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Slash. Uri Caine's Mahler

ABSTRACT: In recent years, artistic projects combining a wide array of musical styles, such as jazz interpretations of classical music or orchestral arrangements of rock songs, have enjoyed considerable popularity. As their authors were focused mainly on sales profits, the artistic value of their works was often highly disputable. Nevertheless, some outstanding achievements in that field have also been made, among them reinterpretations of classical repertoire – Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann, and, above all, Mahler – by American pianist Uri Caine. He recorded several CDs containing new versions of Mahler's entire works or their excerpts. Sometimes Caine's music moves far away from the originals, though such artistic experiments are always well-grounded and aesthetically convincing. Caine's reinterpretations of Mahler have also some (auto)biographical overtones.

KEYWORDS: Uri Caine, blurred genres, reinterpretation, Jewish cultural tradition

A warehouseman Gladyshev, one of the characters in Vladimir Voinovich's novel, inspired by Michurin's and Lysenko's achievements, decided to grow a new plant which was to have been a combination of a potato and a tomato. Such a crop should bring a double benefit as in the near future it would be possible to pick tomatoes off the top and to dig up potatoes at the bottom of the same plant. Gladyshev named this cross using an acronym PUKS which stood for the 'Put' k Sotsializmu' [Path to Socialism]. 'The experiments [...] have not as yet produced any useful results, however, some characteristic features of PUKS have already appeared: the leaves and stalks of Gladyshev's plant were sort of potato-like, the roots, one the other hand, looked definitely like those of a tomato'¹.

Certainly, cultural phenomena have, for quite a long time, shown some features of blurred genres (the term I have borrowed from Clifford Geertz).² The problem is that musical hybrids much more often resemble Gladyshev's cross than turn out to be convincing works of art. Thus, there are 'symphonic' (at least this is how they are described on record covers) arrangements of rock pieces, but because it is

¹ Włodzimierz Wojnowicz, *Życie i niezwykle sprawy żołnierza Iwana Czonkina* [The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin], transl. Władysław Doron [Wiktor Dłuski] (Warszawa: NOWa, 1984), 32.

² See Clifford Geertz, "O gatunkach zmańonych (nowe konfiguracje myśli społecznej)" [Blurred Genres. The Refiguration of Social Thought], transl. Zdzisław Łapiński, *Teksty Drugie 1* (1990/2), 113.

often a rather unsophisticated melody that becomes the object of musical reworking, the use of orchestra merely reveals and magnifies the original simplicity. It is difficult to believe that such undertakings are not ironic in principle. Outstanding musical achievements, for example the Beatles' songs, can also become objects of reinterpretation. They were worked on by no mean violinist Vadim Brodski, and the result was an exceptionally unremarkable album entitled *Beatles Symphony*. Renée Fleming tries from time to time to sing jazz, but the resulting recordings are not among the best albums in her discography. The examples could be multiplied without difficulty.

Of course, it is usually the economy (the expected sale of a high number of copies), and not the deepened aesthetics or at least a well thought out experiment, that underlies such phenomena. Even renowned record companies succumb to those tendencies, thereby affirming them. Not very long ago Deutsche Grammophon released the album *Drums 'n' chant* recorded by Martin Grubinger and the Benedictine monks of the Münsterschwarzach Abbey which combined Gregorian chant with a modern percussion set. Did anyone really believe that the point was, for example, to reconstruct hidden rhythmic structures of mediaeval plainsong?

Yet, it would be a one-sided view if we just made do with such a selection of examples, as there are also truly good works whose innovative character also consists in combining genres of different provenance. This musical intergenericity is thought out and accomplished in different ways. Komeda, Modern Jazz Quartet, Gershwin, the Beatles... Here the examples could, fortunately, also be multiplied. However, the purpose of drawing so much attention to those unsuccessful attempts was to show how negative is the context in which today's artists who cross musical borders have to work. For example Uri Caine.

This American jazz pianist has reinterpreted classical music many times, actually changing aesthetic principles subordinated to a specific undertaking. His recording of *Goldberg's Variations* spans a few centuries of the history of music and presents almost all today's musical genres. He rearranged Wagner's works for a very small group of musicians. His Mozart album, ingenious and diversified, is based on *Sonata in C major* (K. 545). Of special importance to Caine is Mahler, who inspired his three albums recorded for a German record company Winter & Winter. In 1997 the album *Urlicht/Primal Light* was released. The leader, playing the piano, was accompanied by Aaron Bensoussan – a Jewish cantor, Dave Douglas playing the trumpet, Josh Roseman on the trombone, Don Byron on the clarinet, and Dave Binney on the soprano saxophone. Caine engaged also musicians playing string instruments: a violinist Mark Feldman, a cellist Larry Gold and a bassist Michael Formanek. Apart from them, there were a vocalist Dean Bowman and Joey Baron playing percussion instruments. The whole project was complemented by the sounds generated by DJ Olive, sparingly and intelligently dispensed (which I hasten to emphasize). The object of Caine's reinterpretation were fragments of the *First*, *Second* and *Fifth Symphonies*, *Das Lied von der Erde*

and some titles selected from song cycles. Similar selection of compositions were presented during the festival in Toblach, but the group of performers was half the size of the one mentioned above. The recorded material filled a double live album entitled *Mahler in Toblach. I Went Out this Morning over the Countryside* (1999).

