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Lucia Pasini

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THE SOUND OF ROBERT FROST. LISTENING TO POETRY

In my master's thesis, my aim was to examine two examples of musical settings of Robert Frost's poetry. My intention has been to analyze a particular problematization of the esthetic relationship between the instance that produces meaning (first of all the poet, but also the first-person narrator—in this case the composer and then the performers, who actually carry out the elocutionary act), and the instance that receives it (the reader or the spectator, more generally the public). This problematization is caused by a complication entailed by the musical transposition itself, as regards the means by which the artistic object in question proves to be remarkable, not only esthetically, but also semantically (examples, respectively, could be alliteration and metaphor).

The analyzed works are *Three Poems of Robert Frost* by Elliott Carter and *Frostiana: Seven Country Songs* by Randall Thompson. The selection process has followed a few indicative criteria: in particular, Thompson's work is relevant because it constitutes the only case where the poet himself expressed his approval of the musical settings of his poems; and I chose Carter's work because, though its composition dates roughly back to the same period of *Frostiana*, its formal characteristics are completely different.

My hope is that the very nature of such a study could fill a few gaps in the strictly literary scholarship about Frost's work as well as in the musicological analyses of the examined compositions. In fact, musicological studies tend to overlook the textual characteristics that depend on the specific style of a specific author, and on her esthetic, political or philosophical thought, and the fact that these questions are indissolubly linked to the historical and geographical perspective of the author in question. Consequently, the textual analyses in the musicological studies that I came across during my research are mostly inadequate, because they are mainly focused on two aspects of the text: form in its metrical facet, and content as a narrative pretext. These two perspectives, even if they cannot be ignored in a hermeneutic process, are surely not sufficient to produce a deep and comprehensive understanding of the text in question.

I would like to present the analysis of two examples, *Dust of Snow* by Elliott Carter and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Randall Thompson, where the tools of musicology and of the technical analysis of musical language are employed in examining the musical piece as the expression of a hermeneutic process carried out by the composer. I will show that an approach of this kind can bring to light some new aspects of both the examined piece and of the relationship between poetry and music.

“Dust of Snow” was published for the first time under this title in *New Hampshire* in 1923. Here is the complete text.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

From a general point of view, the most obvious subject matter in “Dust of Snow” is the relationship between man and nature: the narrator is surrounded by it and a simple event becomes the catalytic of an emotional change. Nature is represented in a condition of tranquility and relaxation, which is in turn well displayed by the music. Here, Carter favors a modal language without the strict organization of tonality, thus avoiding strong cadences. This allows him, in the beginning (measures 1-18) and in the concluding measures, to pair the tonic and the dominant chord of the key that most characterizes the piece in these two moments, namely E major (ex. 1, measures 33-35). The coexistence of these two chords annihilates the tension that usually accompanies them where they are played subsequently, thus giving a sense of immobility and calm to the general atmosphere of the piece. Nevertheless, an element of movement is perceivable: it consists in the superposition of two syncopated rhythmic figurations in the vocal and pianistic parts (ex. 2, measures 1-4). These will remain present during most of the piece. Furthermore, the distinctive figure of the composition, introduced as soon as the first measure, can be understood as an imitation of the falling snow (ex. 2, measures 1-4).

More punctually, the transition from the first to the second stanza marks the transition of the narrator's focal center from the action of nature to the consequences that it has on his own mood. Carter underlines this change by means of a radical modification of the atmosphere. The change is immediately perceivable: Carter modifies the tempo, which becomes noticeably slower. As a consequence, the second strophe is dilated, which could represent the narrator's emotions, if the music is considered in relation to the content of the poem. This is further confirmed by the importance given by Carter to the word "heart", which is underlined by the ascending fifth that precedes it, by its high pitch and by its position on a strong beat.

From the point of view of the relationship between the meaning of the text and that of its musical setting, it is possible to make two hypotheses. The first one, more immediate than the second, is that the poet simply wants to underscore that the meaning assigned to nature always derives from a human component, and is in no way integral to the natural element. The second hypothesis is that, behind the appearance of serenity, "Dust of Snow" hides some more sombre implications due to the presence of the hemlock tree and of the crow, which can be compared to the cormorant that represents Satan in *Paradise Lost*. In Carter's version, this second hypothesis is obviously not taken into consideration and the composer remains more in line with the first, following a direction that might have been indicated by Frost himself, as he chose to publish the poem under the title of "A Favor" before changing it to "Dust of Snow".

