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Pictures for an audition

Reflections on the role of roots and background in the composing and performing processes

Skriftlig reflektion inom självständigt arbete
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1. Introduction

In the whole of my life I have been looking for the beauty of knowledge and art. I think that when a musician plays, he communicates all his humanity, all his personality to the audience: the clarinet, the piano, or whatever, are instruments for this communication. And as deep is our awareness of human being, with its dynamics, its passion, pain, joy and feelings in general, as deep would be our communication.

But music is not the only form of art that can build our personality: a personality, a uniqueness that is often related to our roots and traditions. I have always found interesting to learn about the environment in which I was born and grown up; that is why, besides the music studies, I have been attending a Bachelor in Humanities: ancient Greek, Latin, and Italian literature in particular. Consequently, I am getting increasingly more interested in investigating the environment and background of artists and people who I meet. In considering the lives of the great composers of the last three centuries, I am impressed by how amazing was the round-culture they had; they were often members of literary salons, or groups of artists in general; they were meeting and confronting with the greatest philosophers, painters, writers of their age, e.g. Beethoven and Goethe, Wagner and Nietzsche, and sometimes even collaborated with them, e.g. Debussy and D'Annunzio.

I would like to consider and underline the importance that a composite background could have in the creative process, focusing on the emblematic figure of Dvořák, who as a composer and person had very strong connections with the Czech land and tradition, as it can be heard in his Symphony n°9 “From the New World”, despite the title of this masterpiece aims to mean the opposite.
I believe that also the learning and performing process can be deeply influenced by the composer’s backgrounds, both through the knowledge of the environment and Zeitgeist which generated a certain composition, and through a “synesthetic” experience caused by selected poetry, images, or other kind of “spots” of emotional input.

2. Being aware of the excerpts’ backgrounds in an orchestral audition

Stepping forward from these reflections, I am going to focus on a particular situation of performance, which is the one of the orchestral audition. Apart from technical and instrumental issues, one of the biggest challenge a player has to face during audition is the ability to suddenly reach the specific style, spirit and character of a composer/piece through the very limited amount of bars of an orchestral excerpt, and the ability to switch fast from one excerpt to the other one. Usually, the better is the full picture we have of what is behind the excerpt -from harmony and tempo, to the single movement, to the whole composition, then the composer, and the composer’s background - the more quality and coherence of expression we get. But I realized how difficult it is to focus on the context and background of a certain excerpt when I am under the stress of audition, or when I have many excerpts to practice of different style and character. It easily happens that I over-focus on technical issues, and pay less attention to my knowledge about the Zeitgeist of the piece.

2.1 The aim: pictures for an audition

Due to the difficulty I have just mentioned, I thought it could have been useful to create a tool which could help me in recalling to my mind what I have been learning, reading, seeing about the specific backgrounds of a certain amount of excerpts.
Since I have a good visual memory, I thought about making a visual support, with the size of a regular A4 sheet, in which for each excerpt I combine selected pictures, words, or short sentences, which are related to what I believe being more relevant about the background and context of the excerpt itself. The context would be summarized in the pages before this visual support, which for the sake of simplicity I am going to call “picture”.

An example of picture: Gershwin’s Rhapsody in blue

A picture, as a help to quickly get a proper inspiration, an idea of the world I am going to deal with in the few seconds, the few lines of the excerpt performance. For instance, instead of reading from a History book about New York in the 20ies before playing Gershwin’s Rhapsody in blue, I can have a look at the photograph of Time Square of those period. And my brain elaborates this visual information into an emotional input, which is about
the same I would have got through the reading at a bigger time expense. I would like the brain process in front of the “pictures for an audition” to be similar to that which happens in facing a figurative painting on a wall: you suddenly get in one sight most of the details which form the scene. It is more or less what happens when a landscape description in a book gets translated into a frame of a movie:

“Rivendell sits high above a gorge which is thick with pines and deciduous shrubs. Delicate, lacy waterfalls trace their way down to the river below. A stone bridge spans the chasm as a cloaked rider upon a white horse plods towards the house.”

(J.R.R. TOLKIEN, The Lord of the Rings)

2.2 Evaluating the use of the pictures in my practice

Once I got the pictures, I practiced keeping them on the stand next to the score. After a week I recorded myself; even if I was quite satisfied with the result (recordings 1-6), I realized that the pictures were not only influencing my playing, but also my critical judgment about the recordings. I noticed technical problems which were preventing the expression to come out, and passages where I should have given much more in order to convey the concepts I put in the pictures, even if these concepts had become clear in my mind thanks to the visual inputs. I am going to describe in paragraph 5 how I have been dealing with this, in order to improve the negative aspects that have emerged from the comparison between recordings and pictures.
2.3 Inspirational background of the method

I recently had the opportunity to read this article about Yehuda Gilad, one of the most successful clarinet teacher of our time, and I got very struck about his thoughts:

“For Gilad, the recipe for making a good musician includes three things. The first is physical. “To be a great musician, you must train and educate your muscles and fingers, bones and body,” Gilad said. “You have to take care of your machine.” The second component is developing a philosophy of music and the world, without which, he said, a musician would just be a shell. “This is the depth of my teaching,” Gilad said. “The ‘why’ is the most important. The ‘how’ comes later. It’s about understanding what a work can say and how you can say it.” To perform Stravinsky, for example, one should understand Russian culture and literature in order to discover “your part in it, what you bring to it,” Gilad said. The third ingredient is a sense of humor. (…)”

(from an interview in JEWISH JOURNAL, 2015.08.08 http://www.jewishjournal.com/culture/article/yehuda_gilad_teaches_the_importance_of_strong_minds_muscles_and_funny_bones)

And one of his students tells:

“I really like that he is trying to describe a certain atmosphere behind a piece,” she said, adding that while working last year on Sibelius’ Second Symphony, “he managed to describe everything … the people, scenery, the darkness and even the sound of the Finnish language.”

(JEWISH JOURNAL, ibidem)

This brief description of performing and teaching approach can give an idea of the method I used in creating the pictures for the five excerpts I selected. In fact, even if the idea of the “pictures” is new in my personal clarinet practice, what is not new is the method on which they are grounded: I have already experienced several times the usefulness of the inputs I got from my teachers when they were re-creating the background, the environment of the composition I was going to play. What they were telling me during few minutes, or even few seconds, before I started playing during the lesson, is something very close to what I would like to find on the paper, in this mastersarbete.
The reasons for the effectiveness of Gilad’s and my teachers’ method can be found in the psychological ambit: different fields, inputs, do interact among each other into our brain, while we learn, act, play. There is actually a psychological disturb called synesthesia, which makes the senses blend, get confused (e.g. while hearing a sound, consequently a color would be seen); but even outside the borders of this disturb, it can be said that colors poems and music can influence each other (I guess this is why nowadays is quite common to attend concerts with poetry readings, or live paintings). It is in this meaning that I talk about “synesthetic experience”, not referring to the illness, but to the power of our brain, which is able to connect -more or less consciously- visual, auditory, and other different stimuli, as well as different fields of knowledge.

3. The power of roots

If I were to point out the two main aspects of a good music performance, I would say the technical precision and the communication of a message.

It is on this second aspect that I am focusing in this work. The idea of the pictures comes from a growing awareness of how rich are the environments which lie behind the composers, i.e. their roots. The more I discover about these environments, the more inspiration I get for understanding their works and, therefore, the more I can communicate a message to the audience.

As an example: imagine a village with few houses, a river, a fruit market, etc. If I could tell you that this village is in the Alps of the 19th century, this piece of information would be relevant to influence the way you picture yourself this village, differently than if I would have spoken about a Chinese village of another century. In a similar similar way, when facing a music score, an orchestral excerpt in my case, I have to take care of doing correctly everything which is written: to reach the technical precision (which, in the metaphor, is the general description of the village). After that,
while being aware of the roots of the composer, I can try to find out how to express these roots through phrasing, feelings, colors, … thus adding a new important pieces of information, and making the communication more powerful.

I believe it is possible to find the composers’ backgrounds hidden in their music itself, because they could not avoid coming from a certain tradition, and living in certain environments. Either loving or rejecting them, they got somehow determined by their roots. This connection is clear in the figure of Dvořák, both in his music itself, and through his own words, in his private letters and public interviews, as I am soon going to point out.

3.1 The “Genesis” project

Reflecting about tradition and Zeitgeist, about how this can influence the effectiveness of the communication with an audience, I cannot avoid thinking of an experience I recently had: the opportunity to work with the outstanding clarinet player Martin Fröst in his project “Genesis”, performed in early December 2015 at the Stockholm Konserthuset. The performance has been something unique, combining sound, light, dance and speech; a performance which brought the audience in a journey through the centuries, back to the religious and folk origins of our musical tradition.

This is how Martin himself describes his project:

“My sound-world journey travels through the sources of classical repertoire, and draws a line from the earliest “roots” of music—music inspired by dance and folk, music drawn from sacred rituals of praise, and music as pure entertainment—and explores how, from these roots, we can open up a new musical door into the future. My journey moves from Gregorian chant, Hildegard von Bingen and Telemann, via gypsy, klezmer and traditional folk music from a variety of countries, all the way through to new works and re-workings of classical pieces.”

There was a deep connection between the people sitting in the hall and what was happening on stage; Martin’s words were becoming music and *vice versa*, and I guess he made the audience feel to have jumped in another time. As an example, after the choir had sung a piece by Hildegard von Bingen, the speech talked about early church music, then underlined the role of folk music, of the jokers sitting around the walls of the churches, playing and dancing...an image which suddenly became reality since the light lighted on us players in the corners of the stage, where we start playing duets combining music and choreography.

