

---

## Wind Blowing Through Utopia

### Form and Impermanence in New Music



Albert Breier

**Abstract:** Utopian concepts have entered European thought since the Renaissance. In music, the first futurist composer was perhaps Claudio Monteverdi. He abandoned the traditional architectural devices in favour of free structures inspired by the expressive components of texts. The subject of Monteverdi's first opera, Orpheus, is connected with the lyre, an instrument producing short, ephemeral sounds. Since the Renaissance, there has been in music a constant fight between architectural forces and the attacks of transience, symbolized by the blowing of the wind. Modern music tends to succumb to ephemerality. This connects composers otherwise so different from each other as John Cage and Brian Ferneyhough. The city of Utopia is in danger to be destroyed by the wind. The composer of future times may well not be a citizen, but a nomad.

**Keywords:** utopia, musical architecture, Monteverdi, Orpheus, Aeolian harp, wind, dystopia, Ferneyhough, underworld journey, nomad, non-lieux

*In the night a wind arose and cooled down the whole city.*

Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*

Utopians live in cities. When Thomas More published his famous work of political philosophy in 1516, European cities were still comparatively small, Paris with its approximately 300,000 inhabitants was the largest.<sup>1</sup> With the growth of cities, utopian writings became more numerous. Utopia itself was often presented as an ideal city. Rural life was an anti-utopian life. Utopias, artificial paradises, forgot that Eden had been a garden.

In the Middle Ages, art music flourished in the churches. It took over many features from cathedral architecture: a mass by Guillaume Dufay or Johannes Ockeghem is structurally related to Gothic church buildings. By gaining steadily in constructive force, composers turned the sacred texts into architecture. The words inspired musical devices and were in turn consumed by them.

The words of the Catholic Mass are not utopian. The center of the liturgy, the sacrament of the Eucharist, is a memorial service: *Do this in memory of me*. As long as people believed in the actual presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Presence could prevail over Past and Future. Liturgical music was in no need to be “utopian”. With the decline of that faith, brought about through the influence of Protestantism, utopian thinking began to enter the Christian religious service. Protestant thought, as developed in Protestant preaching, fostered many utopian ideas. This went hand in hand with the flowering of Protestant music.

In the Renaissance, the planning of ideal cities came into fashion. Only a few of them were actually built, such as Palmanova and Sabbioneta, both in Italy. In music, humanistic ideas led to the invention of a new art form which was eminently suited to city life, the opera. Claudio Monteverdi became the first truly “avantgarde” composer. *Seconda pratica* is another term for “avantgarde”.

The subject of Monteverdi’s first opera was *Orpheus*. In this Monteverdi was not alone: many composers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century wrote operas titled *L’Orfeo*. When the sacred texts lost their prevalence in music, Greek mythology had to fill in the gap. And Orpheus is – along with Apollon – the mythical personage most closely connected to music.

According to Simonides of Ceos, Orpheus’s music and singing could charm the birds, fish, and wild beasts. He could coax the trees and rocks into dancing. He was even able to divert the course of rivers. He was not only a bringer of civilization,<sup>2</sup> he was a utopian,

<sup>1</sup> I have abstained from giving individual sources for each piece of factual knowledge I use. Most of it I got, as (nearly) everybody else, from Wikipedia or other free internet sources. In our time, when printed encyclopedias no longer exist, one is reduced to confide in what is transmitted through the air.

<sup>2</sup> According to different authors Orpheus invented also agriculture, medicine, and writing. He was an augur and seer, practiced magical arts and astrology, founded cults to Apollo and Dionysus, and prescribed mystery rites.

a realizer of utopias. He even fought successfully with death (which Ernst Bloch called the strongest of anti-utopias): his music and song had power over Hades.

Orpheus could not rely on words alone, he had to use a musical instrument too: a lyre or harp. In a way plucked or strummed string instruments and the human voice are at the opposite ends of the sound spectrum. The short, almost percussive sounds of these instruments have a distinctly non-human flavor. They reach into nature as well as into quasi-mathematical abstraction: in either case they are removed from the human world.

Human beings seldom use their voices to percussive ends. Regarded as an exception may be the *Khoisan* languages of southern Africa which use click consonants.<sup>3</sup> These languages, which were once spread throughout southern and eastern Africa, are now quickly dying out. Most of them have no written record. The *!Xóǀ* language has more than eighty click sounds. In the West tongue clicks have come into use in modern times as an element of vocal percussion, in popular music, and also in the avantgarde.