Next, in 2003 there was the album *Dark Flame*. This time Caine concentrated on songs (with the reservation that *Das Lied von der Erde* used in this recording is sometimes classified by mahlerologists as a symphony). Of the novelties of this recording I should point out here the presence of a gospel singer and Chinese singers and instrumentalists.

For the discography list to be complete, I shall mention three more titles. In 2005 a DVD record with a film about Mahler was released. The film *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen/Detaching From the World* was directed by Franz Winter and it presents places and photographs connected with Mahler. It can be watched with a German commentary read by the director or with its English version translated by Richard Toop and read by Caine. The music comes from both of Caine's Mahler studio records and from the album *Wagner e Venezia* (one fragment). There is also a collection of Caine's variations (including some previously unreleased material) – *The Classical Variations*, recorded in 2007, which opens and closes with Mahler's music; apart from this, the record includes one more track inspired by Mahler. And finally *The Drummer Boy* (2011) – a selection of Mahler recordings from earlier albums.

Caine seeks the causes of his fascination with Mahler in the composer's biography: 'My interpretation of Mahler's works is rooted in his life. He grew up surrounded by Jewish culture. Being a Jew himself, he shared the fate of the whole Diaspora. [...] Jewish tradition and culture is suffused with suffering. Of course, the music created by members of the Diaspora is not free of it either. That is why it is possible to find a common denominator for all music by artists of Jewish descent. However, in Mahler's works there are many direct references to our musical tradition.'³

In classical renditions of Mahler's music – which is after all very heterogeneous – Judaic elements may play different parts and be variously treated; it all depends on the conductor's conception of the work. Probably no other composer is so open to various interpretations, which has been in fact nicely proved by the history of recordings. However, despite the variety of possible effects, performers are always bound by the score. In case of Caine's music the situation is different as the score is above all an initial material – a point of departure. It is important to make it clear, however, that Mahler's original compositions (and works by other composers which the American artist performs) continue to be an inalienable point

³ As cited in: Marek Romański, "Uri Caine: żywym i umarłym" [Uri Caine: to the living and the dead], *Jazz Forum* 36 (2001/7–8), 46.

of reference. The better and the more thoroughly the listener knows Mahler (or Bach, Beethoven or Schumann), the more fully he will understand Caine's music.

In Caine's recordings of Mahler's works Jewish motifs are emphasized, hence the participation of cantors and accentuation of klezmer sources.⁴ However, Judaic reinterpretation of Mahler's music is not the sole intention of this contemporary artist. Caine interprets the music of the Austrian composer also through various jazz styles and through functional borrowings from other cultures. However, the fundamental tension that determines Caine's vision of Mahler's music arises from the combination of Jewish motifs and jazz. In the statement quoted above, the American artist pointed to Mahler's life as an important inspiration. One can assume (although it is listener's speculation, not a clear author's declaration) that in this way Caine suggests some autobiographical idea: in a sense that it is through Mahler that an artist born in 1956 defines himself as a participant of historic and cultural legacy and as a musician.

And here is where an intriguing question of attribution arises. The issue seems unsettled since the successive albums differ as to the formulation of the subject. For *Primal Light* it is Gustav Mahler and Uri Caine separated/linked with a slash. In case of the concert record the matter is the least problematic, as it is signed by The Uri Caine Ensemble. On *Dark Flame* there is a slash again, although this time Caine precedes Mahler. The fact is that this album includes probably (but how can it be measured?) the greatest number of seemingly radical departures, perhaps this is why Caine has put his name as the first one. The matter is, however, still open, regardless of the fact that all the pieces are signed 'Caine after Mahler'. According to the typology of intertextual forms put forward by Mieczysław Tomaszewski, compositions which are open to other texts can be divided dichotomously: 'Inclusive music manifests itself through quotations, allusions and reminiscences. Music that is called [...] exclusive – through *colleges* and *quodlibets*.'⁵ Describing the latter Tomaszewski writes: "There were two composers who at the turn of the 19th and 20th century revived the technique of music that is patched up of heterogenic components. Mahler and Ives. Mahler in a fascinating way presented a successive *quodlibet* in his *First Symphony* [although it was composed in 1888 – A. P.] [...]. In case of both of them coexistence predominates over coordination. It seems that their music heralded postmodernist 'being next to each other', which was so typical of the end of the last century.'⁶ Certainly, Mahler is sometimes assumed

⁴ See Peter Franklin, "Socio-political Landscapes: Reception and Biography", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, ed. Jeremy Barham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10–12.