The audience was amazed, enthusiastic, the reaction was fully positive. One of the reviews says:

“...This was not just a musical journey across time but also a theatrical experience of rank. (...) A musical dramatic performance of the highest level ... rarely have two hours passed so quickly, and contained so much.”


This is the power of our roots, when in the hands of someone who is aware of them and is able to first show them, and then use them to step forward in the creative act.

### 3.2 The composer and the Zeitgeist

As I said previously, I would like to underline the human path which lies within the music, the dialogue between the music and its artist, and before (and within!) the intense dialogue between the artist and its time: he being influenced by the tradition and at the same time making the tradition.

I find really interesting the etymological meaning of the word *tradition*: it comes from the Latin verb *tradere*, which means *deliver, hand over*. Therefore, tradition is something connected not only with the action of receiving! Antonín Dvořák is a marvelous example of this act of *tradere*: a
man, who absorbed his own bohemian land, his folk roots, who brings this heritage to America, the new world.

In order to show to an audience (or a jury) a journey of knowledge, I want to start from my own experience of the artistic process, from the dialogue with the composers, with their heritage. The way I am dealing with my clarinet practice is not the only way. But I believe that being inspired by composers’ background, and by their unique humanity, makes the performance different; I feel it is easier to bring a richness while being into such growing awareness.

I would like to tell a personal experience I had in my clarinet education, which I find really interesting. I began studying Brahms clarinet sonatas later than the other milestones of our repertoire; this happened because my teacher suggested me to wait until I would have been older, and thus able to understand deeper what I was going to play. These sonatas might seem technically easier than other pieces are; but they are full of human drama, the drama of a man who was at the end of his life (these are his last chamber music work), and thanks to his genius managed to express this with the music. When a musician becomes adult, and has experienced the nostalgia, the suffering, sadness, anger, or *vice versa* the deep gladness, the greatness, that life offers us, at that point it becomes easier for him to communicate properly to others the richness of such artistic message.

Of course this is true for every work of art; but the deeper was the composer genius, the deeper should be our *awareness*, or *consonance*, in order to [nearly] fully understand and carry to others. I said also consonance, because sometimes the human correspondence with the genius can be even unconscious, but so strong to make the artistic result terrific anyway.

What I can personally say is that knowing better the composers in their history, their personality, within a certain tradition, a specific Zeitgeist,
makes me love more their works; and it makes the eventual unconscious consonance last in time and grow.

3.3 Antonín Dvořák

“I still remain what I have always been: a simple Czech musician.”
(Dvořák, Prague, 1886; see in Šourek, 1954, p.13)

During the preparation of my Master final concert, I had been amazed while going deeper into the discovery of Dvořák, the composer of the Serenade op.44 which I played as chamber music piece, a work deeply influenced by Dvořák Slavonic background (clearly in the 4th movement). Apart from practicing, I had been listening to many of his masterpieces, and reading some of his letters, and I got struck by this personality whose story was the one of a man deeply enrooted in the “old world”, in love with his home land, aware of how debtor he was to the tradition in which he grew up, a man who ended up in the “new world”, in America, and let himself being inspired by that new environment, thus creating an original fusion with his own origins.

“I attended the school in the village where I also learnt to play violin and to sing, as well as the music fundamentals. Every boy in Bohemia receives musical education: this is –I believe- the source for the secret of the musical events in my Country. Our folk melodies and our chorales arise, as it has always been, from the heart of the people: that’s why they are so beautiful. All the Slavs love music: they could work in the fields even for the whole day, nevertheless they always sing and the true musical spirit makes them happy. And how much they love to dance! On Sunday, after Mass, we start making music and dancing, often without break, until the following morning.”
(From an interview to Dvořák in the British newspaper “Sunday times”, 1885; see in Spirto Gentil, 2011, p.322)

Around 1892 Dvořák moves to New York. There he gets fascinated by native musical heritage, both Negro and Indian, and pointed out its potential:

“The music of the people is like a rare and lovely flower growing amidst encroaching weeds. Thousands pass it, while others trample it under foot, and thus the chances are that it will perish before it is seen by the one discriminating spirit who will
prize it above all else. The fact that no one has as yet arisen to make the most of it does not prove that nothing is there.”

It can be said that this is the ground on which the New World Symphony grew. Many studies on this masterpiece claims to see in it the cornerstone on which the American classical music tradition would have had its roots, due to the use of (supposed) Indian harmonies, pentatonic scale, syncopation, quotation from spirituals (e.g. the famous claimed quotation of the spiritual “Swing low, sweet chariot”).

