

Joseph Petrič:

The Holistic Accordion, a manifesto

fresh perspectives on an interpretive art

Texte zur Geschichte und Gegenwart des Akkordeons

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PART ONE: The Very Idea

In 1967 CBC Radio broadcast a program entitled *The Idea of North*. While its author, Glenn Gould was most famous as a concert pianist he was also a composer, writer, and philosopher, often visiting media guru and philosopher Marshall McLuhan in his University of Toronto office on St. Joseph Street for philosophical discussions. *The Idea of North* was a signal moment for Gould as he assumed the role of radio producer and writer for the first time. It was a program that explored the relationship to and experiences of the vast Canadian Arctic from the perspective of Canadians and foreigners. As a radio narrative *cum* information environment, it redefined the listener's expectations with the use of multiple triggers: simultaneity of conversations, imagery and music. It re-defined musical, contrapuntal, broadcast, production and radiophile values with such imagination that it left listeners astonished and critics in controversy.

Just as Gould's CBC broadcast was an inversion of the standard radio-
phonic presentations of the day, the idea of a holistic accordion as a depth-interpretive medium, as put forward in this essay, is one artist's deconstructionist response to the positivist accordion narrative of the last 50 years.

The accordion's heritage and richly diverse artistic value were both inbuilt from the start and long in the making – made possible through the work of numerous artists and their compulsive sense of “seeking” over long periods of time.

It began with the open art of concert accordion pioneer and virtuoso Giovanni Gagliardi (1882-1964), a shining example of what Umberto Eco would, in 1962, call *opera aperta*. Gagliardi was a visionary, as witnessed by his bespoke Savoïa instrument of 1905; his performances in Italy, France and Germany; his design patent of the ideal concert accordion registered with the French patent office in 1911; and the publication of his bilingual treatise *Le Pétit Manuel de L'Accordéoniste*, Paris in the same year.

technocratic accordion world of today, with its proxy values and premiere product deliverables.

Trajectories

It is similarly reassuring to contemplate the idea of accordion in a historical framework, if one views its history as a dynamic of historic oscillations or, perhaps more usefully, as trajectories or waves of various duration that overlap and coexist as they gather and regather. Speaking generally, one can identify four such waves or trajectories.

First is that of the emergent accordion, 1890-1950, from pinnacle through decline to a deserved reclamation now well underway. Then comes the positivist accordion of high modernism, 1960-95 with its erasures and decontaminations. Parallel to that we see the emergence of the postmodern accordion 1980-2000 of inclusivity and deconstructions; then a tightly circumscribed technocratic accordion, a child of its positivist institutional precursor, 2000 to the present. All of these contribute, positively or negatively, to the *new conversations* of this narrative in a post-colonial holistic accordion art, 1990 to the present.

These somewhat arbitrary date ranges are indicative of the oscillating, intersecting and at times necessarily conflicting tensions as we weave the threads of a new “idea of accordion.”

Take the reductivist accordion (1985 to the present) as an example: the idea of holding premiere culture deliverables up as the vaunted compositional and cultural standard. Accordion ideology, in a bizarre ironic inversion, created a second accordion ghetto, in opposition to the one to which they sought to confine the pretextual, “contaminated” accordion of 1890-1960.

While trying to expunge what it considered to be of “lesser artistic value,” this “premiere deliverables” culture only isolated itself – in a “first is best” milieu in which the interpretive art had to meet the demands of concert hall venues with 300 years of “classical” precedents and expectations. This linear approach denies to the accordion the value and satisfactions of an interpretive art, a literacy

PART TWO: Re-Emergence Discovery

Orthodoxies emerge as ideas, then harden into political realities, with their silos structured in ways that require careful navigation as one's own elemental artistic nature surfaces. In an orthodox environment, the development of an individual interpretive art can only be sustained by a persistent personal commitment to artistic interrogation – the refusal to accede to creating copies of things – by maintaining attention to detail and by remaining open to complementary approaches in the process of discovery. All easier said than done, of course, unless the student is granted the right to respectful and unfettered seeking, nurtured with integrity by an artistic guardianship that poses more questions than the answers it has stockpiled. In such a nurturing environment, the reductivist demand for premiere deliverables will evaporate, leaving instead an insistent and inventive hunger, beyond orthodoxy, to seek one's own artistic truths.

This is not a new idea: Gotthold Lessing (1729-81) suggests that the value of a man is not determined by his possession (supposed or real) of truth, but rather by “the sincere exertion to *get to the truth* ... by pursuit of Truth by which he extends his powers ... and where his ever-growing perfectibility is to be found”; inversely, David Hume (1711-76) offers this caveat “. But such is the nature of the human mind, that it always lays hold on every mind that approaches it.”

Certainty, or the illusion of it, makes one passive and dependent on faith. As Christopher Hitchens suggests: “To choose dogma and faith over doubt, experiment and empirical evidence is to reach mindlessly for the Kool-Aid.” The capacity for self-reflexivity is therefore essential for the accordionist accepting personal accountability for the navigational choices they make in pursuing their own art – navigational choices that will vary in impetus depending on whether one's starting point in relation to orthodoxy is that of being locked into it, or looking in from the margins.

not approached their collaboration in this spirit), both may experience a silencing instead, at the hands of a public audience denied the chemistry of the concrete experience, and the satisfactions of completing the triangle.

Confronting the codes

Let us play a thoughtgame (reductivist sceptics and others alike). Imagine for a moment that the idea of an interpretive open art is the *de facto* cornerstone of artistic praxis: a daily process wherein the interpretive act releases poetry, references, previously unimagined tracings of patterns in the art. To arrive at this point, we have had to create an accordion art without the inherited listening codes imposed by the cult of the literal soloist hero. We are, all of us, now first and foremost *interpreters* in an art whose contemporary conceptual dimensions are of epistemological importance.

Embodied interpretive experience has in turn fuelled the impulse to expand the artistic equity of the accordion as a depth medium (not just a generator of sound and extended performance techniques) – a cumulative multi-dimensional art that includes commissioning, palimpsest, deconstruction, re-creation, and interpretation. That combination is now viewed by many instrumentalists in a concert culture as an artistic imperative. The preparation of such scores, ('readings' if you will,) consists of conceptual speculation in preparation for interpretive presentation. It is deeply contextual. (End of thoughtgame.)

So how do we get there? Do we have any notion of the conceptual tools, let alone a common language, that will help us move freely within this new musical domain? This is where the notion of the music archive as a store house of individual and cumulative memories kicks in – no before, no after, totally open, totally present, non-binary, without judgment, awaiting interpretation in its deepest empirical sense. With fresh wind in its sails, the holistic accordion takes on a new artistic role, abandoning safe harbour for open waters and clear

The score as notepad

Where the reductionist considers the score as something cast in stone rather than a roadmap with flexible departure, entry and exploration points, Berio viewed the score as a notepad: a logbook wherein one records a creative process; a place where the composer can wander through the episodes, visiting some, ignoring others, and inventing order, succession, weight, importance or neutrality at will.

By way of analogy, the interpreter can approach rehearsal, practice and performance in the same manner – with vulnerability, openness to random procedure, intuitive alignment of artistic priorities and suggestions, and with a sense of what the accordion medium uniquely supplies: an analogic sense of functions where the instrument is its own notebook, a collection of ideas, episodes, invented order, shapes and colours. “Re-hear-sing” in this way can be shaped and aligned in a multitude of ways, each detailed interrogation yielding significant factors and ultimately accounting for the completeness, meaningful shape and even dramatic presentation of a musical work.

In contrast to a self-validating and reductively positivist accordion art, a dynamic art such as this is hugely challenging because of the enormous musical diversity and pluralism around us. We are in vast uncharted space, parameters within which Soviet and positivist ideals are simply unable to work. Soviet bayanists were politically forbidden to engage with diversity and pluralism; reductive positivists choose not to do so.

