

Musica ex nihilo

Kafka Alert

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Seven musical dogs

Der Weg, der wahre weg...¹ The Way, the true way... Kafka's way.

The Jew from Prague sends out a danger signal. Here is a first Kafka Alert: *The true way is along a rope that is not spanned high in the air, but only just above the ground. It seems intended more to cause stumbling than to be walked along.¹*

The true, straight way, *la diritta via*. But that was lost already in Dante's time, before the gates to the Inferno.

La diritta via era smarrita - the way was lost², writes Dante.

And Kafka says: *Es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen ist Zögern; There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation.*

The rest is silence, says the prince of Elsinore with his dying breath³.

Yet is all the rest really silence? Or is it that amidst the total silence a weird music can be barely heard? Silence or music? It is only the beginning, and we have stumbled already. The first hesitation: music or silence? We are walking on a tightrope mounted low down, and we are in danger of crashing down on the solid, hard ground of this world.

At the beginning of *Investigations of a Dog* we are greeted by seven musical dogs. A weird spectacle, and an even weirder sound. This is noted by Deleuze and Guattari in their own investigations, and they write in the first chapter of their joint book on Kafka: *...the musical dogs produce a tremendous racket, but no one can tell how they do it, since they don't speak, sing or bark but make the music swell up out of nothingness.⁴* From the Nothing of silence? Or from the Nothing beyond silence and music, beyond musical sound or any sound—beyond the total absence of music and sounds? **Musica ex nihilo.**

¹ Franz Kafka, *Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg*; "Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way", *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. Max Brod, trans. E. Kaiser & E. Wilkins, Exact Change, Cambridge, MA 1991

² Dante, *Comedia*, Inferno Canto I,3

³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 2

⁴ Giles Deleuze-Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. D Polan, U of Minnesota 1986, p. 5

Music and Kafka

Deleuze and Guattari propose an equation in which the ratio of the straightened head in Kafka's prose to the musical sound equals the rising Desire and its deterritorialisation. They stress that what matters to Kafka is musical sound as an unprocessed sonorous material, and rightly point to the works of John Cage. But they add: *It is certainly not a systematized music, a musical form that interests Kafka (in his letters and in his diary, one finds nothing more than insignificant anecdotes about a few musicians).*⁵

"Insignificant anecdotes"? Yet it was no insignificant anecdote when, for instance, Kafka, in his talks with Gustav Janouch towards the end of his brief life, chose to cite Haydn as an example of how an artist—a musician, a poet or any practitioner of art and literature—proceeds like a magician to some ritualistic motions, since, as the author of *Metamorphosis* explains to his young interlocutor, *writing is in fact an intercourse with ghosts*⁶. Nor is it an insignificant anecdote when he refers in his diaries, already since the early days of his literary career, to the music in the popular Yiddish theatre of his friend Jischak Löwy, Kafka's main instructor in Jewish tradition and the Talmud; or the attention he pays to Hassidic melody and what he describes as the *Talmudic melody of minute questions, adjurations or explanations*⁷; or his love for the Jewish women who sing for the Yiddish troupe—Mrs Tschissik and above all Mrs Krug, the possible model for the famous mouse-singer Josephine in Kafka's momentous last text, written three months before his death, which is the key to understanding his ambiguous yet omnipresent relationship with music.

After a Brahms concert on December 13, 1911, Kafka notes in his Journal: *The essence of my unmusicalness consists in my inability to **enjoy music connectedly**, it only now and then has an effect on me, and how seldom it is a musical one. The natural effect of music on me is to circumscribe me with a wall, and its only constant influence on me is that, confined in this way, I am different from what I am when free.*⁸

Kafka is at times a prisoner of music, perhaps in the way that Jean Genet describes himself as a *captif amoureux* in the account of his love for a young Palestinian man and the Palestinian Revolution. Could it be that the prisoner of music was the same as the temporary captive of Felice or Milena, who ultimately dug his way out of the 'wall' of love or music and towards the solitariness of his freedom?

Some major composers of contemporary music, from Ernst Krenek to György Kurtág and others to this day, have tried to penetrate the enigma of Kafka's relationship with music using the music itself as the means.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 5

⁶ *Betrachtungen...*, op. cit.