Despite of this, I got very struck by a critical analysis of the symphony, in the form of a lesson, held by Leonard Bernstein in 1956. Bernstein tries to underline how in fact our evaluation of the symphony as a real American masterpiece has not real fundament, since most of the themes and the structures are actually related to European or even Czech patterns. And even the spots, in which most of the people recognize signs of the spirit of Indian music or spirituals, they get developed into these “old world” patterns. Therefore, he says as a conclusion: “a new world symphony from the old world, and full of old world tradition.”
(See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79D5sOD5duE)

Actually this is Dvořák’s personal claim about his own symphony:

“I have not actually used any of the [Native American] melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music, and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, counterpoint, and orchestral colour.”
(Dvořák, interview, New York Herald, December 15, 1893)

I believe that both position has some truth, both the enthusiastic affirmation of Symphony nr. 9 as a masterpiece inspired by the new environment, and Bernstein’s criticism towards “fully American” approaches to the piece. In fact, if on one side it would be reductive to deny what even Dvořák himself was writing, about the influences he was receiving from the fascinating new
world, on the other it is true that the composer never stopped being also a “simple Czech musician”; he could not cancel his roots (and he actually did not want to!), and they permeated the whole piece. It is not a weakness in creativity, the fact that even when he starts with new themes he ends up in the old European tradition; I suppose that this is the richness of the piece: the ability to combine the roots with new inspirations. Creation and development: not as a discontinuity, but within the flowing of history. I.e., meeting with enthusiasm, wonder and curiosity, the new treasures, but with the awareness of our own identity.

That is why, in my opinion, the Symphony nr. 9 became his most famous work; it is a work which uses the tradition (in the etymological meaning, a tradition “in motion”, as I explain in a previous paragraph) as a key point for its beauty.

4. The choice of the excerpts and the pictures

I decided to choose five excerpts from the repertoire list of the one which are more often required in audition, in order to make my work as effective as possible. In making the selection I have also been considering the opportunity to take into account different “worlds”, different backgrounds and styles, even if the chronological period regarding the compositions is not so wide, also due to the time limits of clarinet orchestral repertoire itself.

1. Shostakovich, Symphony nr.9: symphonic genre, 1945, Russia.
2. Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique: program music, symphonic genre, 1830, France
4. Gershwin, Rhapsody in blue: concerto, jazz style, 1924, America
5. Puccini, Tosca: opera, 1900, Italy
4.1 Shostakovich, Symphony nr. 9

This symphony has been written at the end of the Second World War, in 1945, when the whole world was astonished in front of the cruelty, the evil of which man had been capable. The war was over, but no proper happiness could spread from this newly settled peace. Shostakovich was supposed to write from the point of view of his own nation, therefore according to the Russian victory. But this work, as Bernstein states [see video in the references], “has nothing to do with official propaganda” of the Soviet Union (it is well known the hidden hostility he had towards Stalin, whom he parodied for example in his 10th symphony).

The musical world of the time was expecting a big, majestic, glorious 9th symphony, but instead -I would say, with certain sense of humor-, “he simply wrote the least predictable and most surprising 9th that exists: short, hilarious” [Bernstein, ibidem]. It is possible to see in it a portrait of the “sardonic, comic, anti-hero”, which could bring to our mind the figure of Adenoid Hynkel, the main character of Charlie Chaplin’s movie The Great Dictator, or the pig Napoleon in Orwell’s Animal Farm (this character is actually a satirical allegory of Stalin himself).

This is the spirit of the clarinet excerpt from the third movement, combining joke, virtuosity, using fast contrast in colors, and short articulation.

Instead, the second movement (which begins with a big clarinet solo, starting completely alone) is jokeless, the music is spare, the atmosphere is dominated by bitterness.

It is the bitterness which has in the eyes the human disaster that had just happened, the desolation of such a big tragedy. Personally speaking, a desolation which reminds me the restless silence of pictures from the empty concentration camp of Auschwitz, or from Siberian prison camps.
the sardonic, comic, anti-hero

Charlie Chaplin, The Great Dictator
4.2 Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique

This excerpt is peculiar and somehow emblematic for my research, since the Symphonie Fantastique is itself a picture, an attempt of creating something closely related to external inputs.

The background of this symphony is the second Romantic aesthetic (rising around the third decades of the XIX century), the trend of the Descriptivism. This aesthetic tries to connect the score with non-musical references, to transform concepts, words, images, into the language of sound. It is the idea of the *poetische Lösung* (poetic redemption) of the music, as Liszt claimed, that is: music would need poetry to release itself, to reach the Absolute.

This descriptivism in music happens through two main forms: the symphonic poem (e.g. Moldau, Also sprach Zarathustra...); and the program music, which tries to translate into music a quite long text.

The Symphonie Fantastique is the first “program symphony” ever: during the premiere, the audience got also a text, a sort of love story which actually is a transposition of Berlioz biography itself, his love for Harriet Smithson.

The clarinet excerpt is in the 3rd movement, which describes a pastoral scene, which begins with a dialogue among two shepherds, who answer each other like an echo. The clarinet melody will have this echo technique as the most evident aspect.

