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Transcribing: between listening, memory, and invention

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Summary

Transcribing has a long and varied history in Western (art) music. It does not have one single meaning, as it is a transversal and polyhedral practice that responds to several different needs in different eras and contexts; today, it testifies to many composers' deep engagement with the musical past and their desire to establish a creative relationship with cultural heritage.

This research investigates the process and implications of transcribing a musical work from the past, and aims to expand the knowledge and understanding of this creative practice. I have conducted this research through experimenting with various ways of engaging with musical works from the past, closely examining the results, and reflecting on my practice as a composer-transcriber. I have also placed my research within a broader context by putting my practice into dialogue with the work and ideas of other composers and performers, musicologists and philosophers, writers and poets.

Starting from Peter Szendy's ideas, I looked at the practice of transcribing as a form of listening, as an active and critical relationship with musical works that has the potential to transform both the original work and the transcriber's musical language. From this perspective, transcriptions are not mere repetitions of musical works or different ways of saying the same thing, but written traces of acts of listening: On the basis of my research, I claim that transcribing should be regarded as a dynamic and transformative relationship between the transcriber and the musical work, thereby challenging the idea of regarding the musical work and the transcription as static entities with predefined stable borders. In this thesis, the practice of transcribing becomes a means of reflecting on the theme of otherness, on the relationship between self and other. Reflecting on transcribing as a way of listening to the other, I also examine this practice from an ethical perspective: Following Jacques Derrida's ideas, I argue that truly paying respect to a musical work indeed means operating in "absolute ingratitude," assuming the fate of an "always threatening risk of betrayal" and of contaminating the original and, at the same time, being contaminated by it.

Greater freedom and involvement, and thus a reciprocal contamination between the musical work and the transcriber's language, means the invention of new possibilities, as opposed to the musealization and sacralization of works from the past. By removing a musical work from its "imaginary museum" (Lydia Goehr) and exposing it to contamination, transcribing enables a new relation to such a work, transitioning it from the sacred to the profane (Giorgio Agamben)

and allowing for a creative engagement. This process challenges the impossibility of free use, and by disenchanting the musical work, it turns the transcriber's engagement with it – and therefore with a broader cultural and artistic heritage – into a creative, relational, and reciprocal process. Integrating contemporary artistic expression with one's cultural legacy indeed holds the potential to transform one's relationship with history into a dynamic and creative practice.

This thesis is divided into five chapters, each dealing with one specific experience of transcribing that I had between 2005 and 2022, with the exception of chapter 2, which is dedicated to Webern's *Fuga Ricercata* (1935), his orchestration of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Ricercar a 6" from the *Musikalisches Opfer* (1747). I focused on transcribing works from the Western repertoire, and apart from Franz Schubert's Lied "Der Doppelgänger," I chose to rework polyphonic music by Girolamo Frescobaldi, Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa, and Josquin Desprez. Frescobaldi's "Christe alio modo" was the only instrumental piece, while in the others, the presence of voices and poetic texts played significant roles in my transcribing process.

The thesis narrates a journey where I progressively sought to create more openings, allowing the chosen original musical works to influence, contaminate, and transform my language as a transcriber more and more. Each chapter outlines a further stage in the progression of my research and presents a different approach to transcribing, along with various issues and strategies for engaging with a musical work. Additionally, each chapter offers reflections and remarks that consider and develop concepts and ideas from the literature and other transcriptions that I have studied.

At the beginning of this journey, while working on *Une petite fleur bleue*, I started from the idea that the original work, and especially its score, is a prescriptive source. Later, when working on *Hortense* and especially on *Una notte*, I conceived the transcription as a double of the original, with the potential to reveal otherness as something already part of the self – already with us, yet still radically a stranger. Finally, in *Tutto chiudi negli occhi*, I took one more step in my reflections on the double and proposed the idea of dreaming as a model of a relationship with the other. Dreaming of something is a relationship that opposes seizing; instead, it is a way of opening the doors to otherness, recognizing it without neutralizing or domesticating it.

This thesis discusses transcribing as the capacity to make audible the unavoidable mediation that connects (and separates) the transcriber from musical works of the past, as well as several transcribers' strategies to work with this distance. Throughout the thesis I discuss transcriptions by composers such as Richard Barrett, Stefano Gervasoni, Daan Janssens, Fabio Nieder, Dieter Schnebel, Salvatore Sciarrino, Anton Webern, and Hans Zender, and the work of

performers and researchers such as Heloisa Amaral and Lucia D'Errico. Besides the aforementioned musicians, and the philosophers Szendy, Derrida, Goehr, and Agamben, I have also entered into dialogue with the ideas of, among others, Roland Barthes (the listener as a co-author); Samuel IJsseling (transcribing turns a work into an original); Jorge Luis Borges, Emily Dickinson, Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Heine, Ovid, and Raymond Queneau (the transcription as a double, and the idea of the other as something both intimate and foreign, already virtually present within the self); Walter Benjamin, Luciano Berio, and Morton Feldman (slowness gives access to a qualitative relation with a work); and Ludwig Wittgenstein (the meaning of a musical work is the use that one makes of it).

My research offers both theoretical and artistic contributions that may encourage new ways of thinking about transcribing, both enriching the discourse on the presence of the past in contemporary music and revealing how transcriptions also enable musical works to be virtually present in contemporary music, reappearing from the past like ghosts.