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### **Weber on music: Approaching music as a dynamic domain of action and experience**

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## **Weber on music: Approaching music as a dynamic domain of action and experience**

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### **Abstract**

Max Weber's music writings (including his unfinished Music Study) have always mesmerised readers but their importance for analysing music as a cultural domain has only started to be acknowledged. This paper focuses on Weber's approach to the inner 'developmental momentum' of the music domain through his study of the particular tension that pervaded Western harmonic music. By showing how composers, performers, instrument manufacturers, art recipients and the instruments themselves had to grapple with such tension, Weber was able to give an account of the inward connection to an art sphere and its structuring effects, whilst also bringing social, economic and technological factors to bear. In the current debate on the desirable ways for a renewed sociology of culture, Weber's music writings present us with a path at once precarious and bold, an account of inner connections and outer relations, which, against Weber himself, also provides bases for aesthetic judgment.

### **Keywords:**

Music, Weber, rationalisation, music instruments, composer

## Weber on music: Approaching music as a dynamic domain of action and experience

### Introduction

All analysis of cultural domains, fields or worlds would appear to steer precariously between a purely internal – perhaps self-referential – reading of works and crude sociological determinism. There has been no lack of awareness of the perils of such endeavour, from the debates in the first meeting of the German Sociological Society in 1910 (see in particular Weber 2005) to recent critical engagement with Bourdieu's approach to the artistic field (e.g. see the special issue of *Cultural Sociology* of March 2011 edited by M. Santoro). Bourdieu himself professed equal suspicion of the figure of the authentic creator, the free subject coining his own works, and of the 'sociologism' of those explaining works through social determinations, thus seemingly echoing Max Weber's attack on the Romantic vision of the free and creative personality (Valdecantos 1990) as well as his lifetime struggle against all 'isms' and the undue intellectual relaxation which they allow.

But how can such caution avoid remaining at a critical end and accompany a bold exploration of the inner dynamic of – and connection to – domains of human action, rather than 'collude' in 'neutralising' its subject matter (Adorno 1999: 4)? This was precisely the question that Max Weber thought the social and cultural sciences had to ask for each specific domain of human action and experience, on the premise of their "'immanent" dignity' (Weber 1988: 507) and of the impossibility of any easy determination of who is favoured by this or that organisation of a cultural or life domain (*ibid*: 517). An empirical social science seeking to provide an understanding of domains of life which are also spheres of value should thus find ways of researching their inner dynamics, alongside the external factors influencing these, in order to avoid the trap of grand theories about 'adaptation', 'progress', or indeed 'class' which are merely comforting the researcher in his or her prejudices (1924: 452, 2005: 28).

The most systematic, though unfinished, such empirical-historical study of a modern domain of life and its dynamic was carried out by Weber for music, and more particularly through his investigation of the emergence, logic and organisation of the Western harmonic system. Unfortunately there has so far been little engagement in the English-speaking world with the Music Study (hereafter MS),<sup>1</sup> let alone with its general gesture and the vision it conveys for a sociology of the arts and other 'domains of culture'. The work of Christoph Braun (1992, 1994) and the edition of MS by Braun together with Ludwig Finscher for the complete edition of Max Weber's work (*Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* – hereafter MWGA) (2004) have started to alter this state of affair – certainly in the German speaking world. A highly able French translation (Weber 1998) and a lively stream of research on musical practices (e.g. see Pedler 2010) have also restored MS to the place it should have in francophone countries. This paper aims at contributing to broadening the interest for MS in the English-speaking world, and at conveying at least some of the boldness of its proposal for cultural sociology.

I attempt to do this by first bringing out the building blocks of Weber's approach, namely his focus on the dynamics shaping the means and matter of creation – especially the organisation of the 'sound material' (2004: 146; 1921: 3)<sup>2</sup> – rather than directly addressing creative subjectivities, or merely focusing on the social conditions of creation (section 1); on the interplay between such inner dynamic and its economic, social, technological determinants; as well as on carriers (theorists, composers, instrument manufacturers, practitioners and listeners) acting as nodes of connection between art domains and their external conditions (section 2). But I also aim at showing, to come back to the beginning of this introduction, how such vision of the cultural domains allowed for analyses of creation, in particular through what could be called the artistic 'stance' (Frade 2013) and the inward connection to music,

including that of the listener. I thus hope to make clear, in this article, not only the very sociological character of Weber's 'historical study' but also the possibility offered by these writings, perhaps in spite of Weber himself, for valuations of musical works, based on the understanding of the problems and tensions facing composers in the musical situation.