The pastoral idyll, the longing for the peace of the countryside, is a *topos* of the whole history of art and literature, from the Greek and Latin bucolic poetry, to Beethoven pastoral symphony, and tons of other examples. But in this particular case the scene is not fully serene, the peace will be broken by the lonely English horn and the thunders soon after the clarinet solo, as broken is the peace in the heart of the protagonist, in his hopeless love and rising solitude.

“One evening in the countryside he hears two shepherds in the distance dialoguing with their 'ranz des vaches'; this pastoral duet, the setting, the gentle rustling of the trees in the wind, some causes for hope that he has recently conceived, all conspire to restore to his heart an
unaccustomed feeling of calm and to give to his thoughts a happier colouring. He broods on his loneliness, and hopes that soon he will no longer be on his own ... But what if she betrayed him! ... This mingled hope and fear, these ideas of happiness, disturbed by dark premonitions, form the subject of the adagio. At the end one of the shepherds resumes his 'ranz des vaches'; the other one no longer answers. Distant sound of thunder ... solitude ... silence ...”
[from Berlioz’s program notes]

The echo situation, due to the dynamics written in the score, which requires the clarinet to play the same phrase first in “mf” and then in “pppp”, is related as well to the concept Berlioz had about the technical possibilities and potential of this instrument. It is pretty typical of him the research, and consequently precision and effectiveness, on colors and dynamics. That is what he writes about the clarinet in his Treatise on instrumentation: it is an instrument able of “delicacy, fleeting nuances, and mysterious tenderness. (...) It is one of all the wind instruments which can best breathe forth, swell, diminish, and die away its sound. Thence the precious faculty of producing distance, echo, an echo of echo, and a twilight sound.”
“One evening in the countryside he hears two shepherds in the distance dialoguing with their 'ranz des vaches’”

“...producing distance, echo,

an echo of echo,

and a twilight sound”
4.3 Kodály, Dances of Galánta

“Galánta is a small Hungarian market town known to travelers between Vienna and Budapest. The composer passed seven years of his childhood there. At that time there existed a famous gypsy band that has since disappeared. This was the first ‘orchestral’ sonority that came to the ears of the child. The forebears of these gypsies were already known more than a hundred years ago. About 1800 some books of Hungarian dances were published in Vienna, one of which contained music ‘after several Gypsies from Galánta.’ They have preserved the old traditions. In order to keep it alive, the composer has taken his principal themes from these old publications.” (Zoltán Kodály, 1934)

This is how, writing in the third person, Kodály explain the origin, the roots, of his Dances of Galánta.

It is well known the interest Kodály had for the folk roots of his country.

“If I were to name the composer whose works are the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, I would answer, Kodály. His work proves his faith in the Hungarian spirit. The obvious explanation is that all Kodály’s composing activity is rooted only in Hungarian soil, but the deep inner reason is his unshakable faith and trust in the constructive power and future of his people.” (B. Bartok, 1928)

Together with Bela Bartok, Zoltán Kodály is considered a pioneer of ethnomusicology, the science which has the aim to study folk music traditions, whose heritage was orally passed down. In order to safeguard this treasure of culture, they went around in the countryside, in villages, meeting the people, and recording their songs and melodies with the newly invented phonograph; they recorded thousands of works. The patterns of these folk musics flew into their production of formal music.

One of the main aspect of folk music is the use of improvisation. The whole first part of the clarinet solo in the Dances of Galánta is like a cadenza, it sounds like an impromptu creation, with elements springing one from the
other, in a non-resting quest, as it is evident in the two trill+arpeggio at the beginning: the trill, an attempt, is the moment in which the gipsy virtuoso would have hesitated, wondering what could be next, managing to spring forward only the second time. The second part of the excerpts sounds more like a dance: the improvisation leaves space to rhythm, dotted notes with accents pronounced as footsteps, as stressed syllables in a poem, resembling the sound of Hungarian language itself.

In fact, is not by chance if dotted notes are very frequent in Hungarian folk music, as we can see in these lines taken from a Hungarian folk song collected by Bela Bartok.
Rhapsodic style, like a cadenza

Bartok recording Slovak folk songs with the phonograph, 1907

The Hungarian State Folk Ensemble

Dancing

Stressed syllables

Accents
4.4 Gershwin, Rhapsody in blue

The 1920s in America, the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz age: this is the context which gave birth to the Rhapsody. Jazz music had become an icon of American identity; among musician started rising the wish to create something which could have been called American music, able to face and continue the tradition inherited by centuries of European serious classical music, and at the same time to contain a newness: the colors, the improvisative inspiration, the expressive patterns of jazz music.

Gershwin got asked by band leader Paul Whiteman to write a jazz concerto, originally for piano and jazz band, a combination of jazz and classical style. He first denied the request, but later he accepted, and managed to compose this piece in just about one month. This is what he wrote about how the composition came to his mind:

“It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the very heart of the noise.... And there I suddenly heard, and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the Rhapsody, from beginning to end. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already in my mind and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.”

