

VIRTUOSITY, VIOLINS AND WEAPONS

“To fear God and maintain His Church”... “To live by honour and for glory”... “Never to turn the back upon a foe”... Such majestic imperatives were assembled as the code of conduct of men who were considered the guardians of morale in the medieval world. Known as Knightly Virtues, these words governed the reputable deeds of the Knights, which were extensively narrated – as both history and myth - in the epic tales of Roland, Percival, Lancelot and many others. Armed and wearing heavy full-body suits of armor, submitted to assiduous training in horsemanship, archery and swordsmanship, organized in brotherhoods of mounted warriors, the knights were respected as masters of the arts of war. Occasionally poets, they were carried by heroic spirit and devotion to feudal and religious authorities. Largely appointed in the course of the crusades, the knights were also the protagonists of medieval tournaments; fighting spectacles consisting of the practice and the display of war skills. Thus, if the knights were considered valuable men, this status evidently implied their willingness to accomplish blood shed. The practices of the knights and their affect towards authorities was based on a convoluted imbrication of morale, technical prowess and violence. The organization and the rituals of chivalry enabled these contradictions and simultaneously defined which part of society ought to benefit from them. The “knightly virtues” served to preserve this dialectic twist.

This potent mix of values, skills and fear can be applied at different times and in different fashions. Another of its manifestations was brought about by the advent of the Bourgeois Concert, with the development of symphonic music in the 18th and 19th centuries. As concert halls grew bigger, a new type of musical protagonist emerged, who was able to sustain the attention of the larger urban crowd: the romantic virtuoso. Detached from the orchestra, postured in a heroic stance, typically slender, wearing a black cloak and long hair, the virtuoso could occupy an entire evening program and play a long series of “encores” in front of an acclaiming audience. Virtuosos displayed summits of unleashed velocity and stunning contrasts of musical colors and dynamics, making use of innovative techniques such as the Paganini “flying staccato” the “left hand pizzicato” and other musical acrobatics. The experience of a Paganini concert for instance has generated grandiloquent and somewhat bewildering testimonies, as the magnificence of his playing seemed to have met with some kind of insanity and threat. Witnesses of such moments of virtuosity have described their musical experience as an encounter with the devil, an “intoxicating beauty” emanating through the instrumental skills, as the German poet Heinrich Heine put it when reporting upon a Paganini concert. The mere countenance of maestro Paganini was, according to Heine, “cadaverous”, “a vampire with a violin” who seemed to have just “stepped out of the grave”. The equally acclaimed Hungarian pianist Franz Liszt, was often compared with a demon, whose ferocious and nonchalant glance made people shrink into their seats when he entered the stage. The presence of the virtuoso channeled a hellish atmosphere of beauty. The display of extraordinary skills was also a spectacle of devil and death, before which the audience learned to remain sitting, passive and perfectly silent.

From the Knightly Virtues, the virtuoso has taken over the corporality, the individual will and the sense for public action, whereas this activity involves two different and seemingly opposing forces, for instance skill and disruption, morale and cheating, or rigor and

nonchalance. Furthermore, virtuosity has been assigned to different types of personalities and has referred to artistic exploits as well as other kinds of public activities. Therefore, the attempt of defining what the virtuoso really characterizes, or even, what virtuosity means, is treacherous. But if virtuosos are not classifiable, there is a leitmotiv in their acting. Like other public personalities, the virtuoso is in all cases a master of transience, fully dedicated to his task, both aware of the others and capable of disregarding their judgment. But the difference between a skilled and accomplished performer who perfectly masters the rules of his or her discipline and a virtuoso, is that the virtuoso does not just master the rules, but also transgresses them. Moreover, if virtuosity seems such an inscrutable concept, it may be because virtuosity always involves transgression. Such entanglement of values may be some danger. In fact, the religiously connoted affectation of “doing good” originally implied in the term “virtu-osity” has shown no limits in its reversed mode - the invocation of darkness or the call for violence. Both virtue and virtuosity imply a sort of cohabitation between good and evil, therefore having great potential in nourishing all kinds of extrapolations and Manichean discourses. Of course, this cohabitation cannot occur openly. That is why another purpose can be assigned to the virtuoso: as with the virtuous knight, the role of the virtuoso is not only to operate the transgression, but to disguise it.

As the “vir” of “virtue” attests (“vir” is Latin for “man”), the notion of virtue is anchored in the activities of men. By observing their code of conduct, the Knightly Virtues, the Knights possessed the means both legally and technically to kill. Virtues were just as many attires which imparted men the monopoly of action, beyond good and evil so to say, while the virtues of women were restrained to chastity and modesty, thus impeding their access to public expression and power. Virtuosity pursued both this male monopoly and this custom of disguise. The musical virtuosos of the 18th and 19th centuries were men. And if the virtuosos did not possess the right to kill (although wasn't Paganini suspected of an obscure murder?), they were acclaimed for their ability of elaborating the dramatization of fear and of conveying the flavor of death. Similarly, the bourgeois concert was designed as a festive and social event, which simultaneously ought to enable the permutation of seemingly incompatible notions. Virtuosity was to satisfy the concealed and ultimate motive of these events, namely the compulsive need of getting scared. To death. The virtuoso was the fabrication of a figure as well as the linguistic shell in which the incompatibilities of values contained in the emotional needs of nascent bourgeoisie were compiled. The “cadaverous” and potentially murderous Paganini therefore remains the perfect incarnation of the virtuoso, revealing the specific twist of the term, in both its etymological and historical dimensions.

The most concise precedent of this twist is comprised in what had been one of the determining ideas of the Neanderthals during the Mesolithic area, and remained as a somewhat coincidental relationship between weapon and music instrument: the invention of the bow and arrow, which - what a beautiful sound, happened to become the first string instrument. From the beginning on, killing made music.

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