippine social milieu. The trajectories of this paper are the discourses on music composition and production, as well as Philippine modernity.

Introduction

In this article I explore the nexus between art and everyday life; assuming that this rather used-up *cliché* that is most likely fraught with much critique might still be amenable to refunctioning by way of new perspectives. As an initial observation, conditions of production appear to be that which drives the wedge between what is categorized as “art” and everyday life; so that whatever notion that “art depicts everyday life” wholly remains to be a mere depiction. Attempting to advance reflexive and critical views about art and life as it occurs in the “everyday”—to answer that observation—I will present the creative and productive processes of my composition entitled *virtual implosion* for chamber ensemble, veritable instruments, with audio and video playback. The piece results from everyday encounters with the urban poor of Manila during the pandemic. It was commissioned by Ensemble Mosaik, with support from the Bundesbeauftragte für Kultur und Medien and premiered in Berlin in October 2022 as part of the program platform *Echoes of Cultural Localization* (Ensemble Mosaik, 2022).¹

While this article resonates Hegel’s dialectical principle of sublation (German: *aufhebung*), which has been central to my recent analytic views (Baes, 2017; 2018; 2021; 2022), more emphasis is given to what I would call **reflexive praxis**, which is a theory--based mode of practice that is subject to some degree of consciousness that somehow reverts to the ‘self’. This notion has been implicit in those four publications I have mentioned, pointing to the ontology of my creative work to speak of Philippine and Southeast Asian realities. Several further articles that develop this notion of reflexive praxis has either been read as conference papers or published in the last ten years (for instance in Baes, 2013); while chamber music compositions since about 2015 have been created within such theoretical consciousness. It is in this present article that I attempt to foreground reflexivity to characterize the art-reality equation especially in relation to my artistic praxis.

¹ For information on the program, see http://www.ensemble-mosaik.de/en/konzerte.php?26._Oct._2022_/_20:00
Literature on the concert was written by Michael Zwenzner (2022), while a film of the concert is being prepared by Steffi Weismann

I have yet to align my present focus with the academic discourses on “art and reality”, if there be any. I must qualify, however, that while I refer to “art” in general, my entire focus is just one branch of art: music. Much of my theoretical reflections in this article rely on my artistic practice, as musician and composer; and in my personal aesthetic bent, I have based *virtual implosion* conceptually on two existing works: Ludwig van Beethoven’s *String Quartet op. 132* (1826) and Mathias Spahlinger’s “sound mural” with the title: *in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten* (“in the whole ocean of sensations separate off a single wave and stop it”/1985), each of which addressing the art-reality connection in their own unique way. I should also mention that Anton Webern’s *Five Pieces for String Quartet Op. 5*; the *Six Pieces for Orchestra Op. 6*; and the *Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 10* are as well inspirations for my piece of work, though not as direct an impact as the aforementioned works by Beethoven and Spahlinger. It is from these reflexive views that I attempt to address not only the discourses of music composition, creative consciousness, as well as Philippine modernity; but more importantly the very praxis itself of contemporary music most especially in Southeast Asia where a growing community of composers and performance artists engage in the exploration of artistic expression that speak of everyday life in the region.

Art, reflexivity and the ‘everyday’

Perhaps a most enduring example of how the ‘everyday’ finds its way into the practice of art is seen vividly in the kind of reflexivity exhibited in Vincent van Gogh’s paintings; of how the use of color, brush strokes, other techniques and the very subjects of his paintings and sketches—to say the very least—are manifestations of some internal impetus that lies within this great artist². I guess to see the “everyday” or things that occur in the immediate milieu through the eyes of the artist relies on some kind of transformation from experience into the artists consciousness; and this artist’s position within the experience, thus, into what we refer to as *reflexivity* in the creative process. These, in other words, are instances that turn back to the artist