A kaleidoscope of America, a portrait of the New World.

A portrait of the enthusiasm of the decade, after the horror of the First World War, an enthusiasm which the Wall Street Crash of 1929 would have suddenly broken.

The streets of New York in the Twenties became the icon of modernity, of cultural dynamism; the economic prosperity made the new technology developing and spreading around, reaching an extremely wide range of the population. Automobiles, radio, cinema, became symbols of a new era. Women got finally the right to vote. And Jazz music was in every corner,
reaching its golden period with artist such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

“Jazz I regard as an American folk-music”, so Gershwin said.
The whole Rhapsody in Blue has been written following characteristics of this “folk-music” which has its origin in the Afro-American slave songs. The themes of the Rhapsody are built on the blue scale; there are various passages with an improvisative nature, and to be performed with rubato, as it is for the clarinet solo at the beginning (con licenza = with freedom). The famous glissando itself (which entered in the score after a joke of the clarinetist Gorman right before the première) is a technique of jazz playing.
A kaleidoscope of America, 
a portrait of the New World

Time Square, 1920s

Louis Armstrong, King Oliver’s jazz band, 1923

“Jazz
I regard as
an American
folk-music”
[G. Gershwin]

Russell Patterson, Where there’s smoke there’s fire

con licenza
4.5 Puccini, Tosca

Puccini production belongs to the artistic current of Italian Verismo, an expression of the wider current of European Realism. Realism had the aim to describe the reality as it was, with a growing interest for the society, for progress, for humanity. It is not unusual the representation of everyday life, its dynamics and problems, with a particular attention for humble people, for the peculiarity of local middle or low-class environment. As an example, Charles Dickens’ novels.

Italian writer Giovanni Verga said that the author should enter inside his characters, and “see things with their own eyes and express these with their own words” (see in Baldi, Giusso, Razetti, Zaccaria, 2011, p.197). Realism goes against idealisation: art should be the “representation of real and existing things”, as Realist painter Courbet wrote in 1861 (see in Cricco, Di Teodoro, 2007, p.672).

Puccini is probably the composer who best reached these aims. In his works we see the concreteness of things in an environment which is not the one of a far past, or of noble rich people, but the one of normal people through circumstances and events related to a specific and recent (if not contemporary) time, with issues due to society, politics, wars. As for Tosca, settled in Rome, during the time of Napoleon, his wars (e.g. the battle of Marengo) and the consequent political revolution. The research and interest for realism gets in Puccini to the point that even the sound of church bells should be as it is in reality; therefore he went to check which note the bells in St.Peter were sounding: it was a low E; and that note he used for the bells ringing in the third act, right before the clarinet solo.

Puccini has been criticized for his tendency to the pathetic, to sentimentalism, for his ability of moving the feelings of the audience to a sympathy with the characters (“musica di zucchero”, that is, “sugar music”: so Arturo Toscanini used to define it). I believe that now, on the contrary,
this is more and more regarded as the inner power of his melodies, of his music: the power to make us enter in the characters’ life, to feel their suffering, their inner questions, their desires.

So is for Cavaradossi aria *E lucevan le stelle*, whose theme is first presented by the clarinet alone, a theme which is filled with drama, with pathos. A theme in which every note seems to speak, to indulge with the thoughts and memories of a man who is going to die.

*E lucevan le stelle*  
*ed olezzava la terra*  
*stridea l'uscio dell'orto*  
*e un passo sfiorava la rena*...  
*Entrava ella fragrante,*  
*mi cadea fra le braccia.*

*And the stars were shining,*  
*And the earth was scented.*  
*The gate of the garden creaked*  
*And a footstep grazed the sand...*  
*Fragrant, she entered*  
*And fell into my arms.*

*O dolci baci, o languide carezze,*  
*mentr'io fremente le belle forme*  
*disciogliea dai veli!*  
*Svani per sempre il sogno mio*  
*d'amore.*  
*L'ora è fuggita, e muoio disperato!*  
*E muoio disperato!*  
*E non ho amato mai tanto la vita,*  
*tanto la vita!*

*Oh, sweet kisses and languorous caresses, while feverishly I stripped the beautiful form of its veils!*  
*Forever, my dream of love has vanished.*  
*That moment has fled, and I die in desperation!*  
*And I never before loved life so much!*
“See things with their own eyes and express with their own words”

Baron Lejeune, *The battle of Marengo*, 1802

_É lucevan le stelle…_

Jean-François Millet, *Nuit Étoilée*, c.1851

_É muoio disperato!_  
_É non ho amato mai tanto la vita!_
5. Evaluating the efficacy of the pictures and getting the best out of them

While practicing with the support of the pictures, I immediately felt that they were helping me in expressing music, in finding the way I would like to play, in being more attentive to catch note by note the spirit of the piece. They help me in being more concentrate, like if I was telling a story, and making the language of the composer familiar, as if it would be mine. Somehow also certain technical passages got easier, like the cadenza in Dances of Galánta, where I could focus on finding the freedom of improvisation more than having an etude-feeling approach to the fast passage.