## 1. The dynamic of music as domain of culture<sup>3</sup>

In the 'Intermediate Reflection' of the *Economic Ethics of World Religions* (hereafter IR), whose first draft he wrote in 1913, shortly after his first contribution to a 'history of music', Weber approached the constitution of relatively autonomous spheres through an ideal-typical theoretical construct of the tensions and conflicts between the religious and the worldly spheres. 'Spheres' of human action and experience are there elaborated as 'orders of life' (*Lebensordnungen*). The concept of order, a central concept for Weber, but one of 'very variable extension' and scope (Grossein 2005: 698), is to be understood in connection with Weber's axiomatic positing of consistency (or 'the rational') as a 'force' everywhere driving human beings (whatever the extreme limitations of its power in practice): the life orders then designate the spheres of human life and action as the 'consistent' wholes they would be if they were constructed by drawing the ultimate implications of such 'command'.<sup>4</sup> On that basis it would be possible, Weber tells us, to conceive of 'immanent' or 'intrinsic logics' (*Eigengesetzlichkeiten*),<sup>5</sup> i.e. of logics of deployment of the life orders/value spheres as consistent wholes.

These propositions seem to have been elaborated through and abstracted from Weber's history of music. There Weber had explained that the particular path of music to the status of 'art' started wherever a status group of priestly or professional musicians<sup>6</sup> 'reache[d] out beyond the use of traditional tone formulae with a purely practical orientation', and awakened to 'purely aesthetic needs';<sup>7</sup> as, at the same time, this very consciousness also designated music as a specific object of rationalisation (2004: 188; 1921: 31). However, whereas in Weber's evocation of the music 'realm' in IR there was no hint of a possible rift between the aspiration to sublimated musical experience and the constraints of form (1991: 222), the tension between the quest for refined aesthetic expression and the rationalisation of the musical material and instruments pervaded MS. In the ideal-typical construct of IR, Weber explored the conflicts arising (mainly) *between* spheres when the 'rational' steers each of them to its ultimate consequences, whereas a historical study rather looks at the inner momentum created *within* a specific 'domain of culture' or life when rationalisation is empirically deployed, and inevitably stumbles upon the 'irrational' and other forms of rationality (1988: 438, 518). Weber laid down this conception of the purview of historical analysis particularly clearly in a famous footnote to the 1913 essay on 'A few categories of interpretive sociology':

The way in which the relation between the correctness type of a behaviour [*ID: correct according to a particular ratio*] and the empirical behaviour "works" and how this developmental momentum relates to sociological influences e.g. in the concrete development of an art, I hope to illustrate in the future with an example (music history). It is precisely these relations, namely the junctures at which the tensions between the empirical and the correctness type can break open, which are of the highest significance in terms of developmental dynamic, not only for a history of logic or other sciences, but also in all other fields. [As significant] (albeit with individual and fundamental variations in each domain of culture) is the fact that and the sense in which an unequivocal correctness type *cannot* be carried through but compromise or choice between a number of such bases of rationalisation becomes possible or inevitable. Such problems, which are of a substantive nature, cannot be discussed here (1988: 438)<sup>8</sup>.