⁵ See Mieczysław Tomaszewski, "Dzieło muzyczne w perspektywie intertekstualnej" [Musical work form intertextual perspective], in: *Intersemiotyczność. Literatura wobec innych sztuk (i odwrotnie)* [Intersemiotics. Literature towards other arts (and vice versa)], ed. Stanisław Balbus et al (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 245–258.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

to be the first postmodernist, the same epithet is used, almost on a regular basis, to describe Caine. However, it does not seem justified to categorize all Mahler's music played by Caine as exclusive. The diversity of components in Mahler's works is indeed recognizable, but it does not prevent today's listener from experiencing the impression of aesthetic cohesion. The coming of Mahler's time, heralded as early as in the 1960s in Bernstein's famous *bon mot*, indicates also a change in listeners' sensitivity and needs. Thus, Caine is neither an exclusivist, nor does he represent inclusive music, although in the case of the latter term the issue is still worth considering. We would, however, have to modify its definition. In one of the books that were fundamental to modern literary studies, Ryszard Nycz has put forward a concept of modernism as an include of postmodernism: 'For it looks somewhat as if modernism [...] has been absorbed by »amorphous« postmodernism, retaining however the autonomous character of its modern spirit. So now, just like an include [...], it cannot be dismissed, and it remains unshakably inside the postmodernist reality.'⁷

Could Caine be such an include of Mahler's? Certainly, more than anyone else. Taking into account all the ambiguity of postmodernism, all the terminological disputes and divergence of definitions – I would not be so sure that Cain is a postmodernist. If we agree to define (and this is, after all, quite a metaphorical definition) postmodernism as mourning for modernism – then certainly he is. If we accept intertextuality as a primary feature of postmodernism, then pointing to Caine as an example is also justified. If, however, postmodernism was to be described as aesthetics of exhaustion, then immediately there would arise a lot of doubts. Such aesthetics is not characteristic of Caine: as an argument, it is enough to mention the fact that, apart from the music of others, he also records his own compositions.

Let me remind you also about the participation of Jewish cantors. Not that I want to sacralize Caine's music, but the contribution of vocalists for whom singing remains a religious act is quite important. Thus, again: the cantor does not change the recording or the concert into a religious rite, nonetheless, thanks to their presence Caine's music sounds with regard to and becomes a part of existentially personalized tradition. Certainly, it is also possible to leave aside the cantor and the rest of the group so that any sphere of reference can be questioned. In any case, the matter is serious, as is Caine's whole musical undertaking. And never mind the fact that there are highly amusing ideas in his recordings as well.

Mahler, who today is described in a postmodernist way, was after all one of the most important exponents of modernism. The same is with Caine: for a postmodernist he is quite modern.

⁷ See R. Nycz, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* [The language of modernism. Historical and literary prolegomena], (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Leopoldinum, 1997), 39–42.

And finally a few short analytic listenings.

1) For the opening of the album *Urlicht/Primal Light* Caine has chosen the beginning of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*. Dave Douglas on the trumpet generally plays the original music, although the tempo is slightly faster than the one we are used to. More distinct differences arise with the entering of other instruments, especially the piano which is absent in the original score. The performers quickly change the style into klezmer one, effecting musical deconstruction at the same time. It sounds different than other recordings of the *Fifth Symphony*, nevertheless Caine and his musicians after all remain close to Mahler's ideas.

2) Still different is the interpretation of *Trauermarch* in the concert recording (*Gustav Mahler in Toblach*). This time Caine decided not so much to start from Mahler as to come to Mahler. The pianist presents low-sounding chords, and he is joined by percussion instruments and the violin. The beginning sounds more like a sonoristic piece than free jazz. Towards the end of the first minute the leader plays Beethoven's famous fate motif. The trumpet enters only after about a minute. The openings of both Mahler's and Beethoven's *Fifth Symphonies* are very much alike: three quavers and a half-note in the next bar (for the sake of accuracy I will add that both composers used different pitches). In this way Caine remains the listener about Mahler's intention to make with his opening notes an allusion to Beethoven.⁸

3) In his *Das Lied der Erde* Mahler used paraphrases of Chinese poetry written by Hans Bethge. What Caine offers is, let me use an oxymoron, a source departure. He did not himself take part in the recording, but he engaged musicians playing exotic instruments and Tong Quiang Chen, who is reciting a poem written by an eighth-century poet Quian Qi – the very same text which, in its German version, once inspired Mahler.

4) and 5) The song *Liebst du um Schönheit* from the *Rückert Lieder* cycle was not orchestrated by Mahler. Thus, maybe it was the relative simplicity of the original material that led Caine to the idea of two different interpretations? *Only Love Beauty* (from the album *Dark Flame*) is a solely vocal piece: the song is performed by the choir which provides the background for a gospel singer Barbara Walker, who performs her part with a great expression. The second version is an instrumental one: *Liebst du um Schönheit* is transformed into a lyrical quartet (clarinet, violin, piano and trumpet).

Translated by Ewa Skotnicka

⁸ See Stephen E. Hefling, "From *Wunderhorn* to Rückert and the Middle-period Symphonies: Vocal and Instrumental Works for a New Century", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, 116.