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Editorial: Essays on (De-)Composing the Nation

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EDITORIAL

Essays on (De-)Composing the Nation

The idea of this special issue came to us roughly half a decade ago. At that time, we had just completed our respective doctoral studies in composition, both concerned, in different ways, with the rediscovery of local identities, the critical renegotiation of national histories, and the (re)emergence of independence movements. In this context, we were (and are) attracted and repulsed by the discursive pressure of the “nation”, understood, from time to time, as an oppressive colonial institution, as an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s terms (2006), or even as an ideal, independent geopolitical space to be rescued from the sovereignty of other national bodies. As a matter of fact, people in Scotland had just voted in the Independence Referendum when we were starting thinking about potential contributors for this collection.

Now, one problem that we have identified during the many years that have passed from those early days to the present publication is that, while musicians from popular and folk backgrounds have abundantly addressed these issues in their work, the involvement of contemporary composers appears remote. The notion of “contemporary composer” is obviously an extremely problematic one (mind, as much as the notions of “popular” and “folk” musicians), yet we found it extremely useful when putting this special issue together.

By “composer”, we automatically picture a typically (dead) white man (LUCAS, 2012; LUCAS *apud* MESSINA, 2015) in the act of scribbling notes on paper after epiphanic moments of “inspiration” – to this mere act of writing we normally confer the legitimacy of pure “truth”, a truth that is allegedly transmitted to performers (and, in turn, to audiences) via a “musical score”. In the context of the social ritual that surrounds this musical genre – time by time described as “classical”, “erudite”, surely “Western”, etc. – the authored score embodies precisely incontestable truth (cf. COOK, 2009).

After all, the qualifier “contemporary” put before “composer” hardly alleviates the normativity of this whole set of “social paraphernalia” (KELLER et al, 2010). On the contrary, the “contemporary” or “experimental music” rubrics often seem to perpetuate the very same racio-gendered, bourgeois, elitist premises on which the whole narrative of a “classical”/“erudite”/“Western” music sustains itself.

In this context, the inherent, deep-rooted, sentimentally charged belonging of a particular author to the national community that best describes their citizen status is imagined as a natural part of their “contemporary composer” essence. We are always already describable as an “Italian” and a “British” composer, in advance of any verification as to whether these labels mean anything for us and our work. We take this opportunity to recognise the inherent danger that the workings of cultural power become universalised from a Euro- or Western-centric perspective, and we emphasise the ambivalent and fluid nature of identification in order to disrupt discussions that generalise or fix.

With all this in mind, for this special issue we looked at inviting contributors that emerged as exceptions to these naturalised assumptions, combining the need to overcome received narratives on the “contemporary/experimental composer”, with a critical relationship towards the concept of “nation”. In (de)composing the nation from different perspectives, the five authors that contributed to this special issue identify to some degree as “contemporary/experimental composers”, while critically challenging the assumptions that revolve around these nomenclatures.

The artistic sonic practices discussed in this collection constitute critical re-framings, which enable an examination of the organising social practice of identification found within discourses of nation. The special issue explores symbolic struggles for ownership, the power to negotiate and narrate the meaning(s) and boundaries of belonging.

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