Weber's investigation in the inner momentum of music opens on a primary, foundational, contradiction, stemming from the 'encounter' between the 'correctness' 'behaviour' of sounds (correctness according to the 'physics of sounds') on the one hand and their empirical behaviour on the other hand. The main consonant intervals 'recognised' in all musical cultures, namely the octave and the intervals that divide it, the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup>, correspond to fractions (of lengths of string segments and of frequencies) whose powers never equalize – which means that the cycles of 4ths, 5ths and octaves never coincide in any system of just intonation of pitches. The 12<sup>th</sup> fifth for example differs from the 7<sup>th</sup> octave by a very small interval, called the 'Pythagorean comma'. From this 'fundamental', 'inescapable state of affairs' derives the impossibility of a 'rationally closed unity' (2004: 145-8; 1921: 3-5) since the cycle of fifths extends to infinity (Jeans 1968: 166). It is such impossibility of full consistency which, precisely, to Weber, is foundational since it makes for human creativity and movement, as Christoph Braun has shown (e.g. see 1992: 19; 1999: 185)<sup>9</sup>. For, rather than ever being resolved, the tension caused by the 'irrationality' of the empirical behaviour of sounds is harnessed in different ways for the constitution of music cultures into productive systems (and sensory fields) of structured yet infinite possibilities:

The various great systems of all peoples and ages differentiated themselves above all in the art and manner in which they covered up or bypassed this inescapable irrationality [the Pythagorean comma], or, conversely, put it at the service of the richness of tonalities (Weber 1991: 11-2).

Hence music systems fall within two broad types, which Weber elaborated into ideal-types, respectively the harmonic system (which seeks to 'cover or bypass' irrationality) and the melodic system (which plays with it). Although both systems recognise the octave, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and the whole tone which results from their difference, progression from one tone to another in the harmonic system follows the principle of 'affinity' (*Verwandtschaft*), where tonalities immediately related through the cycle of fifths share the same sound material except for one note (2004: 147-8; 1921: 4); whilst, in the melodic system, progression mainly takes place through the 'proximity' of pitches (*Nachbarschaft*), starting from the division of the 4<sup>th</sup> (2004: 151; 1921:7). Weber was here taking up the two principles highlighted by Hermann von Helmholtz in his foundational theory of music, tone 'affinity' and 'proximity' of pitches. But he fundamentally transformed their meaning by granting them an autonomously structuring role as conflicting principles operating in two distinct rationalisation processes – harmonic and melodic (2004: 190; 1921:33; also 1988: 521). Helmholtz, for his part, had defined the principle of affinity indeed as an 'aesthetical principle, not a natural law', thus giving rise to different tone relations in 'modern music' and other music cultures, but had nevertheless rooted it in the physics of sounds. And, finding out that affinity was insufficient to account for scale formation in non-harmonic systems, he had suggested the other principle, proximity of pitches, as consisting 'in an endeavour to distinguish equal intervals by ear, and thus make the difference of pitch perceptibly uniform': but he had argued that this principle had 'subsequently had to yield to that of tonal relationships' (Helmholtz 1954: 249, 256). As Weber suggests, within the harmonic system, Helmholtz only granted the principle of proximity a function of 'passage' between two harmonically defined but not immediately akin notes (2004: 151; 1921: 7).<sup>10</sup>

Weber referred to 'tonal ratio' as 'form-giving principle' (2004: 253; 1921:79), especially for the Western harmonic system. However this was too much of a concession to Georg Simmel's vocabulary of life and form, since, as just suggested, Weber found what is 'form-giving' not so much in each principle in itself, but rather in the encounter and struggle of the principle steering one system with the other principle, as both are present in both systems.

The strength of the engagement and struggle is not symmetrical in both systems. Because of their organisation through the distance principle, melodic systems, of which Weber studied especially the variants of Ancient Greece and the Arabic world, can accommodate the

contiguity of very small intervals and thus a ‘richness of tonalities’. But this also makes them very vulnerable to the complete dissolution of all rationalised form: hence the attempt of melodic rationalisation to set ‘tonal barriers’ playing a similar role to those found in harmonic systems, e.g. the “melodic centre of gravity” uncovered by the Stumpf school, or ‘even more importantly... typical melodic formulae’ which come to characterise the equivalent of “keys” (2004: 191-2; 1921: 34) and most clearly with Pentatonic scales (2004a: 166; 1921: 17)<sup>11</sup>. In music cultures closest to the melodic ideal-type, such tonal grounding is ‘constantly threatened’, and at risk of being captured by the fundamental orientation of the system to melodic ‘refinement’ (2004: 209; 1921: 48), i.e. an extreme fineness of expression and listening obtained through sounds very proximate to each other, and hence through the tonally ‘irrational’ juxtaposition of various intervals of the same kind (e.g. seconds or thirds).