² Its is said that van Gogh, while expressing his depressive state used art as a form of healing; art which “gave him solace and hope”. See further: <http://vangogh.nl/vEnL50MmAsn>

as the actual subjects of the artwork. While there is a myriad of artists in the entire world who have blended everyday experience into the creative processes, I would like to further qualify that I am interested in works where the ‘everyday’ impacts the artist and his praxis rather significantly as to define the very nature of the artwork in question. Aside from van Gogh, this may be well said of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry,³ of the song lyrics of Joni Mitchell,⁴ or in the highly descriptive poetics of the prison songs of Aloysius Baes,⁵ the works Opp 5, 6 and 10 by Anton Webern, especially Op. 6 where the horrific events of his mother’s passing unfold before our ears in the music;⁶ and even in the very assertive stances that redefine “KPop” girl-group narratives in raps of the group Blackpink,⁷ just to name a few.

I find the most remarkable exhibition of reflexivity in musical art with Beethoven, especially in his so-called “middle period”; as such has actually defined what he articulated as a new kind of approach, beginning in 1804 with the Eroica symphony. However, a more transcendent kind of reflexivity appears in his late works, most especially in the *String Quartet in a-minor* p. 132. This five-movement work actually gravitates to its third movement, which carries the title “*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an der Gottheit, in der Lydischen Tonart*” (“Holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian mode”). The movement is to be an actual expression of thanksgiving by the composer for relief from a painful intestinal condition in 1825, just two years before his final demise.⁸ Without going into the rigors of symbolic representation, just listening to this movement’s transitions from an augmented chorale setting to a brighter sounding

³ See for instance descriptions of the creation of works like the Opus 6 in Crawford and Crawford (1993, 103-105) or on the Opus 5 in Hayes (1995, 86)

⁴ From her earliest recording outputs, singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell’s songs strikingly reflect much of her personal narrative; see for instance albums like *Blue* (Reprise, 1971), *Hejira* (Asylum, 1976) or *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* (Asylum, 1977) among many others.

⁵ Baes family private collection “*Songs from Stockade 4*” *The Prison Songs of Aloysius Baes*. Compiled 2007

⁶ Crawford and Crawford, op.cit.

⁷ See for instance, <https://youtu.be/Zoj55rpQ0co>

⁸ Circumstances surrounding the composition of Beethoven’s *String Quartet in a-minor*, Op. 132 may be found in references like Elliot Forbes’ Revised and Edited Version of *Thayer’s Life of Beethoven*, Volume II (1967, 947)

material (and effectively shifting from F major to D major) might give us a glimpse of how the composer must have felt a semblance of hope, be it rather wishful thinking or founded in actual scientific medical evidence (which I highly doubt).

Wishful hope might also be the noble intention in Spahlinger's 1985 work: "*in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten*". The underlying impetus in this work are the conditions of poverty in the materialist world order; where the gross inequality of the rich against the poor, and the conditions of production give less and less opportunities for any kind of social mobility for a larger portion of the population most especially in the so-called developing countries. "[A]rt, Spahlinger declares, *must thematize how representation should relate to its object, to its own way of picturing and to its way of picturing its object, if it is to make reality visible* (Spahlinger in Wilson, trans., 1993). Scored for three choruses and eight-channel playback, the entire work conceptually alludes to Johann Gottfried von Herder's (1744-1803) notion that "*the human being demonstrates reflection when the force of his soul operates so freely that in the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses it can, so to speak, separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and be conscious of its own attentiveness.*" (cited in Spahlinger, 1993). The sounds and events of this remarkable work by Spahlinger with its eight-channel playback of audience sounds and other noises, blending with the sonic gestures of three groups of voices also give a semblance of a kind of liminality between being in and outside the very performance of the music; such can be seen as alluding between frameworks of production and reality that is just outside it.

As a composer from a country like the Philippines, I find that the discrepancies between the more and the less privileged sectors of society are very much emphasized in the practice of art within this "mode of production". This refers to performances in concert venues where the poor have no access, or denied entry. This is as much a logical consequence of the need for survival. While on one extreme end, only a small portion of an educated sector can experience art; in another extreme end, a disproportionately larger uneducated and/or miseducated sector, living in the slums in a hand-to-mouth existence have obviously not acquired any consciousness of...nor find the need for...art within this mode of production.

The trajectories of art have practically excluded them, in fact, by default. The lack of educational provisions as well as the material destitution rooted to the peripheral place of the Philippines in the global political economy created this condition. As with the gigantic shopping malls in Metro Manila that create sensory experiences of extreme affluence of an illusory world isolated from the reality of poverty and the slums, the poverty-stricken 70 or 80% of the population are excluded by default from even a glimpse of the material achievements of the world. It potentially prompts any artist-advocate to think that: if art were meant to liberate; if art were meant to be transcendent; or if art were meant to depict life as it is, or life as it should be, would there be an option—to the very least—to create art that is more inclusive, and genuinely meaningful even to those of the lowest stratum of society?

This question has confronted me in the last fifty years since I started my practice of art as a composer; and often do I reach a dead end: but what can an artist do, when the practice of his or her craft is necessarily subject to the modes and sites of production? My long-standing advocacy has already explored answers to the question of production; but though there have generally been satisfying results those are only on an initial level in the development of my praxis. In this article, therefore I continue to explore creative processes as they are impacted by the present-day ‘modern or post- or super-modern’ processes of production.

Wunden der Welt: virtual implosion and the oceans of the “real”

The wounds of the world were totally underscored during the COVID 19 pandemic; for not only that our very lives had to be disrupted, as we were all to live in isolation for constant fear and anxiety, but also because certain sectors of society—those living in a hand-to-mouth existence in crowded urban shanties—have had no other recourse but to take great risks to go out into the streets to survive. “(Yes,) *if we go out in the streets we might catch (the virus) and die, but this is the only way we can make a living...*” says one teenaged girl who I call “Ineng” (child); “*if we remained at home, she quickly emphasized, “we will surely die of hunger.*”

Ineng is one among thousands of those living in shanties; who make a living collecting recyclable items from the daily wastes brought out by households in the districts of Metro Manila. She comes every morning to collect empty pet bottles and soft drink cans; carton boxes or metal items, which she barter for money in a nearby junkshop, to make the equivalent of less than six US Dollars, part of which she still has to pay for renting the bicycle with a sidecar where she puts all those items for the junkshop. For Ineng, I thought with much irony, every single day deserves Beethoven's "*heilige dankgesang...*", for not being stricken with the virus. Moreover, Ineng—among the hundreds or thousands of scavengers I see each day—allows me to put a face, a body, a family, a community; in fact an entire milieu of the urban poor to Spahlinger's "*in dem ganzen Ozean...*". Their images remain in my mind during the entire pandemic, so vivid that they cut across my creative imagination that I begin to see myself in the middle of the oceans of modernity's waste materials. If I were to "speak" of the urban destitution, through my music, it would be on the level of the reflexive.

I formulated the title of my composition for two reasons: (1) to acknowledge the oxymoronic nature of "reality as being virtual", as such has been the nature of social interaction, in fact, of cultural production during the pandemic; and (2) to advance the potential of an internal source of transcendence...a socio-cultural "implosion", so to say...to address a social reality that is equally from within. It addresses the privileged sector of society who no-longer sees the disorder of extreme material destitution as a disorder, but as *a priori* to modern life. Thus, the title 'virtual implosion'; a piece of work whose actual trajectories are those who are able to experience art, in hopes that their consciousness can be raised as to take part in various opportunities for actual liberative action: that which I consider to be transcendent.

Scored for flute, clarinet, percussion (vibraphone, washboard, wind chimes), piano, violin and cello; the instrumentalists are also to play certain "veritable instruments" (or those which I like to label as "instruments of reality") such as plastic pet bottles or empty soft drink cans, as well as hanging bell chimes; and are to distribute small individual bells (those called *tungkaling* from among the T'boli people of Southern Philippines) to the audience.

