

Music in Psychoanalysis: A Duet between Christopher Bollas and Didier-Weill

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Abstract

Since its early years, psychoanalysis — both theoretically and clinically — has sought to think through human culture and its artistic productions. Within this scope, music has been comparatively understudied relative to other arts. Freud's avowed dislike of music may have contributed to this gap. This article examines ways of bringing music into the psychoanalytic field. It briefly reviews classic contributions and, above all, stages a dialogue between two contemporary authors from different traditions. On one side is Christopher Bollas, from the British school, with his object-relations approach and, especially, the notion of the transformational object. On the other is Alain Didier-Weill, a French Lacanian author, with his original idea of the Blue Note. Read together, they offer a productive counterpoint around the signifying, content-bearing dimension of verbal discourse — an issue that sets the tone for epistemological and methodological debates that run through the history of psychoanalysis.

Keywords: music, psychoanalysis, transformational object, blue note.

Resumo

Desde os anos pioneiros de sua fundação, a psicanálise, em sua dimensão teórico-clínica, propõe-se a pensar a cultura humana com seus feitos artísticos. Nesse aspecto, questiona-se que a música tenha sido tão pouco abordada em comparação às outras formas de arte. A declaração de Freud de que não gostava de música pode ter contribuído para este fato. Este artigo pretende fazer uma análise das possibilidades de inserção da questão da música no campo psicanalítico, percorrendo, brevemente, a literatura de autores clássicos e, principalmente, aproximando dois autores de diferentes vertentes da psicanálise contemporânea. De um lado, trabalharemos com o autor da escola inglesa, Christopher Bollas, com sua abordagem das relações de objeto e principalmente o conceito de objeto transformacional, e, do outro, abordaremos Alain Didier-Weill, autor de escola francesa de inspiração lacaniana e sua ideia original de Nota Azul. Nesta aproximação, encontramos um interessante contraponto em torno da dimensão signífica contenciosa do discurso verbal, que dá o tom de discussões epistemológicas e metodológicas que atravessam a história da psicanálise.

Palavras-chave: música, psicanálise, objeto transformacional, nota azul.

Resumen

Desde los años pioneros de su fundación, el psicoanálisis, en su dimensión teórico-clínica, se propone a pensar la cultura humana con sus hechos artísticos. En este aspecto, llama la atención que la música fue tan poco enfocada en comparación con las otras formas de arte.

La declaración de Freud de que no le gustaba la música puede haber contribuido con este hecho. Este artículo pretende hacer un análisis de las posibilidades de inserción de la cuestión de la música en el campo psicoanalítico recorriendo brevemente la literatura de autores clásicos y, principalmente, acercando dos autores de diferentes vertientes del psicoanálisis contemporáneo. De un lado trabajaremos con el autor de la escuela inglesa Christopher Bollas con su enfoque de las relaciones de objeto y principalmente el concepto de objeto transformacional, y del otro Alain Didier-Weill, autor de escuela francesa de inspiración lacaniana y su idea original de nota azul. En este acercamiento, encontramos un interesante contrapunto en vuelta de la dimensión signica de contenido del discurso verbal que dan el tono de discusiones epistemológicas y metodológicas que traspasan la historia del psicoanálisis.

Palabras clave: música, psicoanálisis, objeto transformacional, nota azul.

Résumé

Depuis les années pionnières de sa fondation, la psychanalyse, dans sa dimension théorico-clinique, se propose de réfléchir à la culture humaine avec ses réalisations artistiques. À cet égard, il est frappant de constater que la musique ait été si peu abordée par rapport aux autres formes d'art. La déclaration de Freud selon laquelle il n'aimait pas la musique a peut-être contribué à ce fait. Cet article vise à analyser les possibilités d'intégrer la question de la musique dans le domaine psychanalytique, en explorant brièvement la littérature des auteurs classiques et, surtout, en rapprochant deux auteurs de courants différents de la psychanalyse contemporaine. D'un côté, nous travaillerons avec l'auteur de l'école anglaise Christopher Bollas et son approche des relations d'objet, en particulier le concept d'objet transformationnel. De l'autre, nous examinerons les idées d'Alain Didier-Weill, auteur de l'école française d'inspiration lacanienne, et son concept original de la note bleue. Dans cette approche, nous trouvons un contrepoint intéressant autour de la dimension sémiotique du contenu du discours verbal, qui donne le ton aux discussions épistémologiques et méthodologiques qui traversent l'histoire de la psychanalyse.

Mots-clés : musique, psychanalyse, objet transformationnel, note bleue.

Music and Psychoanalysis: A Problematic Rapprochement

In *The Moses of Michelangelo*, Freud (1914/2017c) remarks that works of art — such as literature, sculpture, and painting — had a powerful effect on him, often detaining him for long stretches as he tried to understand how those effects came about. Music, however, was a different matter. Although he frequented the opera and moved among influential musicians, such as Max Graf — and despite the interesting “peripatetic” treatment with the composer Gustav Mahler — Freud called himself unfit for listening to music, or more precisely, unable to enjoy musical pleasure, because the emotions stirred by music were irreducible to his analysis. Even so, while acknowledging the limits of his analysis of music, or its effects, Freud conceded the power of musical motifs to elicit associative chains laden with affective memories — as when, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he comments on the recollections that a few bars from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* could immediately evoke in him (Freud, 1900/2017a).

Approaches linking music and psychoanalysis date back to the beginnings of psychoanalysis itself. Among Freud's contemporaries and acquaintances, Max Graf, the father of “Little Hans,” was a major pioneer in bringing music into dialogue with psychoanalysis. A musicologist by training, he drew on Freud's ideas to theorize musical style and its relation to the artist's subjectivity, as in Richard Wagner e a *Obra Dramática* (Graf, 1906/1914a) and *Problemas de Criação Dramática* (Graf, 1907/1914b). From the same period comes the essay *Oficina Interior do Músico* (Graf, 1910), which examines the psychic articulation at work across distinct aesthetic currents in music. There, Graf suggests that the classicist artist controls the unconscious, whereas the romantic artist allows himself to be influenced by childhood reminiscences (Graf, 1910).

Another relevant contemporary of Freud who reflected on music was Georg Groddeck. In *Escritos Psicanalíticos sobre Literatura e Arte* (Groddeck, 1909/2001), he argues that although language undergirds culture and is the basic resource of human communication, it is wholly insufficient for expressing the deepest affective contents of thought, for which other resources are needed. Among these, music holds a privileged place.

In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, several important articles appeared in issues of *Imago*. In *Psychoanalysis and Music*, Richard Sterba (1965) offers an exhaustive review of essays and texts produced by psychoanalysts and commentators of that period. He highlights structurally analytic contributions — e.g., Chijs (1926) and Sterba (1939/1946) — that emphasize relations between music and language and the transformation of sound reception into a subjective creation of images. Others took a more metapsychological or dialogue-based approach to biological and psychological aspects, as in Pfeifer

(1933) and Mosonyi (1935). Sterba (1965) also underscores work such as Perrotti (1945), which addresses the personal stamp of musical production as determined by fantasy and unconscious primary processes.

Thus, while Freud's relationship with music was somewhat ambivalent—owing to the difficulties of applying psychoanalytic decoding to that art—his social circle was filled with musicians, musicologists, and psychoanalysts interested in the topic and, given Vienna at the time, with music in general. It is worth noting that, despite psychoanalysis's organic ties to the arts — whether in Freud's own use of artistic examples to develop psychoanalytic concepts or in psychoanalytic contributions to cultural theory — music has generated substantially less output than theater, literature, and other arts (Castro, 2020).

Beginning in the early 1950s, important texts on the intersections of psychoanalysis and music appeared, leading Välimäki (2005, p. 47) to label this period the “golden age” of psychoanalytic writing on music. Standouts include Theodor Reik's *Écrits sur la Musique* (Reik, 1953/1984) and two essays by Kohut: *On the Enjoyment of Listening to Music* (Kohut & Levarie, 1950/1978) — co-authored with conductor Siegmund Levarie — and *Observations on the Psychological Functions of Music* (Kohut, 1957/1978).

Reik (1953/1984) notes that psychoanalysis has typically approached artworks by analyzing narrative structure — characters, setting, action, and transformations. These elements allow individuals to identify, abreaction to occur, and cathartic effects to unfold in theater, literature, and the visual arts, since they belong to the domain of representation. What remains is to think a psychoanalysis of the subjective impact of music, which by its nature resists representation. Hence the hypothesis — consonant with Groddeck's (1909/2001) account — that music lies within the domain of expressing human affects rooted in unconscious processes. To advance this thesis, Reik (1953/1984) draws on numerous clinical reports and suggests that music lends itself to analytic work as a highly fertile tool, both in the patient's modes of association and in the analyst's possibilities of intervention via evenly suspended attention.

Kohut and Levarie (1950/1978) likewise proceed in a distinctly Freudian register, emphasizing metapsychological and economic aspects grounded in the pleasure–unpleasure principle. From this perspective, musical enjoyment stems from the ego's capacity to manage unknown external stimuli. Put briefly, the infant initially experiences auditory stimuli as intrusive and unpleasurable — especially vulnerable to them since one cannot “close” the ears defensively as one can the eyes. As the incipient ego develops, it becomes able to recognize and master these stimuli, which shift from unpleasant noises to pleasurable sounds, such as the mother's voice soothing with gentle lullabies. Yet because music cannot be reduced to a translation of logical thought, mastering sounds mobilizes energy drawn from an early organization of the ego with a specific distribution. Musical enjoyment thus arises from a formal aspect of music that, depending on its elements, corresponds to distinct levels of pleasure: one linked to secondary-process operations through melody and harmony, and another, deeper one—closer to the sexual drive dimension—evoked by rhythm.

Subsequent significant contributions followed. Unlike the pioneers—who worked within a psychoanalysis grounded almost exclusively in Freud—postwar writing, in the advent of the “era of the schools”¹ (Mezan, 2014), diversified. Theorizing about the human relation to music began to reflect the author's school of affiliation. Consequently, attempts to address the “question of music” took different paths, and the rapprochements proposed by various authors were clearly marked by theoretical–methodological divergences.

In this article, our interest is to identify and bring into dialogue theoretical narratives about the effects of music on the subject. We do so through two contemporary authors central to currents that are highly influential in Brazilian psychoanalysis. On one side is Christopher Bollas, a representative of the “British school,” particularly the English middle group of object relations to which he belongs; from him we draw the ideas of the receptive unconscious and the transformational object. On the other is Alain Didier-Weill, situated in the French, Lacanian-inspired theory of the subject; from him we take the fruitful notion of the *Blue Note* as a way to grasp the specificity and power of the encounter between Subject and Other through music. Our method is a literature review that stages a dialogue between these authors and, in closing, highlights key points that emerge from this rapprochement.

Bollas: Music as a Transformational Object

Recognized as a member of the so-called “independent group” of British psychoanalysis, Christopher Bollas is one of its contemporary exponents, with significant contributions both to clinical technique and to new metapsychological concepts (Nettleton, 2018).

Bollas advances an original conception of the unconscious grounded primarily in Freud's presentation in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and in the notion of free association. From these elements, he develops a view of the mind with

¹ Term coined by Renato Mezan (2014) in *O tronco e os ramos* to designate the phase in the development of the psychoanalytic movement spanning from 1945 to the mid-1970s. This period saw the emergence of divergent centers regarding psychoanalytic practice, which also led to clear theoretical differences. The author highlights four main schools that took shape: ego psychology, the Kleinian tendency, the object-relations school, and Lacanianism (Mezan, 2014, p. 52).

fundamentally creative and communicative features. Hence many of his concepts — such as the receptive unconscious, genera, and idiom — concern the constitutional aspects of the psyche, as well as the dynamics of the object world and the qualities of objects (transformational, evocative, random, transubstantial, and generational) (Loureiro, 2020).

Several of these concepts are particularly fruitful for thinking about aesthetic appreciation — how an individual encounters works of art, including music. This is, in a sense, Bollas's own project, in which he conceives an "aesthetic object" or "aesthetic moment" as a distinctive psychic experience that enables creative expansion when one's idiom "resonates" with an object (Bollas, 1985/2015).

Epistemologically, although Bollas is clearly influenced by the Winnicottian tradition, important concepts in his work seek to engage Freud directly. This is the case, for example, with his notion of the *receptive unconscious*.

The receptive unconscious emphasizes the importance of reception in relation to both external and internal objects. Building on Freud's structural model—formulated in the "turn" of the 1920s and consolidated in *The Ego and the Id*—the topographical and dynamic aspects of metapsychology rest on distinct instances: id, ego, and superego. Despite this advance, the model preserves the idea that each instance has its own features: a deeper, unconscious domain (Ucs) characteristic of the id, and a perceptual-conscious system (Pcpt-Cs) more typical of the ego. It is crucial, in this context, that for Freud there exists an originary, intuitive dimension of the id that is non-representational and not simply the product of repression. This field is later organized through narcissism, which gives rise to the ego.

If Freud's conception of the id — whether in its originary dimension or in repression — privileges Ucs, a theory of reception unfolds from the relation of Pcpt-Cs to objects, complementing the former. As Loureiro summarizes:

what Freud calls Perception-Consciousness (Pcpt-Cs) is brought to the foreground by Bollas, either as a permanent receptacle for sensory impressions or in a more active role of "scanning," selecting, and grasping such impressions. Yet this emphasis does not deny the existence of repressed unconscious contents. For Bollas, the theory of reception complements the theory of repression (Loureiro, 2020, p. 5).

The intrinsic characteristics of objects therefore decisively influence how an individual relates to the world. The receptivity of this system can not only "accommodate" objects but, above all, take them in such that the self is transformed by them — through a "harmonizing" with inner features distinctive to the subject, that is, in accordance with the subject's idiom. For Bollas, each person possesses an essential core of the self — a seed-like identity that contains possibilities for expansion and articulation — so that idiom functions as a "psychic correlate of the human fingerprint" (Nettleton, 2018, p. 3).

When objects attune to one's idiom, a process of transformation occurs that endows them with genuinely *transformational* character. The prototype and benchmark for this process is maternal care. The mother is experienced by the infant as a "transformational process" (Bollas, 1985/2015, p. 50). Through her care — presenting diverse sensory experiences of tastes, smells, textures, and sounds — she sets the parameters that will later be sought in transformational objects. The question, then, is how this theory helps us think about music's effects on the psyche.

Continuing his dialogue with Freud, Bollas revisits a fundamental issue: the polarity between primary processes — primitive psychic activity belonging to the unconscious — and secondary processes — conscious operations guided by language and expressed in logical thought. Building on this, and seeking to move beyond it, Bollas articulates a cross-cutting opposition in his work: the dichotomy between form and content.

As an art of "pure form" (Loureiro, 2020, p. 9), music can function as a privileged object, particularly potent and rooted in primitive strata of experience, with a strong capacity to alter subjective states. In Bollas's words:

The experience of being processed by music is perhaps most clearly captured when we think of the differences in our subjective states brought by the interpretations of different conductors. Bernstein and Giulini take a common object — say, Mahler's Fifth Symphony — and each interprets it according to his own idiom, transforming the form; when we hear one or the other of the interpretations, we are affected by this common object in different ways [...] each of us will be processed by at least two forms: the music itself and the intelligence conveyed by the conductor's interpretation (Bollas, 1995, p. 24).

This passage suggests that the music that reaches — and affects — the listener is shaped by "two forms": the composition itself, marked by the composer's subjectivity, and the performer's execution, which attempts to translate the composer's idiom while dialectically inflecting it with the performer's own. Reception thus becomes more or less pleasurable depending on how it resonates with the listener's idiom. From a semiotic angle, Martinelli (2007, p. 19) argues that the performer's mediation between composer and listener is far more than score decoding; subjective aspects of the performer are central, since "interpreting is really about finding a balance between a liberal realization of the self and a contractual recognition of collective norms and inherited knowledge." This brings us to communication — an encounter between two beings through music — precisely the central point in Didier-Weill's theorization, to which we now turn in search of consonances and dissonances with Bollas.

Before that, a brief genealogical note. When authors approach the issue metapsychologically, each ends up emphasizing a different aspect, even when starting from the same Freudian ground of topographical, dynamic, and economic viewpoints.

Kohut and Levarie (1950/1978) focus on the economic aspects of musical reception and pleasure under the pleasure principle; Bollas complements this with a more topographical emphasis, situating his *receptive unconscious* within the perceptual-conscious system while preserving the “unconscious” quality of a more originary instance.

Another important point returns to the relative scarcity in Freud’s work of sustained considerations about primary, maternal identifications. Freud assigns a central role to paternal — or specifically Oedipal — identification in the constitution of the psyche, the resolution of the Oedipus complex, and entry into culture. Yet the domain of form as a kind of “maternal order” offers a valuable complement. There is a narcissistic, pre-verbal, imaginary identification that occurs in a pre-Oedipal moment and undergirds modes of sublimation and the formation of primary object relations outside the symbolic order (Campos, 2013) — or, in Bollasian terms, within the domain of form (imaginary) rather than content (symbolic-linguistic). Considering the intrinsic, formal features of objects thus makes sense, including the specificities of the musical object.

In phenomena such as “motherese” and lullabies, we find a transformational object outside linguistic content: at a time when only the tonal and melodic variations of the mother’s voice can affect the infant, this “musical object” functions as a constitutive transformational process of the self at a primary level (Godeguez, 2021). In the same vein, Castarède (2002, p. 16) suggests that the maternal voice in the earliest affective relations becomes “the first referent of the child’s psychic world.”

In sum, within a psychoanalytic approach to music, Bollas attributes to music — as object — a specific transformational potential located in the domain of form. Music can resonate with each subject’s idiom and enable a mode of affective, non-linguistic communication.

A Shift in Perspective

We might say that the notion of the musical transformational object is quite original and aligned with clear epistemological features of the object-relations approach. The receptive unconscious — guided by creativity and communication — and the emphasis on the perceptual-conscious dimension signal an openness to sensory receptivity that can also be associated with the British school’s sympathetic view of *functionalist* and biological perspectives.

Accordingly, notions such as health and maturity fit well and recur throughout the English psychoanalytic literature. In the case of the transformational object, we might add that the assumption of an inner idiom “resonating” with an object that carries transformational potential implies a conciliatory view of object relations, one that is almost explicitly “optimistic.”

These points matter as we move to bring this tradition into conversation with the so-called “French school,” which is much more closely tied to the language sciences and structuralism and is often marked by a more tragic outlook — both regarding the constitution of the subject and the nature of object relations. Several basic concepts that orient the French, Lacanian tradition set the tone of its epistemological field: the subject’s constitution through alienation in the desire of the Other; the object cause of desire (objet a) as negative; *jouissance* as a repetitive, traumatic surplus located in the register of the Real; and the Real itself as the traumatic dimension that “does not cease not to be written” (Lacan, 1973/1985, p. 81). Together, these confer a greater degree of abstraction — signaling a kind of impossible remainder — at some distance from functionalist and biological conceptions.

Yet if this theory, stitched together by the thread of the subject’s inscription (or not) in language, yields a tragic structure that cannot be definitively resolved — grounded in trauma and alienation as founding points — something surprisingly different seems to emerge when music enters the discussion. That is what Didier-Weill’s idea of the Blue Note suggests. Let us turn to it.

Alain Didier-Weill: The Blue Note

Alain Didier-Weill was a French psychoanalyst, playwright, and writer, a follower of Jacques Lacan who was invited by Lacan himself to intervene in his seminar toward the end of Lacan’s teaching in the 1970s. Several of Didier-Weill’s works explore the intersection of psychoanalysis and art, especially the influence of music on the constitution of the Subject and its role as an operator of *jouissance*, through musical enjoyment in the unconscious dialogue between artist and listener (Lollo, 2019).

In *La Note Bleue*²: *De quatre temps subjectivants dans la musique*, Didier-Weill (2014) asks how music can transport the listener from one state to another. He highlights the distinctive power of music to evoke an irresistible emotion that joins two “states of soul,” conceived through the articulation of logical times — one of happiness and one of psychic nostalgia (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 41).

² In Didier-Weill’s original text, Blue Note is always written in capitals, following the Lacanian tradition. Here, we will keep the original capitalization only in direct quotations; elsewhere, we will use lowercase. For the terms “Subject” and “Other,” we retain the original capitalization because they designate concepts that do not correspond exactly to their colloquial usage.

He seeks to formulate, psychoanalytically, an idea sketched by the painter Eugène Delacroix in a letter to Chopin: the “blue note” (Didier-Weill, 1999, p. 33). Didier-Weill proposes that the Blue Note is that element capable of “hitting” the listener so as to produce a state of *jouissance* — always the same, yet never monotonous. As his text suggests, the Blue Note is not merely a specific pitch — say, C, E, or B-flat — but rather a particular power of music that, though always identical for the unconscious, should be understood as an effect of repetition. Crucially, it is not to be confused with the coercive, traumatic repetition tied to the death drive. Whereas Freud’s automatism of repetition bears an irreducible weight of non-sense, the Blue Note carries a form of *jouissance* arising from a Real that, though unsymbolizable and ever elusive, is — paradoxically — emphatically symbolizing. As the author writes:

Although this note is not symbolizable — in the sense that we cannot inscribe it or retain within ourselves the eminently fleeting effect it produces, whose fading is strictly dependent on the Real of the supporting sound vibrations — it is symbolizing. Symbolizing in the sense that it opens us to the effect of all other signifiers, as if it were their password. Indeed, under the impact of the Blue Note, the world begins to speak to us and things begin to have meaning: the signifiers of the unconscious chain, once mute, awaken and, prompted by the Blue Note, begin to tell us stories (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 43).

With this particular power to trigger symbolization, the Blue Note evokes what is at stake in love as a limit of meaning and an invocation of what lies beyond meaning. Just as a person in love can perceive meaning in “the slightest trembling leaf” without knowing exactly what that meaning is — because the beloved sets off the unconscious chain — the listener stands in the same position with respect to the Blue Note: a recipient of meaning in the “stories” it tells, without knowing whence they come or why they are so.

The Blue Note, with its distinctive *jouissance*, constitutes the promise the listener expects from music and that the composer is driven to seek in creation, up to the point of self-effacement — engaging in the search as if saying to the future listener: “I recognize, given what I am anticipating, that you have the right to expect me to find that whose existence I lead you to suppose: the Blue Note” (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 45). The promise of the Blue Note binds artist and listener, introducing not only *jouissance* but also the “preliminary pleasure of a love contest” — i.e., the promise of *jouissance* (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 45).

At the moment that promise is realized, a particular movement occurs in the dialectic of Subject and Other. To explain the passage through logical time — by which the listener, initially in the position of the Other, is raised to the position of Subject through the operation enabled by musical audition — Didier-Weill turns to Freud’s account of the joke, while marking a crucial difference in the case of the Blue Note.

In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud (1905/2017b) proposes that the humorous satisfaction of the joke stems from an economy of affective expenditure: rather than being led to the expected tragic outlay of affect, the listener derives pleasure from the economy achieved by the narrative’s sudden turn. The joke’s content also contributes to pleasure, since, coming from the unconscious, it expresses elements that would otherwise remain repressed; the relief of that pressure yields pleasure in accordance with the pleasure principle. In Freud’s scheme of Subject and Other: first, the joke is told; second, the Other laughs; third, the Subject laughs on recognizing in the Other a good understander of his unconscious desire.

To clarify what occurs with the Blue Note, Didier-Weill — very much in a Lacanian register — proposes four logical times for the phenomenon, adding a preliminary time to Freud’s model. In the first time, there is a “presence and weighing of the Other’s desire” (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 48). Freud did not consider this, Didier-Weill argues, because a Subject only produces a joke if, in that initial weighing, something allows the joke to be born. The Other here is not a passive hearer but an emitter of unconscious desire, which the Subject recognizes. In response to that recognized desire (time one), the Subject produces the joke (time two). In the third time, the Other, seeing in the Subject’s words an unconscious desire brought into timely relevance, laughs—attesting not merely to amusement, but to the *jouissance* of “discovering oneself as the subject’s muse” (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 46). Finally, in the fourth time, the Subject laughs at his own joke; beyond surprise and the economic pleasure Freud describes, this celebrates the discovery of a possible unconscious articulation between the Other’s desire and his own.

The difference, with music, is that although a comparable articulation between Subject and Other can be celebrated in the presence of the Blue Note, the four times are not chronologically discernible for the listener; they occur simultaneously. In hearing music, we are initially placed as the Other in relation to the composer-Subject. Didier-Weill’s striking novelty is that, as Other, the listener receives a message that the Subject’s desire is not anxiety-provoking in the sense of Lacan’s *Che vuoi?*³ In other words, music appears as a way for the Subject to answer that otherwise unanswerable, anxiety-laden enigma

³ Italian expression that can be translated as “what do you want,” used by Lacan in his essay “Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (1966) to refer to the devil’s interpellation of Alvare, the protagonist of an 18th-century tale titled *O Diabo Amoro* by Jacques Cazzotte. In the Lacanian framework, *che vuoi* designates the particularity of the subject’s desire in the face of the universality of the Law.

of the Other's desire. In the face of this answer, a relation emerges that allows a conjunction of Subject and Other — rather than alienation in desire — through the possibility of giving what one does not have, in line with Lacan's famous aphorism: "to love is to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it" (Lacan, 1992, p. 122). As Didier-Weill writes:

(...) here the Subject, in answering us, brings forth in us the presence of a question whose nature proves not sterilizing but fecund for him: if there is something in us that is lost to ourselves and that breathes speech into the Subject, we discover ourselves giving this Subject what we do not have—precisely the formula by which Lacan always designated love. It is because such a conjunction for love can be realized that our desire is not anxiety-provoking for the Subject (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 49).

This particular possibility of articulation between Subject and Other — through a "conjunction for love" — helps explain a musical jouissance stripped of its traumatic, painful side and at full potency of happiness, the first of the "states of soul" to which music can transport us. Yet this state is paired with psychic nostalgia: a celebration of a founding moment of encounter in love that also permits the passage from the position of Other to that of Subject — from beloved to lover.

The listener's primary position as Other, not Subject, is also what makes it possible — through music and the celebratory, loving moment into which the *Blue Note* throws the listener — to shift into the position of Subject by way of transfer in the psychoanalytic sense. The revelation that, for the artist-Subject, the Other is "us" — the listener whose presence contains the promise of encounter through the *Blue Note* — gives rise to nostalgia via a recognition that music brings to us. In a moment of transmutation, the Other we were becomes Subject; the music we hear begins to hear us; and we can speak of it, speak with it, or even sing it as Subject, from what it recognizes in us. This is the moment of the encounter's jouissance, akin to the fourth time of the joke.

Didier-Weill thus proposes that, while the joke serves as a reference for understanding the articulation of Subject and Other at the fulfillment of the *Blue Note*'s promise, the dialectic here unfolds in a single instant, in which the music listener is "simultaneously One and Other" (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 45). How is this possible? Because the articulation between musician-Subject and listener-Other is structured not by alienation in desire but by a love relation. What is anxiety-provoking in the enigma of the Other's desire — *Che vuoi?* — is the waiting bound to anxiety, the presentiment of what we might become for the Other. In the case of an Other supposed to desire us as a Subject supposed to love us, the Subject's position is not situated in waiting but in a "pure present" of subjectivation in act:

(...) the magic of this instant seems to depend on the fact that it realizes that the only possible meeting between Subjects lies in conjoining, through this instant of temporal suspension, their common denominator: objet a — as if they could meet only to celebrate, in recognizing the gift of what they do not have, the impossibility of any exchange of currency between them. What is inestimable in the finding of the *Blue Note* is that, faced with the insatiability of Demand, it is the only answer that knows itself to be neither yes nor no: it is the celebration of a founding psychic act, a birth. Hence the rebirth to which music invites us must be understood as a genuine subjective transmutation. (...) As if the listener within us crossed to the other side and began to listen to us — to listen to that impossible love which, being sung by the Subject and revealed to us in this way, can take flight as a love of transference. (...) *Transference* here should evoke the topological tilting that swings the Listener from the position of Other to that of Subject (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 51).

We can frame this "tilt" as follows: in recognizing myself as the music's listener, the music — as an addressed answer — comes to recognize me. Recognized as listener, I receive from music a response to my desire as Other that, in turn, elicits a question within me to which I am invited to answer as Subject. The transmutation that the *Blue Note* introduces is not only topological but temporal. The musical experience carries the listener along the leaps of successive notes which, in concert with the topological shift, do not place us "inside" time so much as insert time within us — as the happy feeling of remembrance capable of transforming sadness into nostalgia. Here lies the pairing of the two "states of soul" associated with music and the *Blue Note* — happiness and psychic nostalgia:

(...) something specific in music's effect on us is its power of metamorphosis, of transmutation. One could quickly summarize this by saying that it transmutes the sadness within us into nostalgia. By this I mean: if we are sad or depressed, we can name the object we lack — the one whose absence makes us suffer — and although being sad is sad, it is no source of jouissance. The paradox of nostalgia — "the happiness of being sad," as Victor Hugo put it — is that what is missing in it belongs to a nature we cannot designate, and we love that very lack (Didier-Weill, 2014, p. 63).

This pairing of happiness and nostalgia in music — of which Victor Hugo speaks — is echoed in Noel Rosa's 1930s song *Feitio de Oraçao*, where he sings that "to sambar is to cry with joy, to smile with nostalgia within the melody." The singer reminds us of Lacan's remark, following Freud, that with respect to the analyst "the artist always precedes him; therefore, he need not play the psychologist when the artist opens the way" (Lacan, 2003, p. 200).

Bollas with Didier-Weill: A Dissonant Chord

Bollas and Didier-Weill undertake a genuinely remarkable effort to bring a theory of music into the psychoanalytic field. For both, the central point is the possibility of an encounter through music.

It is evident, however, that each author works in his own psychoanalytic dialect. Bollas approaches music from ground close to Freudian metapsychology and object relations, whereas Didier-Weill is thoroughly Lacanian, drawing extensively on basic notions from that French tradition — logical time, the dialectic of desire, and the subject's constitution through the desire of the Other. Moreover, even working here with Portuguese translations of their texts, one notices striking differences in argumentative style and textual architecture. Bollas favors more descriptive terms, close to common sense and to the cognitive field — receptivity, creativity, communication. Didier-Weill relies on theoretical abstractions and terms with distinctive conceptual density, in a style readily recognizable as French, Lacanian psychoanalysis. Beyond stylistic differences, though, the most important contrast may be ontological: Bollas speaks of a music of subjective ambience — of *being*, of primary identification, of transformational and transitional elements that form a potential space supporting intersubjective relations. In Didier-Weill, it is the order of the Real that sustains a trans-subjective matrix of symbolic recognition: the *Blue Note* as a bit of the Real with symbolizing power that, in music, assumes an entirely particular pathway.

Even so, we argue that, despite these clear differences, one can find both convergences and novel insights. In this sense, bringing the two authors together draws attention to at least two interesting points.

First, if — as suggested earlier — we posit a broad difference in conception between the British and French traditions, with the former being more “conciliatory” and the latter more “tragic,” then Didier-Weill's *Blue Note* contradicts that thesis. The idea of a conjunction — across logical times — of happiness and psychic nostalgia lends an unexpected optimism to a characteristically French conception. What may at first seem a mere “almanac curiosity” proves, on closer inspection, to be more profound.

The possibility of encounter and a conjunction of Other and Subject through the *Blue Note* opens a perspective that eludes the fundamental structuring performed by language — namely, the necessary and anxiety-laden alienation in the Other's desire that constitutes the desiring subject. In music, the *Blue Note* makes encounter possible through a “love contest.” It is not a matter of anguished alienation while seeking one's place in the Other's desire, but of recognizing oneself as the Subject's muse — a different order of *jouissance*. The *Blue Note*'s promise of *jouissance* — through a conjunction for love that strips away the traumatic dimension — allows the celebration of something of the impossible: a fleeting encounter and recognition between Subject and Other that alludes to a founding act, a time before the anxiety of alienation existed. Something like Chico Buarque's line: “our time (...) after losing you, I will surely find you again, perhaps in a time of delicacy.”

The second point is that this possibility bears a certain resemblance to Bollas's notion of the transformational object. When the other is found — or finds us — through something recognized as shared within the very structure of desire, music affords another kind of *jouissance*. It belongs to “pure form” (Loureiro, 2020), constituting the subject not as a mere sliding along an ever-shifting, partial chain of signifiers, but as a harmonic, joyful resonance that should be remembered and, more than that, “celebrated” each time it occurs.

Here, then, something “dissonant” yet harmonious appears across Lacan's three registers for subjective experience. Music — as a specific artwork — is also a melodic sliding from one note to another. Yet in that imaginary sliding of musical signifiers we can hear the dissonance of a Borromean harmony: the *Blue Note* resounds from the register of the Real and — though it cannot itself be inscribed — produces a symbolizing effect. It yields something like a tritone⁴, lodged in the domain of the irreducible and the “impossible,” as Didier-Weill says, but which, instead of the “devil in music,” introduces “a promise of love.”

Thus, the rapprochement between psychoanalysis and music — though difficult — can carry theoretical understanding beyond its most basic elements. Even if we move in an unconscious “structured like a language,” and our basic therapeutic resource is the “talking cure,” music invites psychoanalysis onto unfamiliar ground, beyond the limits of language.

There is indeed a “language of music,” but it lies both beyond and beneath the discourse that can be structured in words, beyond purely semantic and lexical content (the “content,” so to speak, the information words convey). Understanding music as receptivity, recognition, or evocation — as Bollas and Didier-Weill do — repositions and expands music's place and enchantment within psychoanalysis. It is not, simply, a matter of controlling and modulating stimuli, as Kohut suggested. The key is not a defensive dynamic against traumatic impulses, but something of seduction, erotization, and desire.

Music expresses something of a different nature — something no language could encompass in full — because it bears a universal element and, standing outside enunciation or the possibility of translation into explanatory discourse, belongs to the domain of expression rather than representation (here we can hear resonances of Reik). It thus forms, as often said, a kind of “universal idiom” in its capacity to bring about encounter.

⁴ An interval spanning three whole tones between two pitches. In the Western harmonic tradition, this interval — known as the tritone — has long been regarded as the most radical dissonance; owing to its sense of instability, it was dubbed *diabolus in musica* in the Middle Ages.

Yet although we cannot develop this here, the association between music and language has long been taken up by important figures in philosophy and music. Adorno (1963/2008) aligns music and language while distinguishing them by the kinds of intentionality each entails; at the same time, he insists on their difference through the distance from the symbolic and the expression realized in the “musical event.” Roland Barthes (1971/1990, p. 238), seeking a way for language to characterize music without merely “adjectivizing” it, proposes shifting the point of contact between language and music and develops the notion of the “grain” to think music produced by the human voice, distinguishing that production from linguistic enunciation proper. Ratner (1980, p. 9) proposes studying music through “topics,” whereby musical forms relate to their material base and yield musical figures as “musical practices related to labor, poetry, theater, entertainment, dances, ceremonies, military activities, hunting, and the vital activities of the lower classes.”

All this makes clear the difficulty of addressing music through other fields of knowledge — philosophy, criticism, rhetoric, semiotics. Psychoanalysis is no exception. This helps explain why the topic was uncomfortable for Freud — and, one could say, remains so for psychoanalysts. Even so, music’s potential should not be neglected. However obscure some of this remains, it surely holds power for thinking theoretical and clinical dimensions. Following the paths indicated by Bollas and Didier-Weill, we might even envisage a special category of encounter and bond — a new category of *transference* conceived and operated through transformational aspects or subjective transmutation.

To speak of music within psychoanalysis is to risk becoming, as Tom Jobim would say, someone who “talks a lot and says nothing,” for music is not, strictly speaking, about speaking. Yet in speaking about music we can open another vantage point on encounters — one that need not amount to a mere assertion of “the consequence of what I have just said,” but that, in the possibilities of encounter and resonance between subjects, can affirm in its own idiom and in the first person — as listener, singer, performer, or composer — “I am the inevitable consequence of you.”

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