There is no such wholesale domination of one principle by the other in the harmonic system: Weber takes a contrary view to that of the ‘Panharmonicists’ (Rameau, and, closer to him, Riemann) and asserts that melody ‘cannot be derived harmonically’ although ‘it is, in truth, harmonically conditioned and bound’ (2004: 150; 1921: 7). Melody carries with it, inside the harmonic system, the principle of tone proximity, which clashes with that of harmonic affinity and creates a tension, looking for resolution: ‘Without the tensions motivated by the irrationality of melody, there would be no modern music, since these tensions count amongst its most important means of expression’ (2004: 153; 1921: 8).

It could be said that the successive crystallisations of the tensions arising in the deployment of harmonic ratio served to maintain the tonal principle as the backbone of Western music, although at the same time always stretching it. These were the ‘compromises’ referred to in the footnote of the ‘Essay on Categories’ (see above), provided we understand by compromises not any kind of illusory middle ground, not the ‘relativisations’ between ultimate values made so to speak inadvertently at ‘every turn’ of everyday life (as per the ‘Value freedom’ essay), which in fact testify to adaptation to the dominant Gods of the day – especially the rationalised capitalist economy; but an artistic decision, the conscious and productive moment in the dynamic of a cultural domain<sup>12</sup>. Crucial examples of such crystallisations for the harmonic system were the various forms of polyphony, the tonal integration of chromaticism and up to the decisive ‘equalisation of inconsistencies’ through equal temperament (2004: 243; 1921: 72).

Coming back to the relation between the expression of aesthetic needs and form defining artistic domains, we see that aesthetic ‘refinement’, encountered in melodic systems, always feels curtailed by rationalised form and indeed stems from the overflow over form: rationalisation tends to remain external. ‘Sublimation’ evokes a different kind of relation, arising as a result of a process of ‘inner rationalisation’ of music – in particular of scales (2004: 246; 1921: 74-5), where innovations inspired by melodic and expressive concerns (e.g. chromaticism) are incorporated after a struggle and insofar as they can ultimately be harmonically grounded. In Charles Rosen’s words, in classical style, ‘a dramatic effect seemed at once surprising and logically motivated’ (1998: 44). Expressiveness is conveyed *through* form, although it is also constantly stretching it and attempting to break free from it. Sublimated forms are forms which have turned into what Weber had called ‘value-forms’ (2005: 28), they are alive and inspire musical creation. But what MS unveils is the specific kind of struggle which it takes in the harmonic system to ‘sublimate’ artistic expression.

Beneath and through the multiplicity of threads followed by Weber, of which I have only mentioned a few here, MS uncovers the structuring of music systems through a dynamic of tensions between opposed poles. These tensions were initially unleashed by the impulse towards the rationalisation of the sound material, each tension feeding into yet another one on another plane: from the initial struggle between the theoretical and the empirical ‘behaviour’ of sounds, to that between the principles of affinity and proximity for the ordering of sounds, to, finally, the struggle between the systematicity of harmonic ratio and the expressivity of

melody in the plane of composition and/or artistic expression. Weber summed up these struggles through his final evocation of an underpinning tension between ‘musical *ratio*’ and ‘musical life’, in all music systems (although particularly stark in ‘ours’), that shapes musical creation as well as the aesthetic experience in ways which further fuel the inner tendencies of each system. This however might be seen as an unfortunate summary, as the reference to ‘life’ to designate one of the terms of the tensions is rather evocative of Simmel’s idea of life bursting out of form and reaching over, and points to a kind of ontological primacy of ‘life’ as well as to only one logic of form, the ineluctable entanglement of objectivation and reification; whereas MS had constantly unveiled the opposition between principles of consistency and expression, with no other pre-eminence of the one over the other than that entailed by human decisions.

