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Transcribing: between listening, memory, and invention

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Chapter 1

Une petite fleur bleue

Listening through a Sound Veil

The Duke of Auge appeared at the summit of the keep of his castle, there to consider, be it ever so little, the historical situation. It was somewhat confused. A few odd remnants of the past were still lying around here and there, rather messily. ... A layer of mud still covered the earth, but he could already see, blossoming here and there, some little blue flowers.

Raymond Queneau, *The Blue Flowers*

In 2005, I wrote *Une petite fleur bleue*, a transcription for string quartet of a piece from Girolamo Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali* (1635) for organ. For me, this was a decisive step as a composer in search of my own voice. It may seem paradoxical, but at that time, through the work of rewriting someone else's music, I was able to understand my own position with more clarity: By transcribing, by establishing a relation to another work, I was forced to make my role clear in that relation. This relation materialized in practical compositional choices that can be recognized in my later works which are not based on the practice of transcribing. Audio example 1 presents *Une petite fleur bleue* in its entirety.

Audio 1. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, performed by the Freon Ensemble:
<http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Une-petite-fleur-bleue-G.Bracci.mp3>

Complete score in pdf:

http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Bracci_Une-petite-fleur-bleue.pdf

At that time, as I wrote in my extensive program notes (Bracci 2007b), my primary goal in writing *Une petite fleur bleue* was to get closer to Frescobaldi's music – to listen, imagine, and rethink every note of it, and to be influenced as a composer by this reflective process. I considered transcribing as a tool of knowledge. The act of rewriting every note of a score, even in the simple act of copying it without any changes, is a way of reading it with deeper and more active attention, a fact made obvious by it being a common learning tool for centuries. Transcribing obliges one to read every note and every mark slowly, and this slowness – as I already discussed in the introduction, commenting on Luciano Berio's and Walter Benjamin's thoughts on copying (Berio 2006a, 35; Benjamin 1996, 448) – allows a qualitatively different contact with the text. One looks at every note from a composer's perspective – i.e., considering, reading, writing, imagining, and listening to it – not only as something that is as it is, but

as something that could also have been different, as something that is the consequence of a musical choice.

Writing in his *Philosophical Investigations* about what it means to understand a sentence, Ludwig Wittgenstein makes an insightful parallel with understanding a musical theme or a poem:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)

In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.) (Wittgenstein 1953, § 531)

Transcribing can be a tool to bring a score that has been fixed and completed – and that apparently cannot be otherwise – to a preceding state where the composer’s musical choices were still open and could have been different. Transcribing then allows transcribers to find themselves in someone else’s compositional workshop. I decided to write *Une petite fleur bleue* while I was studying Frescobaldi’s music. Trying to have access to his workshop – moving cautiously because of my reverence for his oeuvre – was for me an attempt to understand his way of composing from a closer perspective. Transcribing can give access to a point of view that shows – using Gilles Deleuze’s image that I referred to in the introduction – a musical work immersed in its own virtuality, looking at the same time at what the work is and what in it is still unexpressed, not yet actualized but nevertheless virtually present.

Furthermore, transcribing gives rise to the question of what “the original” is; and yet, it is also the very action of transcribing that defines what the original is, which is not a foregone conclusion. Is the original the score? Is it the first performance? Is it a recording of a performance, or even the memory that one has of a performance? Or is it something else? Apparently solid, the concept of “original” seems to be constantly moving... What the original is becomes the choice of the transcriber. A musical work becomes an original in the moment in which it is considered as such: Transcribing is a practice that, through transforming a pre-existing musical work, defines (and creates) it as an original. In this sense, ontologically, the copy precedes the original, as a child precedes its parents as such. Reflecting on the relation between original and repetition, at the end of a chapter dedicated to mimetic relations from his *Mimesis: On Appearing and Being*, the philosopher Samuel IJsseling argues that it is only through a copy that something becomes to be regarded as an original:

Now, the fact is that what is called an original act or event only becomes original in and through the doubling, or repetition of this reality, act or event – that is to say, in and through mimesis, which makes the origin into an origin and at the same time implies a withdrawal of the origin. The origin as such is never given; it only appears afterwards, in the doubling, in other words, in the withdrawal. (Ijsseling 1997, 29-30)

The point of departure of my transcribing process was studying the Frescobaldi score that was available to me at the time, without any implication that it was more original or more correct than others that I could have possibly studied. My work started by listening with my inner ear to Frescobaldi's work, meaning here a complex of activities such as performing it – i.e., reading it at the piano – and imagining it while reading it silently or while performing it, and then thinking about it after having read it, and transcribing it, and again imagining how to transcribe it while reading it... Transcribing implies all of these activities, and it is a way to get closer to a musical work, to establish a closer relation to it. To understand this complex entanglement of listening and imagining, it is useful to consider David Lewin's description of musical perception as an active imaginative practice, an embodied action that manifests itself in a number of creative responses such as performing or composing (Lewin 1986). Furthermore, Harold Bloom's idea that the meaning of a poem can only be another poem (Bloom 1973, 70) resonates with Wittgenstein's reflection on understanding, quoted above. Rewriting a musical work is a means to analyze how it is and to imagine how it could be otherwise.

Paying respect

I was not thinking about my transcription as a different way to say the same thing, but as creating a relation to another musical work. I wanted *Une petite fleur bleue* to allow the audience to listen to Frescobaldi's work, and, at the same time, to listen to my intervention, to the way in which I transformed it. I wanted to make both the source – the original – and its transformation audible. I operated on the boundary between transcriptions that repeat something without saying much about the transcriber, and re-compositions that, starting from existing works, transform them until they have become something different and unrecognizable.

Ethically, I wanted to pay respect to Frescobaldi, and aesthetically, I wanted to preserve it somehow and not make it entirely unrecognizable. *Une petite fleur bleue* is also an homage to Anton Webern, as I was inspired by his orchestration of J. S. Bach's six-voice "Ricercar a 6" from the *Musikalisches Opfer*. In the next chapter, I will expand on my considerations of Webern's work, and on the reflections, insights, and tools that have been especially relevant for my own practice. Webern's work was an inspiring model because of the explicit and strong presence of his interventions – he disaggregated and fragmented the single voices of Bach's "Ricercar a 6," redistributing them among the orchestra,

respecting the “notes” (including pitch and duration) of the original, which are all present in his orchestration. But does the respect to the notes coincide with paying respect to a musical work? My reflections on what paying respect means evolved alongside my research project, and today I would say that the wish to make an homage both limited and framed my freedom in transcribing Frescobaldi’s work. In *Une petite fleur bleue*, my respect had as a musical outcome the faithfulness to the notes, without removals or additions, and my intervention – and my freedom – concerned the tempo, the timbre, the instrumentation, and the fragmentation of the single voices of the original. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Jacques Derrida writes about the ever-threatening risk of betrayal that is implied in the relation with the other (Derrida 2007a, 167 and 185). I tried to avoid or at least minimize this risk, and in doing so – by respecting every note – I limited my capacity to transform the original. This limitation gave rise, anyway, to a challenging space for my artistic freedom. This approach originated from three principles: ethically, from my idea at that time of what respecting an original work meant; aesthetically, from my aim to keep the original work distinguishable from my intervention; and technically, from my understanding of my transcription as a layer through which to engage with the original work.

Transcribing Frescobaldi

I will now retrace the path of *Une petite fleur bleue*, commenting and reflecting upon it. First, I chose the piece from Frescobaldi’s *Fiori Musicali* that I wanted to transcribe, and I determined the instrumental lineup that I wanted to use. The presence of a drone in the alto voice for the entire duration of the “Cristo, Alio modo” (shown in figure 1) attracted me: It was an invitation to transcribe one single note, working only on its timbral dimension. In this sense, Webern’s orchestration and the idea of a *Klangfarbenmelodie*¹ were important references and sources of inspiration.

¹ The term *Klangfarbenmelodie* was “coined by Schoenberg in his *Harmonielehre* (1911) to refer to the possibility of a succession of tone-colours related to one another in a way analogous to a relationship between the pitches in a melody. By this he implied that the timbral transformation of a single pitch could be perceived as equivalent to a melodic succession, that is, that one could invoke tone-colour as a structural element in composition” (Rushton 2001). Beyond the Second Viennese School, the concept of *Klangfarbenmelodie* was very influential among postwar European composers developing electronic music (e.g., Karlheinz Stockhausen), and it anticipated the relevance of timbre as a central element in contemporary music.



Figure 1. Frescobaldi, “Christe, Alio modo” (*Fiori Musicali*)

Slowness

In transcribing, my intervention mainly focused on the timbral dimension as distinguished from the notes of the original. This choice fixed some aspects of the original, making it recognizable, and it also gave rise to a distinct sound layer on top of Frescobaldi’s piece. In order to make this rather articulated layer audible, the tempo of my transcription is much slower than that of the original. This choice had a precise aesthetic reason: I wanted a tempo slow enough to make room for articulating – and thus for perceiving – the constant changes of the sound, but at the same time, not so slow as to lose the continuity of the linear melodic connection between one note and the other. I wanted these two elements – i.e., the melodic linear continuity of the original and my intervention on the timbral dimension – to be perceivable at the same time, thereby enabling the listener to move their attention from one to the other, to perceive their relation.

The slowness of the tempo allows the listener’s attention to focus on the sound itself, and on its changes. Slowness – as I mentioned above when discussing

copying a text – also allows a qualitatively different relation with a musical text while transcribing. Both the slowness of the musical tempo and the slowness of (re)writing relate to an intensification of the listening attention: These two kinds of slowness are not disconnected, but the one reflects the other. Paul Craenen, reflecting on the corporality of the composing body, writes about how the relation between these two slownesses – the one of the music and the one of the writing process – is well expressed by Morton Feldman, who in an interview described his way of writing in ink and composing at the piano as a method to find sources of aural resistance to keep the composer’s imagination awake (Craenen 2014, 246). In this interview, Feldman states: “One of the reasons I work at the piano is because it slows me down and you can hear the time element much more, the acoustical reality ... And I’m very into acoustical reality. For me there is no such thing as a compositional reality” (Feldman in Zimmermann 1976, 6). Craenen emphasizes how the slowness of Feldman’s later music “reflects a labour that already embodies this slowness” (Craenen 2014, 246). The slowness of my transcription aimed to create a space where the listener’s attention could focus on the timbre without losing the original’s linear melodic connections. But who exactly is this listener? In the first place, I refer to myself as a listener-transcriber, and in this sense, the slowness of the tempo reflected my slow and intensive listening to Frescobaldi’s original; but further, through transcribing, my aim was to make my listening experience somehow available to other listeners (i.e., the performers and the audience).

String quartet

My choice of writing for string quartet had two reasons: First, to have an ensemble with a homogenous timbre, which would be an obstacle to an easy imitation of Webern’s procedures. Webern fragmented the single voices of Bach’s original among different instruments of the orchestra, obtaining a change of the sound within the same voice, and by doing so, he highlighted the relations among different motives. It would have been different had Webern written for an ensemble of instruments from the same family, a situation I specifically chose here in order to find a different solution, to be forced to make use of different timbral possibilities of a string quartet by using different playing techniques. The second reason for choosing a string quartet was my desire to write for a formation that has always been important for experimentation and encounters with musical tradition and heritage. The string quartet has a history that crosses more than two centuries, from the ideal balance of Viennese Classicism and the extreme experience of the late works by Ludwig van Beethoven, through the experimentation on form by composers such as Claude Debussy and Béla Bartók, to the more recent masterpieces in the genre by György Ligeti, Luigi Nono, and Helmuth Lachenmann.

A layer made of sound

In order to create a distinct timbral layer, I did not change any of the notes of the original, but, following Webern's example, I considered every single note independently from the voice to which it belonged in the original. The presence of all the notes without rhythmic changes made the original lines perceptible throughout the whole piece, even if I did not respect the individuality of the four voices. Also, all the harmonic and rhythmic relations stayed intact. In this respect, I also followed Webern's example: From his work, I was inspired to look at the single notes of the polyphonic texture of Frescobaldi's *fiore* as if they were stars among which I had to draw new constellations.² We can look at the single stars in the sky as individual points, or we can connect them in our imagination to see and recognize the constellations that we already know. But we can also connect them in new ways, and when doing so, imagine new constellations. I looked at the individual voices as a net of individual points that I could connect and reconnect in different ways. These new linear connections – these new motives crossing the individual voices – are virtually present in the polyphonic texture of the original already, and the transcriber can imagine them, actualize them, and make them audible.

Since every note of the original is played respecting its rhythmical position and its octave (with the exception of the final bar), my freedom was restrained (and functional) to the creation of an extra layer made of timbre: Next to the drone, present in the whole piece and going through a constant timbral transformation, I had the choice of letting each note be played by one or more instruments, of determining each note's duration, of spreading the original voices throughout the quartet, and of constructing a sound world through a variety of performing techniques such as harmonics, *arco*, *pizzicato*, *tremoli*, *jeté*, *sul tasto*, and *sul ponte* passages.