The words of Orpheus are poetry. His music is theory. In his study *Die Geburt der Theorie aus dem Instrument: über Bedienung und Bedeutung der antiken Instrumente Groma und Lyra*<sup>4</sup>, Nikolaus Thurn has reconstructed the birth of mathematics from the musical instrument.<sup>5</sup> Thurn draws connections between nautical science, geometry, and music. According to him, the development of Greek geometry can be specifically traced back to the study of instruments.

Musical theory is based on tones, so untuned percussion instruments could never become the basis of theoretical speculation. But neither could instruments with long drawn-out sounds. Abstraction is non-durational, it denies Time: so Orpheus' lyre with its short, precise tones was very well fitted for demonstrations of theoretical thought.

Orpheus was a true instrumentalist in that he probably played his instrument with some kind of plectrum, not with his fingers. The farther removed the sound production is from the body, the more "instrumental" a sound is. Instrumentalism means abstraction. Western instrumental music is the true realm of abstraction in art.

Monteverdi's music is created out of thin air. He leaves the solid ground of the *prima pratica*, of contrapuntal music written to the glory of God. Orpheus' lyre or harp are instruments producing quickly vanishing sounds. Monteverdi and the composers of his time had a predilection for plucked (...) string instruments. They served as the strongest (...) possible contrast to the sound of the human voice. A singing voice carries into eternity, the sound of a plucked string is ephemeral, it vanishes almost in the same moment it is produced.

<sup>3</sup> Most prominent among percussion instruments producing clicking sounds are *claves*.

<sup>4</sup> Paderborn: Fink, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> It is possible to call music *mathematized poetry*. The mathematical nature of music tends still to be underrated.

There is a string instrument which is played without the help of human hands, just by the wind, the *Aeolian harp* or wind harp. Its name derives from *Aiolos* (in Latin *Aeolus*), the Lord of the Winds in Greek mythology. The sound of the Aeolian harp, whose strength depends on the varying force of the blowing wind, is experienced by many as having a magical effect, to be incomparably beautiful and evocative. The Greeks were true humanists in believing these sounds to be the voice of Aeolus. For them everything had a voice, even the wind could not be excluded.

Aeolian harps are sometimes very large. In 1789 Georg Christoph Lichtenberg made mention of a giant harp in a garden in Basel, which had fifteen strings and was almost a hundred metres long and fifty metres high. In Lichtenberg's times, the origin of Aeolian sounds was often thought to be not the wind alone, but electric, magnetic, and thermal causes were discussed as well. The Aeolian harp thus became an object of physical demonstrations. Only in 1825 did Ernst Chladni establish the wind as the only source of Aeolian sounds.

Like the lyre, the Aeolian harp has become a symbol for poetry and the poet. In his *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero uses the term *afflatus* which has been translated as "inspiration". *Afflatus* means a rush of unexpected breath that seizes the poet, who does not know where it comes from and is rendered helpless by it. Like an Aeolian harp struck by the wind, the poet affected by *afflatus* starts to sing.<sup>6</sup>

King David was said to have hung an Aeolian harp over his bed so he could listen to its sounds during the night. In the Middle Ages these sounds were connected with sorcery. Scientific interest in the Aeolian harp arose in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Athanasius Kircher, a near-contemporary of Monteverdi. It was then forgotten until English poets rediscovered it in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then a great amount of poetry has been written in praise of the Aeolian harp. Eduard Mörike's famous poem *An eine Äolsharfe* was set to music by Johannes Brahms and Hugo Wolf.

Wind is the enemy of architecture and the visual arts, but not necessarily of music. In every performance of a piece of music, wind is blowing: sometimes softly, sometimes strongly. The performer is an accomplice of the wind. But in being played, music is constantly destroyed. How to give music permanence was the great question that Western composers never ceased to ask themselves. Their answer was by writing it down and giving it an architectural shape. As Western music exists in written scores, the mere *look* of a score can tell us something about the architectural qualities of the music.

One of the greatest architects among artists was: *Dante*. The grand edifice of the *Divina Commedia* has not much use for wind. They are relegated to the *Inferno*. In the second Circle of Hell, a tempest punishes the lustful. At the center of Hell, Satan beats

<sup>6</sup> *Afflatus* was originally spelt *adflatus* = *ad* + *flatus* ("blowing" or "breathing"), the noun form of *flare* ("to blow"). The term can be taken to mean "to be blown upon" by a divine wind.

his wings creating a cold wind which continues to freeze the ice surrounding him. Satan has wings, but he cannot fly. In one of Dante's many curious anticipations of the inventions of modern technology, he functions as a giant cooling machine.

Wind becomes audible through resistance, when air passes over an obstacle. In the same sense Time is perceived only when its flow is interrupted. Classical Western music is the art of interrupting Time: only then musical architecture (which can be described using metaphors of Space) becomes possible.

The music of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries attains greatness in that it represents an ideal fusion of architecture and flowing time. The seamlessness of the contrapuntal structures guarantees that its continuous stream of vocal sounds is never broken. With opera singing, expressive interruptions of vocal lines (a practice that started with madrigals) became an often-used feature. Instruments helped to fill in the gaps, gradually they took over the whole of an opera. Wagner's operas are already large symphonies (and were perceived as such by Anton Bruckner). Works like Helmut Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit dem Schwefelhölzchen* or Brian Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime* develop the tendency further.

Music, after its separation from the scriptural words, needed a new firm ground. It was found in *basso continuo*. Musical architecture of the baroque was based on thoroughbass. With the use of thoroughbass, music started to walk. Formerly it had been floating. It can be said that Monteverdi invented the *walking bass* later so dear to Jazz. He instigated the march of music into the future – towards utopia.

With thoroughbass, the harmonic structure of a piece of music becomes dependent on the bass line. The use of plucked string instruments in a Monteverdi score helps to fill in the harmony. Soon harmony became the main focus of musical theorizing, the lyre of Orpheus once again proved to be an instigator of theoretical thought.

The lyre of classical antiquity was ordinarily strummed with a plectrum. Later lyres were played with a bow.<sup>7</sup> Some authors held that many modern stringed instruments were late-emerging examples of a lyre. It seems the interest of these authors was to strengthen the supposed cultural continuity between ancient Greece and modern Europe, a continuity which is stressed by all humanists, but may be doubted for many substantial reasons.

Classical Western instrumental music is based on the sound of bowed strings. Bowing guarantees a continuity of sound at least equal to the continuity achieved by the vocal polyphonists. On the whole, musical architecture on a large scale is possible only when continuous sounds are available.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In contemporary Greek and Dalmatian folk music a lyre is a bowed string instrument such as a violin with three or four strings.

<sup>8</sup> The curious neglect of the harp in European art music is noteworthy in this respect. On the whole, the harp never gained prominence throughout the classical era. Either it was relegated to the *salon* or it played a rather subordinate role in the orchestra. Great composers very seldom wrote harp pieces. Mozart's *Concerto for Flute, Harp, and Orchestra* is hackwork.

In European music, the piano soon became the lyre of modernity. Like the lyre, it was used widely for theoretical demonstrations. It is also curious that interest in the Aeolian harp was revived in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in what could be termed the “era of the piano”. The Parisian piano maker, Ignaz Pleyel, was influential in creating new kinds of Aeolian harps.

When in 1725, J. S. Bach wrote his secular cantata *Zerreiβet, zersprenget, zertrümmert die Gruft* (BWV 205), known as *Der zufriedengestellte Aeolus*, the power of the God of Wind was programmatically tamed. In the first chorus, even the *basso continuo* participates in the depiction of gusts of wind. But this wind does not bring destruction and chaos, it yields to the power of the logic of harmonic construction.

A curious feature of Bach’s music is that while it certainly does not lack “utopian potential”, its enormous success seems to depend on a certain feeling of security it obviously provides many listeners with. If Bach’s music is utopian, it creates a liveable utopia. Bach’s heaven is a place open to earthlings. His angels have wings, but more often than not they prefer not to use them.

With Mozart, the depiction of wind and storm is completely subordinated to musical architecture. Winds blow only in the accompaniment, they never gain structural importance. Apart from storm scenes, Mozart also knows the *serene* wind: see the beautiful *terzettino* “Soave sia il vento” in *Così fan tutte*, or the *duetto con coro* “Secondate aurette amiche” from the same opera.

In Wagner’s bourgeois world, storms threaten the physical as well as moral security. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was not only a century of satiety, but also of secret fear. The great thinkers of that century already anticipated the coming destruction of Europe during the First World War. Wagner’s storm scenes are often in *d minor* as in *The Flying Dutchman* and *The Valkyrie*.<sup>9</sup> With the composers of the Second Viennese School, *d minor* became the last stronghold of tonality in a harmonic atmosphere already mainly dominated by atonality. Examples are the second number, appropriately called *Vergangenes*, from Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces*, op. 16, Webern’s *Passacaglia*, op. 1, and the great symphonic interlude in the third act of Berg’s *Wozzeck*.

In Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*, composed in 1909, the Wagnerian storms have come to a standstill.

“I am afraid... What sullen air is out here... Like a storm that stagnates... So dreadfully calm and empty...”<sup>10</sup>

“He is not there... On the whole long road nothing that is living... and no sound... The wide, pale fields are without breath, as if struck by death...”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Already Beethoven’s piano sonata *The Tempest*, op. 31/2, had used that key.

<sup>10</sup> *Erwartung*. Monodram in einem Akt. Text: Marie Pappenheim. [Wien:] Universal Edition, n. d., p. 2f. Translation by the author.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Only at the close of the opera does a gust of wind arise and extinguish the memory of the protagonist who remembers only she had been looking for someone or something. The *Erwartung* – “expectation” – thus turns out to have been the expectation of the annihilating wind.

In Berg’s *Wozzeck*, there is a whole discourse on the wind (Act 1, first scene: *Wozzeck* and the Captain):

[Captain:] “I think there’s something blowing from South-North.”

[Wozzeck:] “Yes sir, just so, sir!”

[Captain:] “South-North! Oh, you are dense, quite absurdly dense!”

This wind is an absurdity, a caricature of the Holy Spirit, *that bloweth where it listeth* – even from South-North...

In much of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, wind instruments are prominent. Composers had grown weary of the lush string sound so dear to the preceding era. The “wind” of wind instruments is the human breath. When it is used to play an instrument, it no longer serves the purpose of bringing forth meaningful language. Man, once capable of articulated speech, again produces nothing but a *flatus vocis*.<sup>12</sup> Pure instrumental music was as late as the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thought by many to be completely meaningless.

In some modern musical works, utopia and dystopia are combined in a way characteristic perhaps only of music. The sound of the works Schoenberg wrote after he had abandoned the tonal system is to many listeners still repellent. Others appreciate the utopian qualities of this music. The short period of free atonality, before the development of the twelve-tone method, may have been the apex of utopian music.

Among the arts, perhaps music has expressed most fully the spirit of dystopia. Like Utopia, Dystopia is a city, a city full of dissonant noise. The uneasiness many listeners feel when they are confronted with a piece of modern music is indeed very strong. The more composers tell their audiences about the intended utopian qualities of their music, the more it is experienced as cacophonous, ugly, unbearable – in short, as dystopian.

For a group of instruments preferred by him in many of his works Schoenberg coined the term *Kurztoninstrumente* – non-sustaining instruments. Harp, guitar and mandolin had a career in works of the Second Viennese School that was quite unexpected. The non-sustaining instruments with their impermanent, quickly vanishing sounds obviously corresponded to an acoustic ideal connected intimately with the avantgarde.

*Kurztoninstrumente* produce a kind of tone-dust, blown up by the sonic wind. In many areas of activity of the human mind, the tendency towards disintegration into dust is today

<sup>12</sup> How the ability to speak and the ability to play a wind instrument are connected in man is of course open to any speculation. The oldest flutes, made from the bones of birds, are thought to be more than 35,000 years old. Since then, wind has always been prominent in music...

noticeable. Mathematics has long known the *Cantor dust*, in music *Dust* appears as the title of compositions as in Helmut Lachenman's *Staub*. Images of dust and sand are also prominent in modern literature. Jorge Luis Borges created the *Sand Book*.<sup>13</sup>

Many scores of modern music have a windswept look. This may be especially true for the works of *Brian Ferneyhough*. The British composer has a reputation of being a structuralist who works with mathematical precision. Yet his mathematics is the complex mathematics of the wind, not that of architecture.<sup>14</sup> Musically, it is not audible as mathematics, corresponding to the fact that modern mathematics is not eidetic.

Ferneyhough's only opera *Shadowtime*, first performed in 2004, contains a scene in which wind is blowing expressly. It is called *Les Froissements d'ailes de Gabriel*, "The Rustling of the Wings of Gabriel". Based on fragmentary musical material, it is a concerto for guitar, appropriately a *Kurztoninstrument*, and a small ensemble.

The reference of the title is to Walter Benjamin's famous *Ninth Thesis on the Concept of History*, where the *Angel of History* makes his appearance:

"There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth gapes open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm."<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin's *storm blowing from Paradise* is meteorologically dubious. Seen from Europe, earthly Paradise is located in the east. But in Europe, the wind mostly blows from the west, a European storm would drive the angel back to Paradise.

The Austrian-German theologian and philosopher *Erwin Reisner* maintains that human culture follows the course of the sun.

<sup>13</sup> In Germany, there even is a *Staubmuseum* – "Museum of Dust" – and a *Deutsches Staubarchiv* – "German Dust Archive".

<sup>14</sup> Mathematically, wind is not easy to grasp. All the subtleties of vector mathematics are needed to describe its blowing. Sometimes it is easier to use graphic representations rather than arithmetical constructions.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Redmond's translation.



“The path of life of humanity, the development of cultural history, corresponds thoroughly with the course of the day-star. In the east or in the south-east are living the people of the beginning, of birth, in the west or in the north-west the people of the end, of dying, and their dwelling place in relation to the whole gives them their presence, marks them respectively as people of morning, midday, or evening.”<sup>16</sup>

Culture is directed against the blowing of the winds. In Europe, any incident becomes culturally valuable when it can be connected with a struggle against the wind coming from the west.

In Greek mythology, the east wind occupies a curious position. It was thought to be unlucky. Not much is known about *Euros*, the deity who represented the east wind, the Greeks did not like to speak of him. Unlike the other winds, Euros was not associated with a particular season. The wind blowing from the east and what came with it would have destroyed Greek civilization. So it was wise to be silent about Euros.

Benjamin’s “wind blowing from Paradise” would be the wind not of culture, but of barbarism. There have always been strong tendencies to identify progress not with culture, but with barbarism. It can scarcely be denied that the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while carrying on the belief in progress typical of nineteenth-century thinking, was also a century of unprecedented barbarity.

Usually angels are not driven by the wind, like Benjamin’s angel, they *produce* wind. It is probable that before the Angel of the Annunciation spoke to the Virgin Mary, she noticed a gust of air produced by its wings. Angels do not usually speak, they *sing*. It was a privilege that the angel spoke to the Virgin Mary.<sup>17</sup> The Annunciation was not possible with song, as it was no evocation of a past event. Music is full of nostalgia, even if it pretends to be utopian, and nostalgia was out of the question here. Vocal music is never completely utopian. By singing, man confesses his imperfection, his fallibility, his sinfulness. Even the songs of the angels are not utopian, they are a *service*.

In *Shadowtime* Benjamin makes a journey to the underworld like Orpheus. But Benjamin was no singer, he was a philosopher. Unlike his friend Theodor W. Adorno, he did not even draw his theoretical inspiration from music. A man who does not have the power of song also has no power over Hades. Singers may charm Hades, philosophers in this respect are impotent. They live in a certain complicity with death, philosophy is the art of dying, not the art of returning from death.<sup>18</sup> So for Benjamin there was no return.

<sup>16</sup> Reisner, Erwin. *Der Dämon und sein Bild*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 226. Translation by the author.

<sup>17</sup> In Rilke’s poem *Verkündigung* – from the cycle of poems *Das Marienleben* – the angel actually sings: *Dann sang der Engel seine Melodie* (“Then the angel sang his melody”). This is kitsch. When Hindemith set the poem to music, he wisely did not try to produce that angelic melody.

<sup>18</sup> According to Erwin Reisner, East means Life and West means Death. Benjamin did not reach the Western Lands. Brian Ferneyhough is currently living in California, having gone to their outermost border.

In Ferneyhough's opera, Benjamin's visit to Hades occurs in a scene called *Opus contra naturam*. Ferneyhough comments:

*Opus contra naturam* "is a term taken from Renaissance alchemy and signifies one of the essential moments of transition/transformation which typify that arcane discipline".<sup>19</sup>

Utopia is an *opus contra naturam*. Paradise had been innocent nature, utopias are never innocent. For them, nature can at best be an object of deep nostalgia.

Perhaps the true philosophy of modern music was not created by thinkers well versed in that art. Benjamin, a non-musician, may have had deeper musical intuitions than Th. W. Adorno, who speaks so much and so fluently about musical topics. The same holds for Franz Kafka in whose writings music is almost completely absent. But perhaps, as the true music of modernity is in some sense non-music, the true philosophy of music does not use musical terms at all.

