

Profoundly Calm

Edgardo Rudnitzky
Berlin, on November 16th, 2019

The first time I came across Claude Debussy's *La Cathédrale engloutie* [The Submerged Cathedral] was when I was six. My parents had sent me to learn how to draw with a teacher in the neighbourhood where we were living in Buenos Aires, and at the same time as giving drawing classes, the teacher also taught piano. Those Saturday mornings were filled with the *Alla turca* rondo from Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11, pounded out over and over by the teacher himself or one of his pupils. But one day, as we were drawing, the teacher played something, albeit with difficulty, that captivated me in spite of, or perhaps because of, the halts, advances, returns and repetitions. I asked what it was and he told me it was by a Frenchman, a prelude.

It wasn't till many years later that I heard it again and identified it. The intriguing thing about this story is that I never forgot that first version, disjointed, tuneless, doubtful in every respect but attractive in my recollection.

When I began to explore Jorge Macchi's project for *The Submerged Cathedral* exhibition, I decided to listen to various recordings of the prelude, one after the other, including Claude Debussy's version recorded on piano rolls, while I perused Jorge's sketches and writings. Every version of the prelude, including Jorge's, is remarkably different to the others.

Edgardo Rudnitzky: The world of music is part of your imaginary and is to varying degrees reflected in much of your work. In this instance, and as you yourself have said, you have long been fascinated by Claude Debussy's prelude *La Cathédrale engloutie* and the legend of the city of Ys which inspired it.

Without question, your work most akin to *La Cathédrale engloutie* is *Prelude* (2014), a work closely connected with the legend of Ys, but I believe that the installation in Lausanne is a version, a possible interpretation, of the prelude. How do you see it?

Jorge Macchi: I agree with your perception. *Prelude* was a replica of the spire of Bariloche Cathedral emerging from the lake 150 metres from the original cathedral. As this was the highest building in the city, the sculpture was for me the first sign of the emergence of a second city, one identical to and barely out of step with the original. The fact that the repeated element is a cathedral creates a direct link with the story that provided the inspiration for the prelude. And obviously the presence of the water as well, though in this instance it is not the sea that swallows up or exposes the building but a calmer mountain lake. I think this is why I decided against Claude Debussy's title for his prelude and only kept the name of the musical form. Besides this, there is to my mind a direct connection between the installation and one of the instructions that appear in the score, 'Comme un écho de la phrase entendue précédemment' [Like an echo of the phrase heard before], to explain why the chords of the main theme that are played *fortissimo* at the beginning of the prelude are repeated *pianissimo* at the end. At this point, I go from illustrating the legend to using a musical device. I believe this is what I'm trying to develop in Lausanne: an installation, or a series of interventions in the room, that reproduces musical techniques in the space. It is interesting to note that whereas I approach these strategies from the visual perspective, Claude Debussy's instructions attempt to translate visual references into music, 'Sortant de la brume'

[Emerging from the mist], for example, which gives the pianist considerable freedom in their interpretation. Perhaps that's why the versions you listened to differ so much.

E. R.: I understand what you're saying about the connection between the instructions in the score and each of the works or interventions that make up the exhibition, but I have my doubts concerning these instructions from a purely musical perspective: they are deliberately narrative and ambiguous and do not have a precise referent in the musical code.

Even so, the musicality of the exhibition is structural, there is a handling of time and of articulation characteristic of musical composition and unusual in works not based on time. Just as the prelude *La Cathédrale engloutie* is organised into 'motifs' that are presented, repeated or reworked and which disappear, the works/motifs in the exhibition are articulated temporally and throughout the space/score with no regard for the absence of real time as a premise. And so the spirit of the prelude reappears, giving you a certain freedom as you make your way through it.

J. M.: What happens is that in sharing the space, the installations make the themes overlap. At no point are the themes perceived as isolated or consecutive, as is the case in the prelude. Here, the itinerary through the room, which is in some way the temporal dimension of the music, establishes new forms of overlapping or transparency between these themes. As if the 'Profondément calme' had to be perceived through a 'Comme un écho...' or a 'Sortant de la brume'. There is, however, a unifying element that runs throughout the installation and that is the waterline marked on the walls. Everything is directly related to that line: it determines the floatation of the hose that crosses the space like an undulating line; it establishes the limit so that the optical effect of refraction becomes evident; it submerges the bells; it establishes an axis so that the plastic bottles can produce their echo; and it even invades the quadrant of a wall clock. The installation *Refracción* [*Refraction*], dating from 2012, is a direct precursor of the piece in Lausanne. That installation consisted of 25 iron girders and pipes supported by the walls of a room that were painted up to a height of 160 cm in a pale colour very similar to the white of the part above. All the girders appeared bent at this same height, as if altered by the optical effect of refraction, and their lower part looked to have rusted. It wasn't important to me to create the illusion that the room was flooded but to present the indelible consequences of a silent catastrophe: the mark on the wall, the rust on the lower part of the girders, and the bending of the refraction, now permanent. Something similar occurs in Lausanne: the water has gone and the spectator walks amid objects permanently altered by the invasion of water that supposedly happened at some point in the past.

