

The Unicorn Paradigm

or, On Mistranslation as Relational Music-making

At some moment many centuries ago a European traveller to India or Africa sees a strange animal. As one can only say (can only see) what one already knows, in words that captivate our thoughts, she describes it as a sort of a horse. A big, sturdy horse, gray or whitish. And – importantly – with only one horn in the middle of the forehead. And just like that, unicorns start striding our imaginations and centuries of Western lore.

It is not important to get the details right (India or Africa?). Neither does it matter if this story really happened, in one way or another, or if I just made it up completely. What is important is that unicorns exist. They *acted upon* Europe for centuries. I have seen, in Vienna's Schatzkammer Museum, the huge unicorn horn that was legally an inalienable treasure of the Habsburgs. To correct me and say that, in fact, it is a narwhal tusk is to falsify history. It has *now* mutated into *having been* a narwhal tusk all along. But for the Habsburgs it was a unicorn horn: it exerted real power as a unicorn horn. When I told my five-year-old niece I had seen a unicorn horn, she asked me if it was real: I answered I had really seen it. She insisted, asking if it was *really* a *unicorn horn* (emphasis in the original). I answered that the Habsburgs *really believed* so – I do not want to destroy my niece's fantasies, and I also do not want to tell lies. To say that a medieval virgin could actually capture a rhinoceros by making it sleep in her lap, now *that* would be preposterous!

One does not need to venture all the way into epistemological questions regarding the (im)possibility of truly *knowing* to recognize that, at the very least in the arts and their history, *misreadings* are and have been a powerful source of creation. It was Mendelssohn's romantic and lavishly modified interpretation that put J.S. Bach into the canon of great composers. Monteverdi and the Camerata Fiorentina's misreadings of Plato generated a *seconda pratica* and planted the seeds of opera. The same birds sing diatonically in Janequin, tonally in Beethoven's 6th Symphony and post-tonally in Messiaen. The Mendelssohn-Bach story is in itself only partly "true". The history of music is full of misreadings, and better off for them.

The process of creation and performance is in itself a matter of misreadings. Every composer has struggled with a thought that resists all attempts of notation. When eventually choosing a notation (and more often than not still hesitating the *if-ness* of the un-chosen ones), then the struggle of the performer starts. He plays it seven times, each one different: which is the right one? Or the best? Is the "rightest one" necessarily the best?

Music-making in notated composition is ill-served by the metaphor of translation. But *mistranslating music* as a creative process may be a rich paradigm. It happens between idea, score, performance, reception. The context of a collective composition enhances the creative potential of mistranslations, adding voices to a musical relational net rich with misreadings. My composer colleague writes something, thinking it "works as Φ ". Well, I see it as Θ , and treat it so. But instead of correcting unicorns back into rhinoceros, we embrace these deviations as part of the process. Perhaps another two composers *notate* what they understand as Σ in two different manners, and the performer receives two notations of the same "idea": *S* & *E* (if a same musical idea exists separately or prior to a notation of it is precisely the question that must not be answered here), and is reminded that neither represents the music that will emerge from them.

All of this is ubiquitous in all music-making, and perhaps unavoidable. Nonetheless, much of music practice still dwells on impossible vocabularies of objective execution of the score – or else denies the score in favour of improvisation and other openings. But the openings are already there, and unavoidably so. So what if we regarded this state of things as a promising paradigm, consciously enhancing and encouraging the possibilities of the infinite possible *mistranslations*?

In the end, we may conjure ourselves some unicorns.