The rules that a composer follows while writing, whether set in advance, unconscious, or made up "as we go along" (Wittgenstein 1953, § 83), are the result of musical – technical, ethical, and aesthetic – aims, personal but always also intertwined with already internalized cultural values. I did not make a set of rules to follow before starting to compose, but the rules or compositional behaviors that I recognized in my transcribing gave rise to a specific musical outcome. My musical choices were artistic responses – based on today's language – to the possibilities that I perceived while transcribing Frescobaldi's original work.

As an example of the constant timbral transformation of the drone on D that is present in the alto voice for the whole piece, let us follow it for the first two bars of my transcription.

² See also the paragraph "Insights and tools" of chapter 3, on Webern's *Fuga Ricercata*.

GIULIANO BRACCI
UNE PETITE FLEUR BLEUE (su mandolino d'archi)

Figure 2. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bars 1-2

Note: My transcription is notated in half tempo: $\frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$.

In figure 2, I have highlighted the drone with a yellow line. The four instruments of the string quartet are all involved in playing the drone, and thus constantly transforming its timbre. At the beginning, it is a harmonic in the cello line; then the second violin plays it, changing between three performing techniques (as a tremolo on two strings with a fifth, *ordinario*, and then as a tremolo on the same string with its own octave harmonic – in this score, I have notated the tremoli as trills when performed on the same string, and as tremoli when performed on different strings). At the end of the first bar, the viola takes the D from the second violin and plays it as a tremolo *alla punta*. This sound is taken up by the second violin in the second bar and then transformed to a tremolo among open strings.

The other three voices of the original go through the same kind of transformations. Timbral elements and instrumental gestures are superimposed upon the notes of Frescobaldi's music, inhabiting the polyphonic dimension of the piece. Through transcribing, I fragmented the individual voices of the original, distributing them across the string quartet and giving rise to motives that cross these voices. Looking more closely at these elements, we can find many examples in the first bar of *Une petite fleur bleue*, shown in figures 3 and 4, and performed in audio example 2.

Audio 2. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bar 1, performed by the Freon Ensemble:

https://giulianobracci.com/phd_examples/ch01/01c_Fleur_Bar1.mp3



Figure 3. Frescobaldi, “Christe alio modo” (*Fiori Musicali*), bar 1

GIULIANO BRACCI
 UNE PETITE FLEUR BLEUE (per quartetto d'archi)

$\downarrow = 40$

Figure 4. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bar 1

On the first beat, the cello plays the D (taken from the alto voice in the original) as a *fermata*. On the second beat of the original, the tenor and soprano enter. In my transcription, this open fifth (D-A) is played by the cello (through harmonics), the second violin (with a tremolo), and the viola, which also plays the first four notes of the tenor.

On the third beat, the second violin stops playing the A of the soprano, keeping only the D of the alto. The first violin takes the soprano line, playing it with harmonics.

The cello stops playing the open fifth (alto-soprano) and takes over the line of the tenor from the viola. On the fourth beat, the viola plays the drone on D as a tremolo, *dal niente*. The second violin has an octave tremolo between the open

string and a harmonic. Here the line of the tenor, which is the most recognizable for its rhythmic articulation, is not fragmented but simply divided between two instruments, whereas the other notes of the original are played and doubled by the other strings so that different timbres are superimposed: harmonics, open strings, and distinct kinds of tremoli.

Harmonic density and instrumental gestures

The freedom in choosing the duration of the single notes allowed me to let some sounds overlap with the subsequent notes, creating moments of greater harmonic density. This happens in bar 4, for example. In Frescobaldi's original, shown in figure 5, the lines of the bass and tenor proceed by thirds (D-F, C#-E, D-F). In my transcription, shown in figure 6 and performed in audio example 3, the viola and cello begin in the same way, but when the C# arrives, the cello plays a double string (C#-D). This produces a little cluster C#-D-E which lasts only for an eighth note. On the second beat, the cello takes over the tenor line, and the viola the bass.

This clustering happens again later in the same bar. On the third beat of Frescobaldi's original, the bass and tenor proceed by thirds again (G-Bb, F#-A). In my transcription, these notes are prolonged to the fourth beat: Both viola and cello play double stops. This produces a cluster (F#-G and A-B). Both of these cluster examples can be heard in audio example 3.

Audio 3. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bars 4-6, performed by the Freon Ensemble:

https://giulianoabbracci.com/phd_examples/ch01/02c_Fleur_bar4-6.mp3

Figure 5. Frescobaldi, "Christe, Alio modo" (*Fiori Musicali*), bars 4-6

Figure 6. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bars 4-6

Another important feature of my work is the isolation of simple, individual instrumental gestures, which are integrated into the texture determined by Frescobaldi's work. Two examples of this approach, mostly related to the use of open strings and natural harmonics, are in the violins' parts in bars 4-6: The first violin plays a long D (the drone) on an open string, which in bar 5 becomes an octave tremolo, and then in bar 6 a passage of double open strings (G-D, then D-A, then D alone). In these same bars, the second violin plays a *jeté* on the D string that becomes first an *ordinario* double open string and then a tremolo between open strings (D-A, and then G-D). Some of these gestures, or instrumental behaviors, are idiomatic, and they sound archaic and primitive: Open strings, open fifths, and natural harmonics are deeply related to the physicality of string instruments and convey a distinctive character to the music. These gestures are indeed not neutral, but bring with themselves a historicity that is connected to instrumental practice, conveying the memory of earlier music.

Another example of instrumental gestures is on the first beat of bar 6, where the second violin plays a B \flat on three different strings, preceded by two grace notes (G-D) that synthesize the three voices of the original and at the same time constitute a gesture with its own identity. Webern used this kind of gesture with the notes of multiple voices in his *Fuga Ricercata* (see, for example, the solo viola in bar 180, which I will discuss at the end of the paragraph "Insights and tools" in chapter 2).

To conclude the musical examples from *Une petite fleur bleue*, let us take a closer look at the last two bars, where Frescobaldi's music is splintered into trills and tremoli, scattered in high-pitched harmonics. My transcription has an extra bar

at the end that prolongs the final chord, allowing it to vanish into thin air (as performed in audio example 4).

Audio 4. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bars 12-14, performed by the Freon Ensemble:

https://giulianobracci.com/phd_examples/ch01/03c_Fleur_finale.mp3



Figure 7. Frescobaldi, “Christe alio modo” (*Fiori Musicali*), bars 12-13



Figure 8. Bracci, *Une petite fleur bleue*, bars 12-14

Shown in figure 7, in the last two bars of “Christe, Alio modo,” there are two octave leaps: in the jump to the last bar of the bass (D-D), suggested by the organ pedal indication, and in bar 12 of the soprano (also D-D). In my transcription, shown in figure 8, this interval resonates in the tremoli between an open string and its octave harmonic (in both the cello and the second violin in bar 12). This gesture develops: Following the second violin in bar 13, this tremolo changes pitch and becomes a harmonic tremolo. Furthermore, the leap of the soprano becomes a two-octave leap in my transcription: In bar 12, the first violin plays a low D and then plays a D as a natural harmonic two octaves higher (notated as a diamond shape notehead G on the third string). This line continues as a tremolo: The first violin plays it as tremoli between unisons on two strings. Further, to follow the general expansion of the register, the viola

also plays one octave higher (bar 13), when it touches the drone (D) while playing the line of the tenor.

In these same bars, there are also two examples of how one instrument can play two voices of the original, combining both into a tremolo: In bar 12, the two lines of the soprano and alto are both played by the first violin as a tremolo on one string. The same happens with the viola playing the alto and tenor parts in bar 13.

Layer as a visual metaphor

With the word “layer,” I am using a visual metaphor. Sight has its own logic that, in general, I do not want to impose onto sound and listening. But in this case, I find the visual metaphor apt, since it also illustrates the way that I was thinking about my work at the time: I imagined my transcription as a magnifying glass through which one could inspect Frescobaldi’s original. My intervention plays with transparency and opacity, and this dimension is also something the performers can play with. To what extent does this magnifying glass filter or let the original piece emerge? These two poles of opacity and transparency can also orient the performing choices of the musicians, in that they can choose to emphasize Frescobaldi’s lines and/or the sound of the string quartet.

In order to place my research within a broader context, I will now consider the works and reflections by other composers who have dealt with transcribing as a means to compose the mediation to a musical work.