⁷ Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910-1923*, trans. Joseph Kresh, Schocken Books 1988

⁸ *ibid.*

We know already from Deleuze and Guattari that in order to access Kafka's work we have to recognise it as *a rhizome, a burrow*⁹. This is why these composers dig musical burrows. Krenek in his *Sechs Motetten nach Worten von Franz Kafka* opus 169, a Lamentation of Jeremiah for the decline and fall of the West into the horrors of the century, and Kurtág in his arresting *Kafka-Fragmenten*, dig underground galleries to join the writings of *The Castle's* author. It is no accident that for all their marked differences these two musical works share a main shaft from which the various galleries of their burrow branch out or to which they converge: the text about the true Way—*der Weg, der wahre Weg*; the tightrope which stretched on the ground, full of secret knots-obstacles, knots-hesitations. Kurtág insists on that non-Way, the knotty obstacle course, and reminds us how Kafka points out, in yet another Kafka Alert, that over the course along the tightrope with the hidden obstacles the main thing is to reach that critical knot which is the point of no return. And there is something else, at once paradoxical and crucial: the knots-obstacles, the hesitations that mortally jeopardise the acrobat's progress, are caches which contain salvation potential, although there is in fact only one salvation and lies at the other end of the tightrope, at the end of the true Way.

Silence Music Fall Rise

Salvation from what? From the silence of death or from captivity in the unfathomable music of a life which remains inaccessible?

In Kafka's parable *The Silence of the Sirens* the mortal danger lies not in their alluring singing but in their silence. Odysseus, *bound to the mast [...]* *did not hear their silence: he thought they were singing and that he alone was saved from hearing it.*¹⁰ He believes he is listening to the music he cannot hear.

Yet there is also a second ending to the parable¹¹. Odysseus is so cunning as to pretend to hear the song that the silent Sirens of Death are not singing. The cunning of the Greek Odysseus (but also of the Mouse Folk with the pronounced Jewish traits) shows, according to Kafka, that there are also *inadequate, childish means of salvation*,¹² obviously hidden in some knot; some knot in the rope tethering Odysseus, in the Jewish prayer shawl, in the *tsitsith* of a *tallit*, in the tightrope of the true Way.

In his swansong text *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk* Kafka condenses in a crystal prism with multiple faces the enigma of the relation between Music and Silence, individual and community, artist and the people, art and humanity and illuminates its inner labyrinth.

⁹ Deleuze & Guattari, op. cit., p. 3

¹⁰ Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, op. cit.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

*Our singer is called Josephine. Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song. There is no one but is carried away by her singing, a tribute all the greater as we are not in general a music-loving race. Tranquil peace is the music we love best.*¹³

The reason behind this alienation from music and everything sublime and the acceptance of an imposed silence does not hover in any metaphysical heights; it walks and stumbles on the hard social ground of this world. The Mouse Folk are in no doubt about that: *our life is hard, we are no longer able, even on occasions when we have tried to shake off the cares of daily life, to rise to anything so high and remote from our usual routine as music.*¹⁴

The world of the Fall, especially in our age, is a world of utter estrangement from everything sublime, a universal alienation, primarily of those whom the official world of dominators oppresses and pushes down and outwards into exclusion and a minority position, making them *mineurs* in the sense given to the term by Deleuze and Guattari.

It is from this off-centre position that Kafka's subversive discourse emerges. He does not stop at a writer's fleeting pleasures, at satisfying his personal desires. As he states categorically on September 25, 1917: ... *happiness [I can have] only if I can raise the world into the pure, the true and the immutable.*¹⁵

The indomitable desire for raising everything, for the *déterritorialisation absolue*, as Deleuze and Guattari described the Utopia of Ernst Bloch and the Constant Revolution¹⁶, is the same invincible urge that makes the unmusical Mouse Folk, who otherwise prefer silence and peace, ultimately idolise Josephine the mouse singer and adore her singing.

The Song of Josephine

The mouse singer's song is the knot of knots along the tightrope of Kafka the acrobat, the most complex set of opposites. Let us look at the main knots and their hiding places.

A. Josephine's singing is alluring but not anything extraordinary. It may even be nothing more than a piping, the common squeak made by all mice. Yet Josephine's piping *is set free from the fetters of daily life and it sets us free too for a little while.*¹⁷ It achieves something similar to the musical audacity of Cage, for instance, or more generally to the new road paved in modern art by Marcel Duchamp with the revolutionary gesture of the readymade.