As regards *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, it was also published in *New Hampshire*.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

This is one of the most anthologized poems by Robert Frost, and also one of the most analyzed. In addition, the very hypothesis has been proposed that the poem itself addresses the problem of over-interpretation. In any case, the reason for such a great width of interpretational range is the ambiguity deriving from the information that the poet chooses to omit, starting from who is the owner of the woods to which promises are those he has to keep.

Thompson sets the poem for male voices, and the device he uses the most is the mimetic imitation of the text: beginning from the pianistic introduction, falling snow can be clearly heard (ex. 1, measures 1-4); the 6/8 metrical time imitates the rhythm of a horse's pace; and the "harness bells" are easily recognizable (ex. 2, measures 27-29).

Possibly, the most noteworthy element here is the repetition of the last two lines. Specifically, this reiteration can be apprehended as the dramatization of the conflict between movement and stasis, within the contradiction of the need to continue the journey when the poem stops and the enhancing of the lulling rhythmic effect that leads the narrator to immobility. A second contradiction is provided by the declaration of having "promises to keep", which creates a moment when the poetic content is contrary to the form.

In the musical setting, the last stanza is also given a particular importance by Thompson. First of all, the change in rhythm seems to indicate the tiredness of the narrator, which dilates the strophe until it takes seventeen measures instead of the eight measures dedicated to each of the other ones. The last line is even more dilated in what seems a figuration of the "miles to go". And finally, the last chord, built on the superposition of an F minor chord, the main tonality of the piece, and an E flat major one, suggests a sense of incompleteness, even if the return of the initial pianis-

tic motive (ex. 4, measures 62-69) seems to indicate a release from the meditative state and the continuation of the journey.

After these considerations, it is possible to discern a first correspondence between Carter's and Thompson's songs and Frost's texts. Firstly, the form of Carter's songs, his use of dissonance and the lack of clear reference points, such as cadences for example, make them an irksome kind of music to the ears of an uneducated public. Thus, they are mainly addressed to only one part of the public that Frost wished for his poems, namely the intellectual one. On the contrary, Thompson's sounds come from the previous musical tradition and they are coherently organized according to forms that even a broader public recognizes as familiar, exactly as that same public is not troubled by the regularity of Frost's use of meter. Therefore, it is possible to generally understand Carter's and Thompson's compositions as separately representative of some particular aspects of Frost's poetic practice, respectively of his insistence on vital sounds and on the complication of traditional forms that is caused precisely by the presence of these sounds, for the former; of the conformity to these same forms, for the latter.

Similarly, from the point of view of the creation of meaning, we have seen that Carter's pieces leave room for a rather broad range of interpretation and often allow different understandings of the same text, which are sometimes even mutually contradictory. On the contrary, Thompson's pieces put forth for the most part an unambiguous interpretation of Frost's texts, which often coincides with the first degree of meaning, the most superficial, the least problematic and also the most institutionalized one. The divergence in the musical interpretation is made possible by the poems themselves. Frost explicitly states that his poems are addressed to two audiences: a broader one, the general public, who will take the poems at face value, and a smaller one, who comes to poetry with a mind to dissect it, to go to the bottom of its implications. And I would like to underline, strongly, that this distinction, and the corresponding one I just made for the music, is in no way depreciative of one side or the other. The interest here is pointing out a difference in artistic expression and in the modalities of its reception, not establishing a hierarchy on the basis of aesthetic value.

More generally, as far as the immediate perception of the meaning of the poem is concerned, this is certainly altered by the musical transposition as well: in a nutshell, if in a poem its sound produces sense, the sense changes along with the sound. More

precisely, if the imagination is the designated faculty for poetical creation, and it is there that meaning is formed, then, exactly because the perception of the poem is changed by the modifications made by the composer, the images evoked by the text are not the same ones that are evoked by the music—perhaps even so when the latter tries to imitate the former. For example, it is highly probable that the readers will see a different image of the little horse in *Stopping by Woods* than the one seen by the listeners of Thompson's piece: the former read a description mainly focused on the interactions between the animal and the narrator, while the latter are vividly struck by Thompson's suggestive imitation of the bells. It seems likely that there is a gap between those who hear what they see (the readers) and those who see what they hear (the listeners).

Nevertheless, I must underline that these considerations are tenable only as far as they relate to performed music. However, music is not always performed; on the contrary, the exhaustive study of a musical piece is often subordinated to the availability of its score. As a matter of fact, musical notation keeps the ear of the imagination free, and, especially in Carter's case, it is possible to weave a complex and nuanced hermeneutic discourse on this very basis. Still, there is one last problem: musical notation cannot easily function as a hermeneutics of ulteriority, of the second degree of meaning, because, in order to have meaning, it calls in turn for an interpretation.