E. R.: I have seen many of your exhibitions in the last 20 years and we have talked at length about them. To my mind, there's a different thinking behind this one. It's the first in which I have seen your connection with music captured internally, as a composer, articulating and developing these motifs/pieces in a work/exhibition entitled *The Submerged Cathedral*. How did this exhibition come into being?

J. M.: As in almost all my previous works, this installation grew out of the intersection between the characteristics of the space, images I have kept and a large measure of chance. Firstly, there's Claude Debussy's prelude, which has been on my mind ever since I heard it 30 years ago for the first time, performed by Joaquín Achúcarro on a record with sleeve notes that I read, telling the story of the submerged city of Ys. And

there are also my vain attempts to perform it and my consequent discovery of the score and the composer's strange instructions in it.

In addition, I have for years hung onto a series of photographs of a pool in which a blue hose forms a marvellous drawing inside the mass of water. The appeal is totally formal, though there is a paralysation or a suspension in the image that seems to contend with the supposed fluidity of the water. The element of chance comes from the window consisting of seven glazed panels at the end of the project space of the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts. While I was looking for information about Lausanne, I visited the cathedral's website and I was impressed by the amount of information available about its seven bells, all from very different periods. It wasn't difficult to draw a connection between the space and a pool, and between the seven windows and the seven bells of the cathedral and the chords in the prelude. According to the Celtic legend that provided the inspiration for the piece of music, the sea swallowed up the city and all that is left of it is a memory in sound. It is said that on calm days you can still hear the cathedral bells and the monks chanting at the bottom of the sea. Broadly speaking, that is how the installation came into being. I believe there is a dialogue between a domestic and familiar situation associated with the pool and an immense, mysterious and awe-inspiring situation associated with the depths of the sea. And the water establishing a bridge between them.

E. R.: 'And the water establishing a bridge between them.' That is the opposite logic of building bridges to cross water.

J. M.: Yes, you're right. [Laughs.] I didn't think of that when I said it. It seems to be the logic of some of my watercolours.

E. R.: So, the water forges a union between seemingly unconnected situations, but also the sound of the bells inexorably 'bathes' the room by being activated by a spectator. The installation is contained by these two ghostly presences, the sound of invisible bells and non-existent water that leaves visible marks.

Problems arise in every exhibition that includes works that feature sound. Sound alters the perception of other works; it invades and overlays the sound of other pieces in a manner that is undesirable. That's when you get walls, headphones and a request for spectators to be tolerant or to rise above it. In this case, the sound of the seven bells integrates with the other works in an organic and necessary way. The randomness of the presence or absence of the sound of the bells articulates the recording of time and alters the perception of the space.

Once again, then, sound is the material of your work with the ringing of the bells and with the imaginary suggested by a prelude for piano, perhaps your favourite instrument and one you have to a degree set aside. Why the sound? Why the music?

J. M.: There's a historical reason and a poetic reason for the presence of music in many of my works and of course in the works we did together. My relationship with the piano was always that of a spurned lover. The instrument never yielded effortlessly to me. I never found reading music or improvisation easy. It was so difficult for me to read scores that my only solution was to learn pieces off by heart and to repeat them ad nauseam to ensure I would be able to continue playing them. There were times when my repertoire consisted of ten or 15 pieces that I had to return to day after day, partly for the pleasure of playing them but also because I was afraid I would forget them. Now,

after so many years of not playing, I am paralysed before the keyboard, as if the piano were simply a strange item of furniture for looking at your hands with. In spite of this, I think that something of those musical years still remains in the way I work as a visual artist.

Moreover, my work in the theatre between 1999 and 2005 ended up amalgamating the two expressions. The theatre posits a horizontal relationship between the script, the stage, the performance and the sound – that is to say, none of them is dependent on the others, they are all necessary and if one were missing, it would leave a sense of imbalance. This necessary and specific relationship lies at the basis of the works we did together. In the installations as well as in the videos, the performances and even in the plays, we created structures in which the image and the sound cannot exist independently.

And lastly in this explanation of the presence of music in my works, I would like to make mention of the fact that music defies translation. This is undoubtedly arguable, but I believe that the image lends itself to being reduced to a text more readily than music does. They both demand the experience of being viewed or listened to, but in the case of music an attempt to encompass it in words is a fruitless and pointless task, whereas there is a much more fluid relationship between the text and the image. Music, then, always adds an ungraspable and irreducible dimension. In any event, the score for *La Cathédrale engloutie* and Claude Debussy's instructions are a clear example of this.

E. R.: 'Je conçois une forme dramatique autre: la musique y commence là où la parole est impuissante à exprimer; la musique est faite pour l'inexprimable' [I envisage a different dramatic form: music begins at the point where the word becomes powerless to express; music is made for the inexpressible]. Claude Debussy wrote this in 1889. Your exhibition *The Submerged Cathedral* is in keeping with this, an ineffable act in which the ephemeral and the permanent meet and crystallise.

Schmidlin Laurence 16/1/2020 15:17

Eliminado: inexpressible