I recorded myself (see recordings 1-6), and the outcome I got is better than any recording I did before during my studies. But still, while listening to them and trying to be critique, I found out some problems regarding the full achievement of what the pictures are suggesting me. Through the pictures I get clear ideas in the brain, but there are technical difficulties in making them happen completely. Therefore, I started to look for specific exercises, or technical tricks, which, by bringing an improvement, can make more effective the realization of the ideas I got.

I could say that, somehow, first of all the pictures helped me in freeing from being stuck on technical aspects while playing, but at the same time they are helping me in being more aware of which kind of technical work is needed for a specific excerpt.

5.1 Shostakovich, Symphony nr. 9 (recording 1-2)

Second movement: the lines are somehow still too active, I would like the sound to be colder, more spare, less dramatic. Since the clarinet begins the movement completely alone, and the whole solo has just some pizzicato as
accompaniment, I could take more risk in the dynamic, starting softer, with a real piano, without using any nuances apart from the written crescendo and diminuendo. The tonguing on the high D gets easier if the general dynamic is a bit louder, but this makes the atmosphere becoming less bitter. In an empty concentration camp there is no noise; but its desolation itself is what cries out the tragedy of the Second World War. A restless silence. In the same way should be the dynamic of the clarinet solo, apart from when it breaks out in the third line, on the high F#. To get this nude color, I need to do long tones, as stable and pianissimo as possible, without vibrato or sudden air speed changes. Then try to get the same feeling in playing single bars of the excerpt, very slowly, and just couple of notes at a time. Finally add the written nuances and play it in tempo.

Third movement: to get more of the anti-hero spirit, I think it can be useful in the practice to focus on the sudden crazy changes in dynamics, and on the dissonances which break the apparently simple harmony: the passage is based on Bb and F major scales, which are constantly disturbed by unexpected harmony switches. I have been practicing by stressing these dissonant notes in a slow tempo, since are the ones insinuating the biting caustic satire behind the joking, hilarious façade. It is not a hero, but an anti-hero!

5.2 Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique (recording 3)

In this excerpt I have been challenging myself to get dynamic contrast, a round forte in the end, and a real pianissimo in the echo passage. As a result of taking the pianissimo to extreme, the legato got more difficult between B-A#-B, due to the register change. The effect should be an even pianissimo, but to get this I need extra support in the change, and stable blowing and embouchure to not have notes sticking out.

I found really useful the etude nr.6 from JeanJean’s Vade-Mecum du Clarinettiste, whose aim is “to restore the mouth and improve sonority”; the
author suggests that “considerable time should be devoted to the prolonged execution of large pianissimi to improve the lips when they are somewhat relaxed”. And it is actually really curious that above the first line JeanJean quotes Berlioz himself: “As piano as possible. (In his traité d’instrumentation H.Berlioz says: “Twilight sound” the echo of the echo)”.

The first line insists on low B, and includes a legato passage in $ppp$ between A# and B: the same notes involved in the pianissimo of the excerpts; therefore, I found really useful to practice this etude also one octave higher.

5.3 Kodaly, Dances of Galánta (recording 4)

What I found most difficult in this excerpt are the arpeggios at the beginning. I have been thinking about the cadenza feeling, about the improvisative effect; on one side I was less stiff in the arms and fingers, but on the other one the result is still a slightly uncontrolled passage: it gets faster than how I would like it to be in order to sing. Paradoxically, I found out that I need to practice the arpeggios in a very measured way, with rhythm and metronome, in order to get a freedom in fingers which then results in a freedom of music and air flowing, and thus in a cadenza style.

5.4 Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue (recording 5)

I believe I could get more of the jazzy style in this opening of the Rhapsody. If I compare to the technique of jazz players, I realize that what in my sound is mostly missing is the wide vibrato; differently from other woodwinds, it is not so common to learn the use of vibrato in orchestral clarinet education, and so happened to me. After this recording, I started working on it, first as regular air movements from the diaphragm, then trying to apply it more freely to the long tones in the Rhapsody which, otherwise, are too steady.
and consequently boring. Since I did not find any specific etude, I find useful to try to imitate the vibrato I naturally do when I sing, or to listen to players who are experts in this genre of music, such as Giora Feidman and Eddie Daniels, whose videos could easily found on the web.

Another aspect I would like to improve are the trills in the second line: they are too measured, and so lack of “con licenza”, of freedom. In a way similar to the approach used for the arpeggios in the Dances from Galánta, I need to improve the finger ability and speed with simple and specific trill etudes in order to get rid of the etude-feeling trills in Gershwin. Again, I found useful JeanJean Vade-Mecum, in etude nr.1.