To our line of famous men who visited the underworld should be added *Aeneas*. In Virgil's poem, the wandering shadows tell the Founder of Rome:

"Nulli certa domus; lucis habitamus opacis"<sup>20</sup>

"None of us have a fixed abode; in shady groves we dwell"<sup>21</sup>

These shadows seem to be not unlike modern composers, who along with their music most often do not possess a "fixed abode" either, they have to remain in "shady groves" where nobody notices them.

Nomads come and go with the wind. With the German composer *Walter Zimmermann*, nomadism becomes a compositional mindset. Many of the technical procedures in Zimmermann's music may be directly related to the principles of nomadism, if it is possible to speak of "principles" in connection with nomadism at all. But Zimmermann nearly always maintains the notion that music has to be something also fixed, something crystalline. The nomad carries small portable sanctuaries with him on which his religion depends. The composer as a nomad accordingly forms small musical crystals, cathedral architecture is out of reach for him, but something like a tabernacle or a chalice he might successfully produce.

A nomad's empire, though as a rule short-lived, can be very large. If one counts the Mongol Empire of Kubla Khan's time as a whole, it reached from the Pacific to the Black Sea, from Siberia to modern day Afghanistan, in all one fifth of the world's inhabited land area.

<sup>19</sup> Ferneyhough, Brian. *Shadowtime*. Full Score. London etc.: Edition Peters, 2007, p. 244.

<sup>20</sup> Sixth book, 673

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Davidson's translation (New York: D. & G. Bruce, 1811).

In 1279 Kubla Khan also became the Emperor of China which regarded itself with some justification as the earthly Paradise. Thanks to globalization the empire of available music has become very large too. But quite like a nomadic empire, it has no solid foundation (it is founded on the wind of modern media) and there is every reason to believe it will not last long.

Perhaps nomads too are secretly in search of the City, the Holy City, the White City. But this City is not called Utopia. Its name may be *Xanadu*, the summer residence of Kubla Khan<sup>22</sup> evoked in Coleridge's famous poem:

“So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round;  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.”

This city can be recreated using *music loud and long*, but only by him who has *drunk the milk of Paradise*.

In every respect utopia is the anti-paradise. It is reached by leaving the East in a westerly direction.

“The Orient is the country of origin, the occident the country of the future. Everything comes out of the East, but nothing goes there... We are wandering towards the West, it is the future and therefore hidden, an unknown land until the moment, when the wandering center reaches it to dwell there, to get West itself and therewith stop being the center.”<sup>23</sup>

Realized utopias have a strong tendency to become dystopias. In his *Lecture on Nothing* John Cage wrote, in 1950:

“More and more I have the feeling we are getting nowhere.”

Now we have reached nowhere, but it is not the utopia we had been longing for.

“Attained future is future no more, because he who has attained it belongs to it himself, becomes himself future.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kubla Khan was a grandson of the famous Genghis Khan. In German, the Mongol invasions are called *Mongolensturm* = the Mongol tempest”.

<sup>23</sup> Reischer, E., *Der Dämon und sein Bild*, p. 227.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

The term *utopia* derives from the Greek οὐ = “not” and τόπος = “place”. The French anthropologist Marc Augé has developed a theory of *non-lieux*, “non-places”, by which he understands mono-functionally used areas in urban or suburban spaces like shopping malls, motorways, railroad stations, and airports. These areas do not possess an identity or a history, they do not relate to their surroundings. They are characterized by communicative neglect.

Modern music is full of *non-lieux*. As long as music was architectural, it was able to create τόποι, or places. The wind of progress has swept away most of these, what remains is a constant motion that does not lead to anything and purports to be meaningful in itself. In non-places the blowing wind does not meet any resistance. *Non-lieux* are places that cannot be seen, a lot of modern music is music that cannot be heard.<sup>25</sup>

Modern travelers to the netherworld do not always want to return. In Franz Kafka's story *The Hunter Gracchus*, written in 1917, the boat crossing the Styx misses its aim. Gracchus is condemned to remain as a dead person in the realm of the living. His arrival in the town of Riva is announced by a dove which may be an angel or the Holy Spirit himself. The hunter is “always in motion”. For him, death was a happy event. He greeted it with music, he sang. His song was not meant to charm Hades, it was meant to welcome it.