¹³ Kafka, *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, trans. Willa & Edwin Muir

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod, Schocken Classics, p. 386-7

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?* Minuit 1991 p. 95-7

¹⁷ Kafka, *Josephine the Singer*, op. cit.

B. The song of Josephine contains *something of our poor brief childhood is in it, something of lost happiness that can never be found again*. Moreover, it goes beyond nostalgia for what is forever lost in the past to include *also something of active daily life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet springing up and not to be obliterated*.¹⁸

On this indestructibility Kafka notes in the octavo notebooks on December 23, 1917: *The indestructible is one: it is each individual human being and, at the same time, it is common to all, hence the incomparably indivisible union that exists between human beings*.¹⁹ Herein lies also the indissoluble bond between Josephine the exquisite primadonna and her people.

C. The song of Josephine will certainly become a memory one day; perhaps it has always been a memory—a memory of her people's lost yet strangely indestructible tradition. And as Kafka writes, it was *rather because Josephine's singing was already past losing in this way that our people in their wisdom prized it so highly*...²⁰

D. The power of Josephine's song lies in that it sends out a signal for the people's uprising. It is literally a Kafka Alert addressed to the humble Mouse Folk and the entire *direly suffering humanity*, as the poet Andreas Embiricos would put it. Josephine's singing *is not so much a performance of songs as an assembly of the people [...] This piping, which rises up where everyone else is pledged to silence, comes almost like a message from the whole people to each individual; Josephine's thin piping amidst grave decisions is almost like our people's precarious existence amidst the tumult of a hostile world*.²¹

The piping of Josephine is a call for hard political decisions by a displaced minority, for a revolutionary policy of the oppressed *mineur* within the turmoil of the hostile world of the official *majeurs*, the Dominators. Josephine's song may be addressed to her people with the recognisable traits of Yiddishkeit, but through it—or rather the minor folk through the call of Josephine—is addressing all the oppressed on Earth. As the other Josephine, the Jewish singer Mrs Krug of the popular theatre of Jischak Löwy, had joked one evening at a musical show: *You see, I speak all the tongues in the world, but in Yiddish!*²²

A faint piping rises from among the minor folk, something like the *bat kol*, the *small whisper* which the prophet Elijah heard when he was persecuted and hiding in the cave.²³

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, op. cit.

²⁰ Kafka, *Josephine the Singer*, op. cit.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Kings III 12

Walter Benjamin, in his famous *On the Concept of History*, describes this barely audible voice—*une voix mineure*—as a **weak messianic power**.

Musica ex nihilo: Benjamin vs. Scholem

The emergence of the messianic in Kafka's works (for in the *Octavo Notebooks* it is direct and incontestable) became a point of contention between the two great Jewish thinkers, Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem.

In 1934, when Benjamin was writing his seminal essay on Kafka on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his death, the two friends with the frequently different or conflicting views crossed swords around the oeuvre of the author of *The Trial* in their correspondence.²⁴ Their different paths, the specific historical junctures and their own particular circumstances go some way towards explaining their dispute. By that time Scholem had spent over a decade in Palestine under the British mandate, and his crushed illusions about Zionism had driven him to a peculiar religious anarchism nurtured by his study of the Kabbalah and the heretic Judaic messianic movements of the Sabbatai Zevi ilk. As for Benjamin, he was ten years into revolutionary Marxism, which he had publicly and irreversibly espoused in the year of Kafka's death.

On July 9, 1934 Scholem writes to Benjamin enclosing a copy of *The Trial* and what he calls a "didactic poem", whose fourth stanza says that the only experience from God that the biblical revelation could have in our time is Nothing.²⁵ And Scholem explains, on July 17, that *Kafka's world is the world of revelation, but of revelation seen of course from the perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness [...], the nonfulfillability of what has been revealed.*²⁶ And this concerns not only Judaism but the entire modern world.

Later, after Benjamin's persistent questions and objections, Scholem writes on September 20, 1934: *You ask what I mean by "the Nothing of Revelation"? I mean a situation where this [Revelation] does not signify; where the wealth of significance is gone and what appears [is] reduced, so to speak, to the zero point of its own content.*²⁷

Retorting Scholem's interpretative approach to Kafka, Benjamin writes on July 20: *I tried to show how Kafka attempted to project on the reverse of this 'nothingness', on its lining. [Hence] every way of overcoming this nothingness [...] would have abhorrent to him...*²⁸

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith & Andre Lefevere, Harvard University Press 1992.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 127

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 128

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 128

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 130

It is from the reverse, from the lining of nothingness that the piping or singing of Josephine, the *Musica ex nihilo*, rises.