The orthodox accordion with its self-validating certainties and authoritative energies has been unable to come to such an artistic perspective. In fact, while the entry of the accordion into the international academic realm was indeed a signal moment in the development and recognition of the art, the longer the academic accordion walked on that track the less sensitivity it had to the essential art of the *opera aperta*. Eco’s observation is to the point: “A piece of music gains aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. These give it a wealth of resonances and imparts its original essence.” The reductionist accordion

The richly detailed holographic geography of this moment, makes it a socio-artistic sweet spot in time for the emergence of a holistic accordion culture; one can comfortably let go of reductivist fixations, beyond schisms, and turn to the accordion with full attention to its appearance and essence, expression and idea, compulsions and relationships, where imagination is more important than knowledge, and a return to intuition is welcomed as a sacred gift.

Listening

For accordionist-interpreters with some curiosity, the polyamorous and playful creativity of the emergent holistic accordion now offers an enigmatic, magical and miraculous moment if we can achieve a heightened awareness of our own creative listening agency. This is because listening to music is mobile, ambiguous and irreversible. How to do so? Once again it is the questions that are the important thing. Why do we listen? How do we listen? Do we *really* listen? The musical art, like theatre or dance, must be capable of nurturing the ability to break “out of itself,” to speak to a world outside of itself (as with all feelings and ideas.) The accordionist-interpreter must be able to hear it happening from within the reality within which it is taking shape.

This is no more complicated than it sounds. As a composer colleague, David Mott, once said to me: “There are only 12 notes, and while the permutations of this set of sounds in combination are limitless, they are, for all intents and purposes, either drawing away from a centre (of tension), or drawing nearer to another.”

In this setting the compositional techniques and the instrumental possibilities of instruments are topographical; add a dose of self-awareness in the moment and the potential for an embodied artistic dialogue is there. That dialogue can then assume narrow mechanistic overtones of stasis, intolerance and rigidity (preventing the possibility of any entry point for *exotikos* by its adherence to the text). Or it can embrace the encounter, the senses, the intellect, riding the wave of all the trajectories that formed it, the roads it may have taken, and the multiple textual suggestions that spring by association, from the thing,

Afterword

In writing this afterword, I was reminded of an anecdote from my first, much lengthier book. There I described my performance at the Picton Music Festival near Toronto that included a program for people with all levels of musical knowledge keen to learn more about the accordion. I played Baroque Suites, contemporary works, works by Pietro Deiro and Domenico Scarlatti.

After the performance, a retired Italian-Canadian audience member approached me and shared: “My father played the mandolin, my uncle the accordion,” she said. “There was always music in our kitchen on the weekends ... When you started to play Deiro’s *Trieste Overture* I heard Verdi, I heard the Italian national anthem, I heard America, I felt Italy and my own Canadian-Italian childhood. I was flooded with memories that have been stored in a lifetime of experience.”

This brief conversation reaffirmed for me three fundamental characteristics of an interpretive accordion art: that audiences have an innate competency; that music is transformative; and that musical inclusivity in a contemporary world can provide subtle, deep, even gentle satisfaction. They are also, however, as I noted then, aspects of the ineffable which a positivist accordion ideology denies and might well have difficulty in understanding.

That first book, *The Concert Accordion – Contemporary Perspectives* (2017) was a comprehensive work, casting its gaze across a 150-year historical landscape validating a fully contextualized future accordion art based on the ineffable – one that remains too-little-known to accordionists to this day.

Among those that *did* discover the book, it was well received. One reviewer’s comment in particular stayed with me – something that reassured me during the course of writing this terse *Manifesto* as something infusive for the art beyond the decades long re-hash of accordion denigration, identity politics and colonization.

The reviewer was Jonathan Goldman – himself an active musician, pianist, accordionist, and bandoneonist, an excellent interpreter of