“I pursued, I fell, bled to death in a ravine, died, and this ship should have conveyed me to the next world. I can still remember how gladly I stretched myself out on this pallet for the first time. Never did the mountains listen to such songs from me as these shadowy walls did then.”<sup>26</sup>

Gracchus thinks his situation absolutely hopeless:

“Nobody will read what I say here, no one will come to help me; even if all the people were commanded to help me, every door and window would remain shut, everybody would take to bed and draw the bedclothes over his head, the whole earth would become an inn for the night. And there is sense in that, for nobody knows of me, and if anyone knew he would not know where I could be found, and if he knew where I could be found, he would not know how to deal with me, he would not know how to help me. The thought of helping me is an illness that has to be cured by taking to one's bed.”

The boat Gracchus is travelling in has no rudder and it is “driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death”. During his travels, Gracchus loses his memory.

<sup>25</sup> Even modern paradises and modern hells are non-architectural, in strong contrast to Dante's concept.

<sup>26</sup> The translation is Willa and Edwin Muir's.

In the German original, Kafka uses two different meanings of the verb *gedenken*. When the burgomaster of Riva asks the hunter:

*Und nun gedenken Sie bei uns in Riva zu bleiben?*  
 “And now do you think of staying here in Riva with us?”

the verb means “to intend”. When the hunter answers:

*Ich gedenke nicht.*  
 “I think not.”

it means “to keep in memory”.

New music has made a devil's pact with oblivion. If it has a soul, it is a soul that longs to be annihilated, that longs to be forgotten. Each premiere is a *derniere* and people seem to think this is the way it should be. Modern music is the art of oblivion and, paradoxically, it will be remembered as such, perhaps not through scores and recordings, but as written myth created by philosophers and poets.

In works by modern composers, the wind machine, long in use in opera orchestras,<sup>27</sup> gained symphonic prominence. Manuel Hidalgo's orchestra piece *Harto*, first performed in 1983, confronts noise and sound. It starts with accents on the (tuned) tomtoms which are percussive, but possess a fixed pitch. Then harp and wind machine are added, the principles of noise and sound separate; pitch that is architecture, fixity, theory, and noise that is wind, randomness, sensuality, are disconnected. Hidalgo is a composer who has confessed to utopian longings. But it is not always clear whether for him utopia is gained by architectural strategies or it is brought by the wind.

*Sound art* was born from the spirit of the Aeolian harp. Very few sound installations actually use Aeolian devices. Its preference of mechanical sound production makes it dubious whether sound art should be counted as a discipline of music at all. Many regard it to be a branch of the visual arts. In any case is directed against the Word; it denies the origin of music in the Word in Sacred Scripture Western music had acknowledged for centuries.

Sacred music must not yield to the wind. Liturgy is spiritual architecture. In some of *Arvo Pärt's* works, wind is banned through complete stasis. When music speaks of dogma, no other solution seems possible, dogma cannot be changed by wind. And yet complete stasis is merely death, whereas every Christian dogma speaks of living things.

<sup>27</sup> Well-known operas in which the wind machine is used include Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, and Strauss' *The Egyptian Helena* and *The Woman Without a Shadow*.

The Credo movements of the great 15<sup>th</sup> century composers were never static. In them the words of the creed created a kind of living spiritual architecture. In this respect, the masses of Dufay, Ockeghem, and Obrecht form the epitome of European music. But the ideal of living architecture guided the Viennese classic composers, too: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven did in a Rococo way what the 15<sup>th</sup> century composers had done in late Gothic style.<sup>28</sup>

There are other pieces by Pärt which do not rely on stasis, but on linear movements which follow a strict logic. Such pieces sound as if driven by a mechanical wind. In music, scales lead into oblivion. When they are used by Pärt, his music becomes wind music like any other music by his contemporaries who seemingly inhabit musical worlds so different from his.

In physics, the *Coriolis effect* is defined as a deflection of moving objects when the motion is described relative to a rotating reference frame. In meteorology, the Coriolis force is the reason why, rather than flowing directly from areas of high pressure to low pressure (as they would in a non-rotating system) winds and currents tend to flow to the right of this direction north of the equator and to the left of this direction south of it. In this way, a spiraling movement is created which determines the shape of large cyclones. The Coriolis force is what is lacking in most of Pärt's music. This may well be seen not only as a "physical", but as a spiritual deficiency too.<sup>29</sup>

*Morton Feldman's* works may be described as a series of attempts to resist the wind. Whereas the music of most minimalist composers offers no resistance to the constant blowing of the wind, Feldman's music, even if it comes technically near to minimalist procedures, always contains elements of stasis, of fixity. If it moves, it does so often in a spiraling way. Feldman creates places which even may be places of worship. Some passages in his music have a curious resemblance to the saying of the rosary.