5.5 Puccini, Tosca (recording 6)

About this excerpt, I found it easier to get a proper result of the picture in the recording. The reason of this I think could be found in the nature of the excerpt itself: the clarinet solo has the same music of the aria of the tenor, and the lyrics of it are in Italian. I can somehow easily enter in Cavaradossi’s world, sing with his words, which I know by heart, and thus “see things with his own eyes and express with his own words”. I would not say the picture in this case have been useless, but its influence has been less perceivable than in the other excerpts, since the background from which Puccini’s music arises is almost my own.

One thing I would like to improve is the sound in the line which corresponds to the most dramatic passage of the aria (“e muoio disperato”, “and I die in desperation”): I cannot feel enough this despair, I am still too much in the “dolce” atmosphere of the beginning.
6. Conclusions

If my personal interest in the Zeitgeist and roots of the composers has been a constant factor during my studies, through the tool of the pictures I found a new support which helps me in making this interest even more influent to my playing, and in catching details to be improved during the self-critique process. In fact, on one side the picture makes faster the process of recollection of information, through the primary use of visual memory; and on the other one it makes me more demanding in practice, since I get more aware of what I would like to hear in the recordings: that is, the images or concepts which are in the picture itself. Thus, the pictures opened the chance for a new improvement.

This tool also helps me in not getting stuck on technical issues, and instead letting the music and the expression be the center of my playing and practicing. However, the aim for technical perfection is still one of the biggest obstacles I find when performing, and making the recordings; the pictures help, but it takes time to change my attitude, from listening to my technical mistakes or inaccuracy, to focusing on the message I would like to deliver. I have time, in my practice room, to practice in order to solve the technical issues. But when it comes the moment of the audition (or the recording) it does not help at all to think of my limits. The performance will not get better just because I am concerned or worried about them. This worried attitude occurred, in this masterstarbete, especially for the virtuoso excerpts, i.e. Shostakovich 3rd movement and Kodály’s Galánta. I have been cancelling many recordings because of single notes mistaken in them, and curiously these recordings were the ones in which I was mostly focusing on the technical passages instead of on the spirit, the character of the piece. Unless the mistakes cause a complete disaster, I believe that what a jury in an audition wants to hear is how much you are able to express, to communicate. They themselves know that minor mistakes might occur due to tension! Therefore, I tried to have this same attitude toward myself: once
I am in good shape, I start the recording device, and just try to express, with the help of the inspiration the pictures give me. And after, while listening, it is on this expression that I want to focus my critic.

As I previously said, it was surprising that this kind of critic listening made me creative in finding new exercises, or technical tricks, and gave new points of view also to look at the technical issues themselves: e.g. in the fast arpeggios in *Dances of Galánta*, which are not like in an etude, but instead are an expression of freedom, of improvisation; or about the jazzy playing in Gershwin; or in Berlioz. In playing the excerpt of the *Fantastique*, the aim was not anymore to get a nice, equalized pianissimo, but to get the echo. It seems the same aim, but in the second case I felt my approach had a wider perspective; my attempt was not to fix the extreme dynamic, but to go beyond it, to make something special. These new perspective and inventiveness happened quite easily and spontaneously as soon as my aim became the effective adherence to the pictures. I started “questioning” my playing through, and my recordings, not only about how clean were the passages, or how good was the intonation, but about the different characters, the different styles, and different expression.

Through the pictures I manage to reach expression quicker than before, and that is what I was expecting from this experiment. Of course, what I reach is my own idea of expression; the reader of this thesis, or the audience I will play for, they do not need to have the same criteria and taste of mine. But what I aim for in my playing is to please, to reach the heart of the most people; and I believe that the close we get to the roots of the piece, the more people we reach with our music. It is like talking a foreign language: if I would read a poem in a language I do not know, I could not express anything: the sound of my voice will be plain, empty, meaningless. Instead, the more I master that language, the more I can communicate. So it happens with music, where if we would be able to master the composer’s language, we would convey better a content which often has a universal value.
I can say the pictures have been a success in my practicing method. Actually, this success is just a step: the process of learning and improvement is never ending. And I personally believe that in this process we always need to find new ways, to be creative, to get renewed inspiration. So that we would not stop being surprised and amazed by the gift of music, and involved with this treasure which never runs out because, as Riccardo Muti once said in a speech\(^1\), “behind the notes lies the Infinite”.

7. References

- \(^1\) Riccardo Muti’s speech, 
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- Dvořák, A., Symphony No. 9 "From The New World", Karajan, Vienna Philharmonic,  
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• Shostakovich, D., Symphony nr.9, Bernstein, Vienna Philharmonic, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfakIg9E_ao

8. Appendix: the orchestral excerpts

• Shostakovich, Symphony nr. 9:

![Sheet Music](image-url)
• Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique:

• Kodaly, Dances of Galánta:
• Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue:

• Puccini, Tosca: