



## Poetry and music, between José Angel Valente and Mauricio Sotelo

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### Abstract:

*Jose Angel Valente's work provides an essential reference to comprehend the actual literary fact in Spain. Not only his poetry and essays, but also his thought and his æsthetic definition, occupy a very relevant place, in a wider artistic sense. As a result of a large and close relationship -in a musical and personal field- this poet gets also an important presence in the composition of Mauricio Sotelo. In this short text, I seek to overview the way in which the verse of Jose Angel Valente and his poetic and æsthetic notions are revealed in Mauricio Sotelo's compositions. This will lead us to identify also the most important features -like a deep convergence of interdisciplinary references- that define Sotelo's music.*

**Key words:** Contemporary poetry and music, José Ángel Valente, Mauricio Sotelo, Poesis, aesthetics

There are many ways and very different analytical approaches that can address the relationship between poetic and music production. From semiologic to phonetic-structural studies or those proposals born out of historical methodology, there is a wide spectrum of options, all of these enriching the hermeneutic possibilities of an art, literary or musical work.

Here I propose to analyse the poetic link which exists between Jose Angel Valente's production and Mauricio Sotelo's music, from the given point that they share a conceptual background.

As the composer asserts:

The year 1989 is marked in the grooves of my memory (...) by reading the poetry of José Angel Valente, who was gradually emerging to me as a quite musical space (Sotelo 2003, 9).

A little bit later there is the description of the meeting: The first contact took place in 1993 and it was through telephone: very first minutes after a lengthy moment of just two words, Valente, enthusiastic, stated that finally a musician perceived a certain sound vibration in his poetry. Then we spoke about the deeply musical nature of his poetry, about listening, memory and Giordano Bruno. (...) It was the beginning of the adventure to our *Theatre of Memory*, and, I must say here, of a beautiful friendship (Sotelo 2003, 10).

This contact became closer, in a personal and professional way, and it appears as unavoidable in Sotelo's work -mainly between 1994 and 2000-; thus, we can carry out an analysis not only under a comparative methodology but also in that of a *poiesis* field, a conceptual stage shared by both artists.

## Construction of the silence

### *Palabra*

*A María Zambrano*

Palabra  
hecha de nada.

Rama  
en el aire vacío.

Ala sin pájaro.

Vuelo sin ala.

Órbita  
de qué centro desnudo  
de toda imagen.

Luz,  
donde aún no forma  
su innumerable rostro lo visible.

José Ángel Valente's poetry describes a profound attitude in order to get an æsthetic essence, latent since the beginning of his creation -as can be already seen in the verses of Serán ceniza...: 'Cruzo un desierto y su secreta / desolación sin nombre' (in Sánchez Robayna 2001, 23)<sup>1</sup> -; this process is intensified from his *Material memoria* (1977-1978)<sup>2</sup> -'a poetic *habitat* of nocturnal luminosity'<sup>3</sup> - a book of poems in which we can find Palabra, devoted to the philosopher María Zambrano (1904-1991). The semantic reduction of this 'Word / made of nothing' stands for the presence, in the poet's thought, of a sort of 'negative spirit, (...) *negative* in its most positive sense, since this allows the recovery of deeper cultural and literary values' (Mayhew 2007, 132). As Valente asserts on his own texts:

Escribir es como la segregación de las resinas; no es un acto, sino lenta formación natural. Musgo, humedad, arcillas, limo, fenómenos de fondo, y no de sueño o de los sueños, sino de los barro oscuros donde las figuras de los sueños fermentan. Escribir no es hacer, sino aposentarse, estar<sup>4</sup>

And also,  
La escritura es lo que queda en las arenas, húmedas, fulgurantes todavía, después de la retirada del mar. Resto, residuo. Ejercicio primordial de no existencia, de autoextinción (in Mayhew 2007, 152).

This process of 'self-extinction', falling into our own depths, as it is finally claimed by Valente, finds embodiment in silence: actually, the composition of *silence* should be the first and last aim of the lyric creation: 'Poética: arte de la

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<sup>1</sup> "A modo de esperanza" (1953-1954), Madrid, Rialp, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> As it is said by Robayna in the preface of *El Fulgor* 2001, 5-19, page 11. *Material memoria* was published at first time in Barcelona by La Gaya Ciencia in 1979.

<sup>3</sup> As asserts Juan Goytisolo in a fragment included in the preface of *El Fulgor*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> In *Mandorla*, published at first by Cátedra in Madrid in 1982 and looked up by the author in *El Fulgor*, 250.

composición del silencio. Un poema no existe si no se oye, antes que su palabra, su silencio.<sup>5</sup>

This falling into the inner ground of both poet and reader, that can be possible only in the absence of word or sound, is also a continuous wish to descend to the center of a symbolic knowledge circle:

*Tamquam centrum circuli*  
La memoria nos abre luminosos  
corredores de sombra.

Bajamos lentos por su lenta luz  
hasta la entraña de la noche.

El rayo de tiniebla.

Descendí hasta su centro,  
puse mi planta en un lugar en donde  
penetrar no se puede  
si se quiere el retorno.

Se oye tan sólo una infinita escucha.

Bajé de mi mismo  
hasta tu centro, dios, hasta tu rostro  
que nadie puede ver y sólo  
en esta cegadora, en esta oscura  
explosión de la luz se manifiesta<sup>6</sup>.

We must move back in time a few years, to the end of seventies, when Valente completes his *Tres lecciones de Tinieblas*<sup>7</sup>, written between 1979 and 1980, a crucial text to Sotelo's musical inspiration, and *Material Memoria*, a poem collection noted earlier and seen as a hinge between two different periods in the poet's catalogue.

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<sup>5</sup> Fragment of the text titled "Ut picture", as a part of *Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tàpies*, included also in *Material memoria*. This sentence is usually mentioned by Sotelo himself related to Valente's thought.

<sup>6</sup> Published in *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Published at first in Barcelona by La Gaya Ciencia in 1980 and included in the anthology cited above, *El Fulgor*.

*Tres lecciones de Tinieblas* has an obvious musical origin: the *Leçons de Ténèbres*, a genre correlated to sacred music in the mid-seventeenth century, when it achieves some of its paradigmatic samples<sup>8</sup>. The rhetoric feature of this genre, thoroughly known by Valente, is used however as a gradual process of stillness, already noted, a fall to the 'deep of breathing': 'el eje de las letras (...) es, en efecto, el que hace oír el movimiento primario, el movimiento que no cesa de comenzar. (...) Canto de germinación y del origen o de la vida como inminencia y proximidad' (in Sánchez Robayna 2001, 224) as explains the poet himself in his self-analysis of the Lessons.

At the end of the seventies too, Luigi Nono (1924-1990), a deciding voice in contemporary musical discourse writes his string quartet *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima* (1979-1980), seen also as a cardinal point of departure to the search of a re-definition of listening and space concepts, in its physical and perceptive means and regarding both composer and listener. This string quartet, like *Das atmende Klarsein, Fragmente* (1983), *A Pierre, Dell'azzurro silenzio, inquietum* (1985) and, in a very relevant way, his 'tragedia dell'ascolto', *Prometeo* (1981-1985) and *Caminantes...Ayacucho* (1987) too, lay down a different manner of seeing the creation and performing in music: the sound becomes an event with a main resonance in the listener's inner field, some that shows an æsthetic change even from the music writing moment; this must be taken also as a essential feature in Sotelo's musical thought because of his disciple's relationship with the Italian composer during the last two years of his life.

In order to understand this æsthetic stance defined by Nono, we may refer to the use of Friedrich Hölderlin's single lines in *Fragmente-Stille* score; these verses, far from being recited, which in fact should be avoided, must to be sung 'internamente nella loro autonomia [of the performers] nell'autonomia dei suoni tesi a un 'armonia delicata della vita

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<sup>8</sup> As we can see in the *Leçons de Ténèbres* (1670-1692) by Marc-Antoine Charpentier or François Couperin (1714), composers cited actually by Valente himself.

interiore”<sup>9</sup>. Hölderlin's texts have to reach a sort of an echo in the inner boundary of the performer during playing the piece, in a relative way, for instance, to the internal poetic resonance in Valente's thought.

On the other hand, silence is also crucial in the formal structure of Nono's quartet: the radical absence of sound is understood as an apollonian space of self-thinking for the listener and it should be assumed to be ‘spazi sognanti’, ‘stasi improvvisate’, ‘pensieri indicibili’, ‘respiri tranquilli’ by performer: without any kind of sound, just the performing gesture gets here a decisive poetic and conceptual purpose.

The poetic conception in Valente's *Lessons*, on the one hand, and the æsthetic approach in Nono's latest works, among others, are the columns of Sotelo's thought even since the mid-nineties, when he writes *Memoriæ. Escritura interna sobre un espacio poético de José Ángel Valente*, for cello and double bass, commissioned by the Spanish Center for Contemporary Music of Contemporary Music and premiered during the International Contemporary Music Festival of Alicante in September 1994.

We could distinguish three different sections in this piece, with a ceaseless play between the stillness of hanged chords and the vigorous drive of *glissandi*, exceptionally fast *glissandi*, if we bear in mind the kind of instruments for which it is written. Likewise, *Memoriæ* stays always on the edge of sound itself through a continuous work with overtones, something that takes the piece far from the conventional hearing: we can see here a sort of a journey to the musical root of every tone to show us its physical constitution; a travel to the heart of the note in searching of quietness and, maybe, of a certain kind of musical ideality ‘hidden behind sounds or even between them’, as Merleau-Ponty asserts.

Hence, the most interesting moment in this piece is the measure 26, when the discourse of cello and double bass is suddenly cut by a deep silence, but with ‘arc fermo sulle corde’; both players must hold in ‘assoluto silenzio’ - ‘absolute silence’. Here, the musical gesture acquires even greater significance in

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<sup>9</sup> Fragment of the performing indications of *Fragmente-Stille* score. The last quotation is a fragment of personal letters by Hölderlin to Susette Gontard at the end of 1799.

the absence of sound, in a sort of no-sound in which hearing stops to see itself in the inner field of listener, to go to the 'seed of listening', as Valente himself asserts in his *Lessons* alluded before.

Sotelo draws up in *Memoriæ* a sort of 'hidden quote', an intertextual reference taken to a wider conceptual mean, not obvious, to a 'poetic habitat' shared by both artists; this is maybe one of the most interesting ways of intertextuality because it means a completely common thought between artists of different arts.

Here we stay, for now, at the edge of a great way to analyze this interdisciplinary link, with the open mind 'to the possible and the impossible'.

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