

Migrating Keys. A Conversation with Wayne Koestenbaum

Music as a Cultural Practice, or, What is Being Manrico?

My encounter with Wayne Koestenbaum is the contrapuntal complement to a week of official meetings. I'm spending a few days in New York after attending a summer school in Dartmouth, New Hampshire, an intense week of lectures, seminars and presentations. I'm happy to replace the onerous duties of academic performance with the pleasure of exploring a city that is mostly unknown to me, and quietly conversing with persons I like.

I am going to meet him in a cafe in Chelsea, a part of NYC that is gradually acquiring a new shape. New buildings are being constructed everywhere, as I noticed yesterday evening while strolling from Greenwich Village to the Upper West Side. My staying in an Asian neighborhood in Queens widens the perception of my own displacement: I'm a stranger who lives in a 'distant', peripheral part of the city, continually experiencing a sense of transitoriness from one place to another without being at home anywhere.

My conversation with Wayne Koestenbaum is destined to a forthcoming issue of *Anglistica*, whose focus is music and cultural studies. I'm immediately fascinated by Wayne's talk, and in the convoluted digressions of our conversation words go astray, as brought by a natural, independent flow of ideas and suggestions. Obviously, I don't read any of the questions I have accurately prepared yesterday.

We just sit in the cafe and have a beer.

To my utmost surprise, it is Wayne who starts asking me about my interest in music; yet it is not after all that strange that I should find myself interpellated by the supposed 'object' of my research. The alternating, interfering rhythm of our questions and answers and the interweaving of our voices and ideas continually relate our talk to the musical subject of the conversation.

Wayne's words focus on the private, corporeal correspondence that connects music and identity, as he shows me by immediately translating my initial remarks on the differences between piano and harpsichord into the different physical effort that marks the limit between the more aggressive, muscular piano performance and the subtler, more cerebral requirements of harpsichord. Music, as an experience closely related to the construction of identity, is intimately connected to one's own corporeality even when it seems far distant from it, and the importance of performance and exhibition, as Wayne reminds me, is no less crucial than the role played by texts and scores.

What immediately emerges in Wayne's words (and, obviously, in his books) is the idea of music as a cultural practice in its own right, even when considered in its exclusive textual, albeit polysemic, dimension. Wayne hints at the questions of music and sexual identity, of music and queerness. And, surprising me for the second time, the first instance he refers to is not melodrama and its innumerable nuances, which we discuss later on, but Chopin and Schubert piano music. He makes me notice the "migrating keys" that characterize Chopin's music, through which identity is aptly staged as a notion that comes to be asserted only while it is performed, finding in its temporary and transitory phases and phrases the apical and at the same time problematic moment of expression: "Think of Chopin's Sonata in B minor: think of its chromaticism. When I practice, I play the supposedly subordinate lines and chords slowly and separately, and thus I hear them take a detour, away from the dominant drama".

Chromatic elaborations trigger a radical reconfiguration of traditional musical genres, and, consequently, undermine the very possibility of conceiving structures and forms as aesthetic and historical data given once and for all. And, as Wayne underlines introducing a theme that will occupy us for another part of our conversation, uncanny hospitality and disguising displacement turn out to be two potential figures capable of questioning and conceivably dismantling any strong sense of identity. Chopin's waltzes, scherzos, sonatas are "perpetual masquerades", the gestures through which something different and differed is materially performed. "Is a waltz the speculum of a masturbatory inner dialog? Is it an inner track scrupulously followed? Is it a repressive fantasy?", Wayne keeps asking me. Chopin's melodic detours trace the unstable limits of a "musica practica", as Wayne terms it, music as experience, in which even the part played by the left hand is a kind of interrogation with which the player addresses his (or her) audience: "Imagine playing very, very slowly the Scherzo of Chopin's third Sonata for piano (which is 'molto vivace')".

Chopin's music conjoins the traits of mimicry and displacement, two words so recurrent in critical theory, which I had never associated with music, or at least not in these terms: "Chopin was always broadcasting the genre he was occupying, and also broadcasting his broadcasting", insists Wayne. I instinctively think of mazurkas, polonaises, waltzes, even ballads and nocturnes. What could it mean that Chopin is "broadcasting his broadcasting"? Is Wayne suggesting that something is displaced in the very act of its performance, and that this displacement is both textual/linguistic and territorial? The queer emphasis on political dimensions of the performative is charged, in his words, with a further, complicating meaning: it is not so much that we are what we stage, or are requested to stage, as that our political location is also constructed and elaborated through the very mechanisms of staging and performing, and that music

succeeds in the twofold goal of staging a text and a genre (namely: an identity), since it is a score, a written page, that acquires an audible and phonic shape, and, at the same time, of replicating the act of this staging, rehearsing it, questioning its rhetorical structure and the ideological bases from which it derives. That is why there's no need to find a connection between music and cultural studies: music is already a political practice, as Wayne suggests, and performance is the vacillating, slippery surface of its practice. He goes on, referring to Chopin's mazurkas: "What mazurka are we in? And then: are we in France? Are we in Poland?" From Chopin, our discussion immediately and naturally shifts to opera, for very similar reasons: "The tenor is a man, he has a penis, probably" – I cannot restrain my laughter – "But what is 'being-Manrico'?"

Call me Liberace: Hotels, Displacement, and Ambiguity

"I'm essentially a poet, I don't work through arguments, I don't like to argue, I present fragments. My work resembles a collage", Wayne tells me, and I'm by now intrigued by the idea of being myself displaced in the very moment I'm doing this interview and listening to Wayne's words about the work of displacement as it is realized in music and through music. As a scholar operating (more or less) in an international context, as a former pianist, as a queer person, as an Italian that is spending some days wandering in the meandering, reticular urban scenario of New York City, displacement comes to me as an almost familiar notion, a modality of assembling ideas, conversations, encounters, cities in a way that I am getting more and more acquainted with. Also noises, and music, set up my unstable location: my iPod provides me with a necessary soundtrack while I walk through the city, and even now, as Wayne reminds me, the loud music played in the cafe where we are sitting and talking literally surrounds us. Music almost inevitably determines the experience of displacement and is determined in turn by it.

I am interested in one of Wayne's books in particular, *Hotel Theory*, "two books in one", as we read on the back cover, two different and parallel narratives: the first, written on the left part of the page, contains scattered reflections about music, space, and 'theory'; the second, on the right part, is a dime novel that features the love story of Lana Turner and Liberace. A musical book, I would say, since it narrates the story of a piano-performer, Liberace, and often refers to Chopin as a key figure to explain its own narrative detours, but also because it is constructed on a rigorous and severe harmony between the two sections, which proceed together like the two parts of a piano score. Besides that, it is Koestenbaum that stages his own role as a performer and as a *virtuoso* here: the whole novel (the right-hand column) does not contain a single article, which makes it an exhausting

and presumably almost exasperating tour de force for the writer and a vertiginous experience for the reader (a book *d'exécution transcendante*, I would say).

I ask Wayne how he wrote his book. Our conversation turns, again, to displacement: "I'm interested in staging my work, in creating a symmetry between, on the one hand, a scene overtly displayed and transmitted to a hypothetical reader and, on the other hand, a scene of internal conflict, self-interrogation and crisis. Even when I use the voice of a critical theorist, I'm behaving as an impostor" - impostor being a word that I decide to understand as a metonymic trick to display, in a single gesture, both the act of showing off, proper to the *virtuoso*, and the act of disguising the lack of any definite location. This sense of perennial estrangement from structures of belonging is made all the more explicit by the label chosen for the love story between Lana Turner and Liberace, 'dime novel', a literary sub-genre that has a clear place in the history of American popular culture. Dime novel was the term used for popular literature, often of a sensational character, largely diffused at the beginning of the XX century. I ask Wayne if he really considers *Hotel Theory* a dime novel, and why. "It's ventriloquism: my voice, but mediated. I impersonated a cheap genre. A 'dime novel' is aesthetically low stakes. Just cheap gossip".

A ventriloquized expression: maybe his own words uttered through the voice of another, maybe the means through which the trivial plot of the Lana Turner and Liberace love story could be conveyed in its essential 'trivial' nature, being at the same time accompanied and sustained by the elaborate and refined digressions that occupy the left part of the pages. Are these digressions Wayne's real voice, opposed to his ventriloquized one? I don't dare ask him, perhaps because the mere hypothesis of a 'voice of one's own', in the middle of a conversation like this, seems quite simplistic if not totally incongruous. Wayne confirms my impressions upon the musical nature of *Hotel Theory*, comparing his writing to a piano performance: "A pianist, on the stage, expresses an 'object' for his audience's delectation, but at the same time the pianist submits that object, that material, to an internal jury".

But displacement is charged with another meaning that I had totally overlooked. Jewish identity is one of the other imperceptible stakes in *Hotel Theory*: "While displacing words and texts in *Hotel Theory* I make clear my exile". The Jewish question haunts both *Hotel Theory* and another book he authored, *Cleavage*, as he points out: "I'm not religious, I'm not very Jewish. But I see a connection between my aesthetic structures and a Jewish intertext, concerned with diaspora and displacement. My father is a Jew from Germany, and *he* is one of the 'hotel figures' in my life. Displacement, an inherited element, is something I consciously deploy as aesthetic scaffolding".

I am pushed back to an intricate textual interplay: first, Derrida, for displacement and Jewishness, and then Henry James, who broadly discusses in *The American Scene* the “hotel-spirit” that permeates the US national culture and tradition. I ask him if ‘his’, too, are American hotels, metaphoric tricks that mirror political processes presently going on in the US and in the world. America and the hotel, in Wayne’s words, share a symbolic structure that is to some extent based on a specular recognition (and I cannot but think of the ‘specular’ structure of *Hotel Theory* again, its two columns of text facing and mutually resorting to each other). “In the US we don’t have social welfare: during the Reagan administration, patients were ‘deinstitutionalized’ from mental hospitals, rendered homeless, and put in hotels. A similar thing has happened with immigrants. The hotel is not a place of hospitality, it is not a ‘guest-house’. It is a kind of prison. Guantanamo is a hotel. This U.S. politics of inclusion and exclusion, this ambivalent relation to outcast immigrants, is part of the American political unconscious”.

Hosting people amounts to making them aware of their precarious status, and, at the same time, to hold them hostage, to enclose them in a symbolic framework that turns hospitality into a condition of perennial subjection. *Hotel Theory* is characterized by a visible and powerful sense of political self-awareness, which deeply and controversially questions the stability of any belonging, subtly highlighting its transitional status. Identities are as precarious as hotels, and so are national and sexual identities, and music too is one of the tracks along which this precariousness can be better displayed and understood. It is because I’m back from a Summer school in American studies, maybe, that I cannot but notice that there’s a passage in *Hotel Theory* where Liberace declares: “Call me Liberace”, which is for me a blatant reference to the much more notorious “Call me Ishmael”, one of the milestones of the American canon. Wayne argues: “Identity is a hotel-like structure, and ambiguity is inscribed into its design. This character is just a figment whose name happens to be Liberace. He is not the actual Liberace. I’m calling him Liberace”.

A Music to Fight Against

Let’s turn back to music. Thinking of another of Wayne’s books, *The Queen’s Throat*, I suggest the possible connections between two powerful, emblematic ‘musical protagonists’: the *virtuoso* and the *diva*. I ask Wayne to discuss the figure of the *diva* and its thematic articulations, in terms of both musical performance and identification of gender, and I hypothesize that the music performer, or the *virtuoso*, could somehow be perceived as the male counterpart of the *diva*, as if they were the opposite extremes of the same spectrum. The more so since, as I was arguing above, Wayne’s