## 2. The configuration of Western harmonic music

The artists, creators, interpreters, the manufacturers of instruments, the art ‘recipients’ and amateur practitioners, all have to grapple with the tensions structuring music as a domain of culture. All are shaped by it and at the same time further contribute to it through their own interpretation and expression of it. It is this ‘grappling’ with the immanent dynamic of the musical domain which, I will seek to show more in depth in section 3, ‘inwardly’ connects individuals to music and thus constitutes its ‘spirit’ – bearing in mind that the very way in which they ‘grapple’ with such dynamic has very vivid manifestations on the plane of social relations and is itself influenced by ‘external’, i.e. social, economic, wider technological factors. For now let us see how this differentiated connection accounts, in Weber’s approach, for positions in the music domain, which are thus primarily defined in relation to the inner logic of Western harmonic music (again, bearing in mind that this inner logic is itself socially, economically and technologically conditioned), rather than primarily in their relation to each other – in contrast, for example, with Bourdieu’s homology between a space of works understood as ‘system of differential gaps’ and a space of schools or authors understood as ‘system of differential positions in the field of production’ (1994: 69).<sup>13</sup>

More specifically, those (human as well as instrumental) figures best placed to assume and productively harness the tensions pervading the music systems are called to take on a culturally dominant position within the field.<sup>14</sup>

Thus melodic systems are prone to the flourishing of virtuosi singers and players, characteristically deploying their talents of expression in complex and endless chromaticism, which threatens to dissolve all tonal boundaries. In the Arabic system, for example, the only limit that was put in some specific epochs and places was through the ‘stereotyping’ of melodic sequences (i.e. their fixing and repetition), but these did not resist the search for increasingly refined melodic expressivity and the accession of the ‘virtuoso or professional artist trained in virtuoso-like performances as carrier of the musical development’, whose ‘entirely irrational expressive means’ rely on specific qualities – ‘recherché, baroque and affected aesthetic mannerism, as well as intellectualist gourmet refinement’ (2004: 241-2; 1921: 70-1).

By contrast, Weber unveiled the relation of affinity between the ascetic ethos of medieval monks, their quest for methodical lack of ambiguity and the possibility of planning, and the development of the fixed notation of polyphonic pieces, against the 13<sup>th</sup> century practice of improvised counterpoint singing, e.g. by those appointed to the pontifical chapel. The domination of the monks of the Dutch missions over the chapel after the Pope’s return from Avignon to Rome ensured the embedding of notation as against improvisation (2004: 237; 1921: 67-8), contrary to what happened in Byzance where musical arrangements were entrusted to professional song makers trained in the Hellenic tradition characteristically oriented to ‘melopoeia’, the art of melody (1988: 522). The decisive contribution of the fixed

notation system was to make composition possible, and thus to create the ‘real “composer”’ (2004: 238; 1921: 68). Contrary to the virtuoso artist whose aesthetic expression sets him/her in direct contact with the sensitivity of audiences, the composer mediates expression through the creation of new forms. It is thus the figure of the composer which can make the most of the particular ‘tension between musical *ratio* and musical life’ characterising the dynamic of the Western music system. Indeed it is that tension (provided we take it, as suggested above, as a tension between two principles rather than as an expression of a reification process) which makes such figure possible, and constitutes the composer as the ‘dominant type of human being’ in the music domain.

A paradigmatic example is that of J-S. Bach, who ‘brought counterpoint to its highest perfection’ (2004: 215; 1921: 52), counterpoint being the form which by definition both encapsulates harmonic ratio and stretches it through the primacy of melody.<sup>15</sup> Weber’s references to Corelli, Scarlatti, Mozart, Chopin and Liszt further highlight other ways in which composers have been harnessing the tensions of harmonic music, especially as all of them were virtuosi players and with an art of composition which freed/further developed the expressive possibilities of their respective instruments. A sense of the end of an era, of exhaustion of the momentum of the harmonic system is already there with Liszt, who had gone furthest in ‘unlocking’ the expressivity of the piano (2004: 278; 1921: 94). Thus not only were the composers of the harmonic system spurred to actualise the tensions between affinity and proximity, as well as between harmony and melody, but their very creation consisted of new ‘value-forms’ which impacted harmonic ratio in return.