What is structural in *John Cage* are his strategies to make the wind audible. This is even true for silent wind (perhaps we are approaching an age where wind becomes more and more silent). – Cage is Wind, Feldman is Light. One of Feldman's last compositions, *Coptic Light*, offers glimpses of the Everlasting Light.

Modern music is said to be very diverse. The overall picture it offers looks confusing to many. But perhaps composers differ mainly in their treatment of wind. There is no one among them who is not affected very strongly by it, but some try to resist it, others let themselves be carried away by it.

The Austrian composer *Peter Ablinger* has used the term *Rauschen* ("rustling") in the title of several of his works. By *Rauschen* (white noise) Ablinger means

<sup>28</sup> The affinities between late Gothic and Rococo have often been noticed. Mozart has been called by some the last "Gothic" composer.

<sup>29</sup> An awareness of the Coriolis force exists among musicians: A Munich string trio has named itself *Trio Coriolis*.

“totality of sounds – ‘everything always’ in its acoustic representation. Comparable to white light that contains all colours, white noise contains all frequencies, and – poetically speaking – all music.”<sup>30</sup>

Ablinger comments:

“Rauschen therefore is maximum density, maximum information. But it is also the opposite: no information, maximum redundancy. For me it is less than nothing, less than silence. Silence ceased to be silent long ago. It is crowded now. Full of ideas, sentimentality, and reminiscences (of privacy, religion, nature, and within music: John Cage). The idea of Rauschen furthermore is not empty: there is the ocean, the noise of trees in the wind, an old analog radio tuned between two stations.”<sup>31</sup>

*Rauschen* is what the wind does. And it connects the wind with poetry: *Ich habe nichts als Rauschen* (“I possess nothing but rustling”) is a line by the great German poet Rudolf Borchardt.

The organ is the largest wind instrument. It is also the most mechanical of instruments. As such it has been the model for the computer.<sup>32</sup> The whole system of electronic media is a wind system. Modern communication means speaking into the wind. Permanence is what it cannot achieve. The word no longer contradicts, it no longer creates spaces, it no longer carries any responsibility. And it has left music alone.

We are living in the Era of Wind or in the Era of the Holy Spirit, the wind *that bloweth where it listeth*. Starting with Joachim of Fiore, the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic, there have been several attempts to divide history into three fundamental epochs following the order of the persons of the Holy Trinity. The German author *Markus Konradin Leiner*, who used the pseudonym *QRT*, wrote that

“the Third Empire has not come to an end. The Third Empire is, according to Fiorinic mysticism, the Time of the Spirit, and that means precisely the Time of Medial Society. Feudalism was the Empire of the Father (of clerical aristocracy), which ended with the French Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was the flower in the Empire of the Son (the bourgeoisie). Fascism meant the advent of the Third Empire, that of the Spirit (of the Masses), that reaches its apogee with the Electronic Revolution.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> www: <http://ablinger.mur.at/rauschen.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The operation of computers today has created a new kind of click language, very far removed from the African tongue...

<sup>33</sup> QRT. *Schlachtfelder der elektronischen Wüste. Schwarzkopf, Schwarzenegger, Black Magic Johnson*. Berlin: Merve, 1999, p. 118. Translation by the author.

Another tripartite scheme of historical eras would posit an Era of Water, an Era of Fire, and an Era of Wind. Buddhist mythology knows an end of the world by wind. But this is thought to happen relatively seldom, in a cycle of 64 great *kalpas* the world ends 56 times by fire, seven times by water, and only once by wind. For Western modernity with its penchant for thinking itself unique, an end by wind would surely be most fitting, an end by fire, so often suggested during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seems a bit commonplace by comparison.

In Bertolt Brecht's poem *Of poor B. B.* (Michael Hamburger's translation) the fate of modern cities is foreseen quite succinctly:

"Of those cities will remain what passed through them, the wind!  
The house makes glad the eater: he clears it out.  
We know that we're only tenants, provisional ones  
And after us there will come: nothing worth talking about."

Also of the city of Utopia nothing will remain, only the wind.

**Albert Breier** (1961) is composer, pianist, writer. Strongly influenced by the music of Morton Feldman and by classical Chinese painting. As a writer, touches subjects as diverse as mathematics and German 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry. Lives currently in Berlin and Dresden.