writing is also an example of virtuoso art. “Virtuosity is a kind of exhibition in writing”, he says. “As a pianist, I’m always counting, shaping and collaging. Most of my writing is a way of counting and rearranging. I like to play – self-consciously, idiosyncratically – with increments”. Is it a kind of performance? “A masochistic one. And not so different from the *diva*. She is an example of self-sacrifice, of self-punishment, for the sake of the score”. Subjecting oneself to a strenuous regime of discipline in order to serve a text seems to me the hidden connection between the *virtuoso*, the *diva*, and the writer. “Maria Callas was an admirable example of imposed control, in every instance of her expressivity. What was required of a master singer was, first, to obey a maestro, and second, to obey the composer. It’s a kind of monastic subordination. Everything is written in the score: nothing is a matter of temperament or individuality. The singer undergoes a rhythmic discipline, as well as a vocational commitment. And the same goes for a piano *virtuoso*. Think of Glenn Gould. Perhaps he was autistic, we don’t know. But his performance was an example of scrupulous, philological submission to the score. There is no ‘affect’, the dynamics are terraced, every phrase is absolutely precise. He stopped performing to avoid the exposure to the ‘other’ altogether. The interrogation by his audience was a kind of unbearable inquisition”.

I finally ask Wayne to talk about opera, voice and gender. It is a complex question, and Wayne’s answer is an elaborate and, as he remarks, an oblique one.

“Let’s start with the mouth. The mouth is a sexual organ, in its own right. Sexuality is displayed and displaced to neutral organs. I insist that the mouth is like the anus or vagina; the mouth is sexual, but it doesn’t need to be genital”. He insists: “Mine is an indirect answer, but also the queer meaning is not the most obvious one, it is the meaning I decide to impose – and I decided to impose this meaning on the mouth, in a gesture that conjoins perversity and willfulness. And after all, preposterous things are the ones that give pleasure, like voice itself. Pitch is gendered. We think that we can tell gender by a person’s voice, but voice can be very misleading, and gender is not a secure location but something that opens interrogations. The tenor’s high note doesn’t represent masculinity or femininity, it represents a scene of binary failure or success. Is it a man, or someone who has successfully crossed over into a third sex? Every aria is a test of what he is”.

I insist on the question of voice and gender, and, more broadly, of how music, and opera, can undergird the politics of gender representation and identification. There is a passage in *The Queen’s Throat* where he writes: “Music can allow people to come out without saying a word”. I ask him what he means by these words, what role music plays in relation to identity politics. “It is an oblique answer that I’m giving you. You see, we’re fighting

against music here, in this bar. We've been struggling for one hour against music: a typical urban experience. Here is music that we are not listening to". Background music has insistently interfered in our conversation for an hour, so much so that we have asked the bartenders to kindly turn it down a bit, also because other people are coming and the cafe is getting crowded with the voices of young men and women chatting and drinking around us. "Music helps us have a good time, and creates a space of conviviality, but it can also be invasive and coercive. People can identify with divas, but identity can be as coercive as music, and we will find ourselves compelled to fight against it. I'm listening much less to music now than when I wrote *The Queen's Throat*, maybe because I live in New York, where there is too much noise, which drowns out my music. Even when I play piano I can't hear myself. In my book, I don't make an issue of noise, although I imply that divas can make a lot of noise. But noise is a political issue. When we're forced music by the environment, we succumb to 'false consciousness'. Every day, we're coercively interpellated by music. I'm fighting against music even as I fight to articulate myself through musical practices".

We've come to the end, I am going to turn off my recorder, and ask Wayne my last question. "Do you think that gay people still listen to opera?"

"I think they do. Opera is a code for dissidence and excess, and I believe that there's a queer relation to vocal power and vocal excessiveness. That relation has a history; it can't disappear, simply because 'coming out' has become, in some cultures, banal. Opera culture may have sedimented over time, but, like religion, opera remains alive because it answers an unspeakable craving".

While walking from the 23rd Street to Washington Square, where I have to meet a friend for dinner, I am suddenly aware that on my iPod Glenn Gould is playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The starting, linear theme, unfolds, sometimes totally unrecognizable, through thirty magnificent elaborations; yet, each variation is imperceptibly linked to the essential, perspicuous *aria* from which it derives. Nothing could have rendered the sense of Wayne's words better than that. Once again, my route is accompanied by a musical track; once again, music is displacing me while infinitely displacing itself.