In the context of this visual metaphor, a relevant work to consider is Dieter Schnebel’s *Schubert-Phantasie* (1978), which can be heard in audio example 5. As Schnebel writes in the performance notes of his score, in this fantasia a chamber orchestra plays “an analytic orchestration” – a term that refers to Webern’s orchestration of Bach’s “Ricercar a 6” – of the first movement of Schubert’s late G-Major piano sonata, op. 78, D. 894 (1827). At the same time, the orchestra is placed behind a *Blendwerk*, a sound layer or sound screen, concretely made by another string orchestra (the lower nine staves in the score, which I have outlined in red in figure 9).

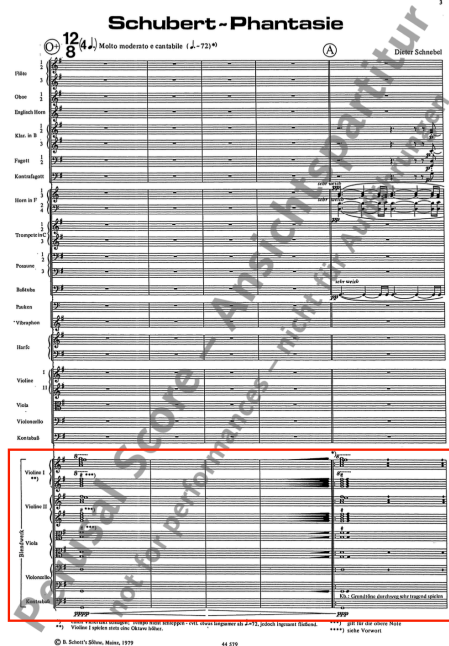


Figure 9. Schnebel, *Schubert-Phantasie*, first page of the score

Schnebel’s *Phantasie* begins and ends with the *Blendwerk* alone, that is “moreover, an independent composition for string orchestra which can be performed under this name as a complete piece in itself” (Schnebel 1978). When the two layers are played together, the *Blendwerk* “functions as a kind of veil; if it is played alone it functions as a vague reminiscence of Schubert’s work” (Bergé 2007, 229). This veil separates the listener from Schubert’s music, but it is also, at the same time, the medium through which it is accessed: It is “at once a means of elucidation, and also an impediment to reception. The same device stages the mediation of the historical object and also the impossibility of it ever becoming immediate” (Brodsky 2017, 165).

Audio 5. Schnebel, *Schubert-Phantasie*, Sinfonieorchester des Südwestrundfunks conducted by Zoltan Pesko:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6dqeI2DtI&ab_channel=WelleszTheatre.

The German term *Blendwerk* can also be translated as mirage, deception, or illusion (Balik 2011, 177). It expresses a relation to Schubert’s music that recognizes its historicity and its belonging to the past, placing it at a distance, separated by a veil. In this sense, Schnebel’s transcription does not follow the conception of Schubert’s original as a static, eternal, and autonomous entity – presupposed by the notion of *Werktreue* – but lets us perceive the time that separates us from it, transforming Schubert’s work in a mirage or a reminiscence.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson, discussing different possible attitudes of restoration in music in relation to Berio's *Rendering* – a “restoration” of Franz Schubert's preparatory sketches for his tenth symphony which does not try “to disguise the damage that time has caused, often leaving inevitable empty patches in the composition” (Berio 1989-90) – emphasizes how in architecture, the concept of *Werktreue* is less significant than in music, as it is obvious that buildings are subject to the passing of time, which consumes and changes them:

These questions are more easily resolved when dealing with works of architecture than with works of music. The concept of *Werktreue* is less significant, for example, as buildings already track the course of time. They are adapted for different purposes, extended, renovated, and refitted; they fall into disrepair and even ruin. At any given moment, a building reveals its whole history. Attempts are still sometimes made to preserve historical buildings in as close to their original state as possible, but it is more widely recognized that buildings are fluid. (Rutherford-Johnson 2017, 249)

Transcriptions like Schnebel's also acknowledge the fluidity of musical works; they are non-transcendent entities subject to the passage of time and are influenced by how they are listened to in the present.