It is in the analysis of the trajectories of instruments – and, accordingly, of their manufacturers, the instrumentalists as well as the composers associated with them – that the dynamic character and explanatory power of Weber’s approach to the music domain appears most clearly<sup>16</sup>. The key polarisation here, bearing in mind that the study is unfinished, is between strings and keyboards, and more pointedly between the violin and the piano; it starts in the late Renaissance, a crucial period for the completion of the basic structures of the harmonic edifice, but one in which such completion was still in process.

The Renaissance period was that of technical “experimentation”, which started on the artistic terrain before becoming the purview of science as the result, Weber tells us in his comparative study of the *Economic Ethics of World Religions*, of the ‘singular blending of two elements’:

the empirical skill of occidental artists, developed on the grounds of craftsmanship; and their ambition, determined through cultural history and socially, and rationalist throughout, to raise their art to a rank on par with a “science” and thus secure an eternal meaning for it as well as social worth for themselves (1991: 142).

However such blending of elements only ‘typically’ characterised Leonardo’s art (*ibid.*). In music, Weber showed that the elements of the precipitate remained more separate.

On the one hand there is the figure of Zarlino and his ‘experimental keyboards, at the core of this powerful wrestling of the Renaissance which operated with the characteristic artistic concept of “nature”’ (*ibid.*), since the Zarlino scale operates with ‘pure’ 3rds, 5ths and octaves. Zarlino was maestro di capella at St Mark’s as well as a composer, and above all a theoretician of music, not a crafts keyboard manufacturer. Rather he ‘had keyboard-like instruments specially constructed for [him] for experimental purposes’ (2004: 273; 1921: 91). On the other hand, the manufacturing of the violin, viola and cello was the product of a ‘very long period of experimentation’ in Brescia and Cremona in Northern Italy, but wholly within the context of ‘craftsmanship’, and, thereby, wholly at the service of the ‘expressive beauty of sounds – of a singing sound – as well as, probably, the elegance of the instrument’ (2004: 260; 1921: 83). The Renaissance music domain staged the rational experimentation with



keyboards and the crafts-based experimentation with strings in parallel rather than organising their synthesis.

This led to a polarised positioning of both families of instruments in the domain defined by the tension constitutive of harmonic music. Thus, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, organists and pianists (the technique of both instruments being tightly linked until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) ‘felt themselves to be, separately and in solidarity, the artists and carriers of the development of harmonic music, by contrast, notably, with string instruments, which “could not produce any full harmony”’ (2004: 273; 1921: 91-2). For its part, the ‘creation of the great violin-builders lacked... a rational foundation’. String instruments, in their technical construction, were not meant to foster harmonic music; the few technical means which had facilitated the production of chords or the harmonic underpinning of melody (e.g. drone strings) were dispensed with in modern instruments, ‘which rather seemed destined to carry *melodic* effects’ (2004: 261; 1921: 85). Such polarisation was further bolstered by very concrete struggles for status, as for example when organists and pianists withdrew from the corporation of ‘*ménétriers*’ in France (from the old French ‘menestrels’), which pretended to federate all musicians and was headed by a ‘king’, then referred to as the ‘king of violins’, precisely because they saw themselves as the true carriers of harmonic music (2004: 273; 1921: 91-2).<sup>17</sup> Violinists also fought to be recognised as ‘artists’ in court orchestras, where organists were enjoying such status (2004: 262; 1921:85).

However, with the more advanced completion of the harmonic music system, and the increasingly structuring character of the tension between the melodic and harmonic principles due to the harmonic grounding of all resolution, no instrument, and hence no instrument manufacturer or player, nor any composer for that instrument, could be the carrier of one principle or the other. In fact, the two families of instruments so to speak influenced each other, bringing each other more within the field thus defined<sup>18</sup>. Weber narrates the emancipation of the piano from the organ, ‘first under the influence of dance in French instrumental music... then by following the example of the beginnings of virtuoso violin performance’ (2004: 273-4; 1921:92). On the other hand, ‘the formation of tones in the learning of string instruments is practised from the beginning at the piano’ (2004: 279; 1921:94), whose fixed harmonically grounded temperament has dampening effects for the ear’s capacity of distinguishing minute intervals: ‘clearly, it is not possible to attain the fine hearing [that one gets] through instruments tuned through just intonation’ (*ibid.*). Taking up the distinction introduced above, it can thus be said that virtuoso compositions for the piano attain to the sublime of expression more than to its refinement.