Video clips and photographs of actual people and enhancements of audio recordings of their actions are also to be used. I have intended to virtually “drown the audience into the ocean of garbage”, because in doing so do I also drown them into the reality of material destitution, especially in the so-called Third World. As I mentioned earlier, Spahlinger’s “ocean” is now to be given actual faces, bodies, families, communities, and an entire milieu.⁹ It is in this part of the work that the boundary between the real and the performance are, in the same way perhaps as Spahlinger’s “*in dem ganzen Ozean...*” becoming liminal.

Modelled after the structure of Beethoven’s Op. 132, ‘virtual implosion’ is in five movements; with the first two gravitating to the third movement, and the last two movements gravitating to the “coda” of the fifth movement. The general progression from ensemble instruments (flute, clarinet, etc.) to veritable instruments (plastic pet bottles, bells, etc.) have a social nature, all made to address the audience, who I assume to be made up of privileged concert goers and followers of the contemporary-classical tradition.

‘Virtual implosion’ is framed within a general progression of what I would like to consider as two “oceans” of transcendence: the first one of solidarity; and the second of (for lack of better term at the moment) “spirit”. Because the destitute is the main source of narrative that defines the entire structure and the nature of these five movements, the two types of transcendence are in dialectical opposition with each other; the former descending into the abyss of existence (for such is what it means to be “in solidarity”), while the latter attempting to uplift the spirit. This structures the suggestion for the privileged to (hopefully) take part in various, actual modes of action; although solidarity is more “tangible” and spirit is almost, if not entirely “intangible.” The nature of one “ocean” is indirectly defined by the nature of the other. Hence, are they in a dialectical interlock (read: sublation/*Aufhebung*) with one another.

⁹ Those photographs, videos and audio recordings I mentioned were taken with permission from the people who consider it an opportunity to have “*the rest of the world (get to) know their stories*”. All ethical aspects of the visual and audio materials have been considered. A few other photographs used are in public domain and are taken by various advocacy groups and posted on the internet.

In 'virtual implosion' I subject the entire ensemble to go outside the frames of their very existence...their very 'being'...to dramatize the progressions into the ocean of solidarity; and of spirit. This is done first by leaving behind their instruments to crush empty plastic bottles and magnify the sound of scavengers crushing empty plastic bottles in the third movement; and then by distributing small *tungkaling* bells for the audience to take part in building the sound environment at the end of the music.

The sound of crushing empty plastic bottles are the most striking sonic event that signify the actions made by scavengers to bring together these remnants of modernity to be bartered for cash in junkshops. The sound of bells in many Philippine cultures signify reverence and the presence of spirits; whereby with such action of giving out bells the entire ensemble leads the whole assemblage present at the performance into the "spiritual realm".

Production...into the realm of the "unreal"

At the beginning of this article, I cited an observation that conditions of production drive a wedge between art and reality. In fact, in going deeper into this assessment, it is production and not merely the artist's reflexivity that makes art what it "is"; being essentially a spectacle that is to be viewed, watched, listened to or experienced in one way or another by a presumed "audience". In the creation of art, therefore, production subjects human experience within a sense of logical "wholeness" or "completeness", where actual human experience is seemingly bent towards the arbitrary. Production, therefore, is the necessary contradiction of human experience for the creation of art.

In qualifying the creative phase in the production of Beethoven's fifth symphony, Theodor Adorno underscores sublation (*Aufhebung*) as central to the very act of composing. "*The sound of fate knocking at the door...Adorno proclaims...are only for the first two bars. A movement emerges from then, not to demonstrate 'fate', but to cancel, preserve and elevate...*" (1998, 166). Art by its nature contradicts human experience by becoming the experience itself; and as such is necessarily confined within the modes and sites of its production that actually delineate such

experience from everyday life. In music, this encompasses the creative phase as described by Adorno above, to progress into the performance phase, by which the written musical work becomes what it is: a musical work.¹⁰ The formal structure of the piece of work is its narrative, told within the confines of the temporal space. The concert performance provides this temporal space by which within a specific span of time, the listener/spectator is able to experience this narrative.