In the same letter Benjamin insists on the *messianic aspect* of Kafka's work. He writes to Scholem: *you take the 'nothingness of revelation' as your point of departure, the salvific-historical perspective of the established proceedings of the trial. I take as my starting point the small, nonsensical hope, as well as the creatures for whom this hope is intended and yet who on the other hand are also the creatures in which its absurdity is mirrored. [...] I recognise [in Kafka] a messianic aspect.*²⁹

Benjamin points to *return* as the main messianic theme in Kafka, which is linked to *teshuvah*—the change of one's life (as opposed to mere repentance)—as the core concept of Yom Kippur, the Jew's Day of Atonement.

This conflict between Scholem and Benjamin is paralleled by their different attitudes in the question of the *Law*, which is a major issue for Kafka. Here the theological aspect is left aside and the clear political dispute comes to the surface.

To Scholem, Revelation means revelation of the *Law* in the sense ascribed to it by rabbinic Judaism. From this viewpoint he censures Benjamin for approaching Law in its *more secularised* sense and not as *the moral world of Halakhah* [the Talmudic codification of Mosaic Law] ... *with its abysses and its dialectics.*³⁰

Benjamin claims *Kafka's constant insistence on the law to be the point where his work comes to a standstill*³¹, but leaves the matter open to further investigation. His attitude cannot be seen in isolation from his essay on a *Critique of Violence* at the time of the tornado of the Russian and German revolution, written under the direct influence of the ideas of the proponent of anarchic syndicalism Sorel about a proletarian general strike as well as those of the Bolsheviks; Benjamin distinguishes between the pagan *mythical violence* which imposes the Law and the biblical *divine violence*, the fire of God which burned the antirevolutionary enemies of Moses who demanded power, privileges and the return to the land of slavery. Benjamin equated divine violence with the revolutionary violence which prevails over the mythical violence of instituting and imposing the Law. This does not mean a regression to a chaos of lawlessness but an act of salvation which will pave the way to what in biblical terms is called *Tsedeq*—a term translated as both *Justice* and *Mercy*.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 135

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. xxx

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 135

Scholem himself, in a youthful text on Jonas³², juxtaposes Law and Justice and quotes the crucial verse from the Book of Psalms: *Ki ad tsedeq shuwv mishpat- For judgment shall return unto righteousness.*³³

Jonas, as representative of the Law, sees the divine verdict about the annihilation of the pagans' sinful city of Nineveh as a historically irreversible fact. Yet divine justice itself overrules the verdict when Nineveh and all its inhabitants repent, perform a *teshuvah* and come out in the streets contrite, with ash on their heads, people and dogs alike.³⁴ (They may have included Kafka's seven musical dogs, with ash on their little heads). And the twenty-year-old Scholem notes: *Justice is the idea of a historical negation of the divine verdict; an action is just which relieves History from the burden of this verdict.*³⁵

Benjamin would not object to that and nor would Kafka, and especially the hero of his *Verdict*. Besides, we should remember that: *one could argue [...] that Josephine stands almost beyond the law.*³⁶ Yet she does not stand beyond the jurisdiction of the people, of the unuttered demand of justice for the unprivileged, the *mineurs* of this world.

There is no personal escape from the major world of the dominants, not even for the sake of a singer like Josephine, Tschissik or Mrs Krug.

In an aphorism in his fourth *Octavo Notebook*, Kafka speaks about the need for this world to be destroyed: *neither a flight from the world of magic nor an exorcism to rationalise it, but a destruction of the world that does not destruct but constructs.*³⁷ Constructs from nothing, or rather from the other side, from the reverse aspect of Nothing. A *Musica ex nihilo*.

And this is another, somewhat paradoxical description of the Constant Revolution.

20-21 September 2011

³² Gershom Scholem, *Sur Jonas, la lamentation et le judaïsme*, Bayard 2007 p. 20

³³ Psalm 94:15

³⁴ *Jonas*, 3:8

³⁵ *Sur Jonas*... op. cit., p. 21

³⁶ Kafka, *Josephine the Singer*, op. cit.

³⁷ Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, op. cit.