The domination, the ‘unshakable position’ of the piano today, for musical education, accompaniment, as well as through ‘the immense wealth of its own literature’ both entrenched harmonic ratio ever more by shaping our ear, and thus in truth by shaping the type of listener that the harmonic system required; and, at the same time, made its limitations very manifest, as the construction of pianos, ‘conditioned by mass sales’, resisted moves towards a new phase of experimentation (2004: 279; 1921:95). It is through the piano that the music domain and the capitalist economy became articulated with one another, and whilst this articulation brought about the ‘technical perfection’ of the instrument (through the ferocious competition between instrument makers engaged in very modern business and marketing techniques) (2004: 277; 1921:93-4), it also served to harden the tension besetting harmonic music towards the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – thus in effect pushing towards its explosion. We thus see how Weber conceived of the interplay between the own dynamic of the capitalist economy and the momentum of artistic domains: in this case, it took place with particular strength through the piano as both object of mass consumption and carrier of the harmonic ratio. By conceptualising the specific dynamic of domains of life, including art, as dynamics of tension, Weber also made them inherently unstable and more or less amenable to pressures conditioning their paths of expression.

### 3. The inward connection to music

In this section I turn, finally, to Weber's sketched analyses of the way in which artistic will, the inner bonding of artists to their art, 'works with' the tensions in its domain of deployment to make artistic decisions; as well as to the evolution of the other key inward connection to music: that of the listener.<sup>19</sup>

The first connection is not directly evident from the reading of MS, and we first need to make the detour of the 'Value freedom' essay to find an explicit account of the way in which the tension between rational consistency and expression provides the matter with which creators have to work – in Weber's analysis of the springs of Gothic architecture, rather than music:

It was the encounter between this primarily technologically conditioned revolution and certain contents of feelings underpinned to a large extent by sociological conditions and the history of religion which supplied the essential elements of that material with the problems with which artistic creation worked in the Gothic epoch (Weber 1988: 521).

Rational technology, here a 'technologically successful solution of what was in itself purely a problem of building technique' (*ibid.*: 520), does not 'converge' or 'coincide' (as the English translations would have it<sup>20</sup>) but 'runs into' 'feelings': 'the "atmosphere" of inner Gothic spaces was, at least at the beginning, an unsought consequence of innovations purely [to do with] construction [techniques]' (2004: 261; 1921: 84), not unlike the 'stumbling' of harmonic ratio on the Pythagorean comma. Nothing obvious emerges from that encounter, and it is only the artist's 'will' and desire (*Kunstwollen*) which will work upon this as its matter and transform it into a specific relation between form and expression.<sup>21</sup>

Weber had suggested (in the first meeting of the German Sociological Society) that music history should consider 'the question of the relation between artistic will and musical-technological means', whilst sociology should focus on 'the relation between the 'spirit' (*Geist*) of a particular music and the *overall* technological basis that influences the vital feeling and tempo of our present-day and (once again) metropolitan way of life' (2005: 31, 1924: 455). On the basis of the problematisation by MS of the 'immanent logic' of 'musical-technological means', I suggest the following reformulation: the way in which the artistic will of composers (but also instrument manufacturers and to a lesser extent performers) gets to grips and works with the momentum of the music domain constitutes the 'spirit' of the music domain and the object of history. The particular affinities between this spirit and 'technological bases', as well as specific carrier strata, are the purview of sociology.

If this is so, then characterising the inward connection to a sphere means assessing the way in which 'will', that is to say desire, 'works' with this inner tension of its domain of deployment: whether it seeks to escape it, ignore it by resolutely embracing one of its terms, or whether it confronts it, and, in each case, how, through which artistic decisions. We can see how such assessment allows for positioning creators in an artistic domain according to their specific contribution to its inner dynamic and the direction they have imprinted to it amongst the many possible. Weber was adamant that the assessment of technological 'progress' in art history was totally distinct from aesthetic valuation (1988: 521). But such emphasis rings oddly if we consider that aesthetic judgment bears on a creator's response to the questions that demand addressing in an artistic domain: does not Weber discuss the poetic stances displayed by Emile Verhaeren and Stefan George (1924: 453)?<sup>22</sup> Does not he commit precisely this kind of valuation when he states that Bach 'brought counterpoint to its highest perfection' and that Liszt unlocked 'all the ultimate expressive possibilities' of the piano?