A transcription that focuses explicitly on the intimate relation of the transcriber with the original work is Gérard Pesson's *Nebenstück* (1998), a “filtered” transcription for clarinet and string quartet of Johannes Brahms's Ballade, op. 10, no. 4 for piano. In his program notes, Pesson writes:

I have tried to fix objectively the strange contamination that exists between musical invention and memory. [...] This ballade from opus 10 literally haunted me for years ... If it stayed with me for so long, it is because I never heard it other than in my memory, where it gradually rusted, like something fallen into the sea. Trying to transcribe it was like trying to fish it out again. Discovering it was suitable and indeed contained what my own musical work had added, going so far perhaps as to conceal the ballad, when in fact it took on a precise shape, like coral growing on any matter close to hand, exaggerating the form it encloses. My memory had always multiplied those few bars where Brahms makes a chord turn in on itself, and in order to remain faithful to this false impression, I wrote them out as such. (Pesson 1998b)

Pesson established with the original a relation made of memory and invention: In his poetic description, Brahms's original Ballade had fallen into the sea of the transcriber's memory, after which he transformed and reinvented it. At the end of his program notes, Pesson states that with transcribing, he wanted to remain

faithful to the “false impression” that his memory had made of the original. In this way, Pesson frees himself from the obligation of being faithful to the original work, and even more from the dichotomy between being faithful and unfaithful. Pesson’s relation with Brahms’s original is made of memory, and memory – remembering (and forgetting) – also invents and creates false impressions.

Transcriptions such as Schnebel’s and Pesson’s make audible the unavoidable mediation that connects us to (and separates us from) musical works, and tell us that the past cannot be present without mediations: They do not restore the past, but compose the distance that separates us from it. In *Une petite fleur bleue*, I somehow share Schnebel’s and Pesson’s approaches, aiming to make this distance audible. My transcription acts as a glass that filters – playing with transparency and opacity – the access to Frescobaldi’s work. At the same time, by slowing down the tempo and allowing the listener’s attention to focus on the timbral dimension and on individual instrumental gestures, I aim to render the intimacy of my listening to Frescobaldi’s work.

Further reflections

At the time I was working on *Une petite fleur bleue*, I did not really set myself free from the dichotomy between being faithful and unfaithful to Frescobaldi’s work. I indeed still embraced a perspective of respect and faithfulness to an original, considered as a static entity, and consequently I wanted to preserve it at the same time as finding room for my own freedom. These two aims remained quite distinct, and my attitude gave rise to the musical choices and outcomes that I have discussed extensively above.

A relevant achievement of this transcribing experience was the intimacy that I found with Frescobaldi’s music and with his writing, and at the same time, an awareness of the possibility of a space to explore where one could play with and adopt different strategies to be in dialogue with a musical work.

My approach in writing *Une petite fleur bleue* had clear limits, which were also the features of the piece: the preservation of the original (every note is there), the freedom in creating a sound layer on top of the original work, and also the absence of any real possibility of a swerve away from Frescobaldi’s original. Considering it as a static entity to be respected and preserved did not allow me, for example, to enter into a dialogue with its internal structure, questioning and transforming it: I slowed down and stretched the tempo, but all the harmonic and rhythmic relations and the overall sequence of events stayed intact. Aiming to maintain Frescobaldi’s original, recognizable and distinguishable from my intervention, finally limited my capacity to contaminate it and to let my language be contaminated by it.

This experience made me interested in the practice of transcribing, both as a workshop to study and look for a dialogue with musical works from the past, and as a litmus test of a composer’s attitude towards musical tradition. I did not

write another transcription for another eight years, after which I decided to tackle this topic again, framing it within my artistic research.

As a next step, I decided to choose another polyphonic piece, and to keep a similar instrumentation, using only strings. For my transcription *Hortense* (2013), for string trio, the original is a five-voice madrigal by Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa. While in Frescobaldi's piece, there were four voices (though in fact one was a drone), and I had at my disposal a string quartet, transcribing five voices for three strings is a greater challenge, and this obliged me to find different, more radical, approaches. More interestingly, while Frescobaldi's *Fiore Musicale* is for organ, Gesualdo's madrigal is for voices, raising the question of how to deal with the text. This scenario obliged me to deal differently with the original, and to search for new ways to be in dialogue with an already existing piece.

I did not decide how to proceed in advance: Composing and transcribing can consist of putting oneself in a situation to see how one's creativity reacts. A metaphor that helped me to frame my research, and that arose during my discussions with composer Stefano Gervasoni, is the idea of looking at each of these transcribing experiences as a chemistry experiment: to consider the already existing musical work as a reagent that comes into contact with my own musical invention, and to allow myself to investigate the reaction. The original work is not a simple pretext, since it produces unexpected reactions with singular specific features.

Before dealing with *Hortense* in chapter 3, however, I will dedicate the next chapter to Webern's *Fuga Ricercata* (1935), his seminal orchestration of J. S. Bach's "Ricercar a 6" from the *Musikalisches Opfer* (1747).