Aesthetics is a construct that emerges from the contradictions between the everyday experience and production in art. In the context of creating “wholes” in production, aesthetics is a matter of ‘coherence’, or the relationship of one element (musical material, etc.) to other elements to thus create this “whole”. Aesthetics is the very essence of art and is central to any and every consideration of production. The whole of Beethoven’s fifth symphony—with all its cancellations, preservations and elevations as described by Adorno above—transforms this sonic experience into an aesthetic one because those are all made to connect each other. Thus we might understand why it is but necessary for the sites of production (the concert hall) to be rather isolated from the disjuncture that characterizes the “everyday”, right outside it; most especially within modern capitalist landscapes. During such “classical” modes of performance, the prescribed behaviors of its actors: the performers onstage and the audience seated quietly to listen, has much to do with the perception of the musical work in its full narrative potential as being the very experience itself.¹¹

¹⁰ I am of course referring to the “Western” and/or “modern” mode of musical production where music is created by a composer who writes down the musical piece, to be played by musicians for a concert production usually held in a concert hall. I set aside for the moment, other modes of creation and performance, especially among indigenous peoples, as with the three-day *liwliwa* ritual of the Kankana-ey, or the powerful healing chants in a *marayaw* among the Iraya-Mangyan, or the playing of the *tagunggo* on gongs during *pagipat* rituals among the Maguindanao; to cite just a few among many others in the Philippines or elsewhere.

¹¹ This is very distinct in nature from recent modernist performance modes of a commercial nature. I’d like to cite here in particular the very popular and influential K-Pop group BLACKPINK, who is currently making waves on a global scale. The thousands or even hundred-thousands who come to experience the live performances of Blackpink appear to come as if they are on a “pilgrimage”, waiting in line for hours prior to the performances and where, in this case, the live performances are actually the “real” counterparts of the music they have prior experienced only virtually on YouTube, Spotify or any other streaming platform. This is one important aspect of the present global phenomenon that in my opinion needs to be looked into.

I created ‘virtual implosion’ within a relative degree of reliance in Spahlinger’s (2015) notion that “(this work) *must thematize how representation should relate to its object, to its own way of picturing and to its way of picturing its object, if it is to make reality visible...*”. The creation of those “gravitations” towards those “oceans” I mentioned previously relates to how the musical piece can be the experience itself thus, presenting its own way of making reality visible, as per Spahlinger’s suggestion; and—just as important—where social meaning can potentially be drawn from the listeners themselves. In the third movement of ‘virtual implosion’, I put the instrumental sounds in a state of dissolution, while at the same time increasing the intensity of the sounds and actions of crumpling plastic pet bottles; gestures of which induce some performers in the ensemble to go outside their performance spaces onstage and immerse into the audience spaces, continuously scattering and crumpling empty plastic bottles; while at the same time, the electronically generated sounds and the visual images build up in front of the audience. It is a critical and ironical (and in fact, personally an “angry”) bent in building an aesthetic from the states of human condition in the so-called “developing countries” like the Philippines. The final “ocean” of faint sounds of T’boli *tungkaling* bells given out to the audience by some members of the ensemble is a gesture of “hope”, which if any person would consider as mere wishful thinking (on my part) must also accept the reality that this is an actual human need. The faint yet, in my opinion, powerful diffused sounds of tiny bells played by the public might translate into a symbolic act of, and by the privileged listener into becoming an advocate for those like Ineng whose day-to-day experience of destitution seems to be at a dead end. This is where I hope things would genuinely become

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