He also associated the 'most modern developments of music in the direction of a corrosion of tonality' 'at least in part' with the 'intellectualist-romantic turn of our enjoyment towards the

search for effects and what is “interesting” (2004: 252; 1921: 79). Composers seem here to be ineluctably drawn into the ‘intellectualist-romantic’ turn of a generation of listeners who were also Weber’s audience in his conference on ‘Science as a Vocation and Profession’: young people who sought to escape from the rational intellectualism of science by throwing themselves into ‘the modern Romantic intellectualism of the irrational’ (1994a: 12). Faced with the extreme enunciation, in equal temperament, of the tension between the demands of expression and harmonic ratio, composers have turned to unbridled chromaticism, which, to Weber, amounts to a ‘flight from the world’ of music at that point in time. But the alternative cannot be the composer’s mere adaptive reproduction of the status quo in the contemporary ‘world’ of music demanded by another section of the listening public. Before figuring out what creative stance Weber appears to be demanding, we thus need to understand the other inward connection – and contribution – to the ‘spirit’ of music: that of the listener.

In the wake of Helmholtz’s analysis of hearing as culturally shaped taste and habit (1954: 234), Weber highlighted the way in which ‘our harmonic conception of music’ (Weber 2004: 190; 1921: 33), ‘the sense of harmony’ (2004: 252; 1921: 79), work with the listeners’ capacity to ‘interpret the notes according to their harmonic provenance’ and ‘even to “hear” them actually in subjectively different ways’ (2004: 251; 1921: 78-79). The creator’s possibility to play with anticipation and resolution, which is at the core of Western harmonic music, depends on this harmonic disposition of the ear. In the same way, in melodic systems, the ‘ear’ learns to ‘profoundly enjoy’ the multiplication of ‘irrational intervals’ (2004: 242; 1921: 71), and in the Antiquity, it was the trained ‘fineness of the ear’ which gave the ‘melodious refinement of the musical culture ... its definitive stamp’ (2004: 278; 1921: 94).<sup>23</sup>

But the tension encapsulated in temperament works its way through hearing. The ear learns to recognise the harmonic provenance of tones (in the sense of recognising modes and keys), but at the same time the correction mechanism brought by the distance principle means that intervals which would be considered different (for example on instruments tuned according to another system or through just intonation) are here identified to one another, hence blurring the perception of sounds. Fineness of hearing seemed to refer, for Weber as for Helmholtz, both to the capacity to distinguish equal intervals as well as minute intervals by ear; and to the feeling for the just intonation of intervals; in other words fine was the ear that tasted the ‘baroque’ scales of oriental music, fine is the ear that tastes the melodiousness of a ‘natural’ third. But equal temperament dampens both.

The disposition of the ear takes ‘habituation’ (*Gewöhnung*), indeed it is the condition for ‘profound enjoyment’ (*Genuß*) (2004: 242,278; 1921: 71,94), beyond the mere ‘tasting’ of musical effects. Yet, as explained above, habituation has become entrenched, scripted by the piano: as the chief instrument for musical education becomes an object of mass consumption, there emerges and comes to prevail an economic logic to the persistence of equal temperament. Through this connection, the productive tension of the harmonic music system becomes reified.

Where did this leave the creative stance? To Weber, as to Adorno in his characterisation of Schoenberg’s art, such entrenchment of the status quo through the economic ratio could be further fuelled by the rationalisation by composers of their own creative impetus: Weber reproached Stefan Georg for ‘dismembering’ all passion in himself so as to elevate form from de-personalised grounds (1994b: 561). But whereas, for Adorno, the ‘hardening’ of new music (2006: 19) is but the extreme version and the logical consequence of the creative act, which posits ‘spirit’ into objective form, Weber did not follow such Hegel inspired dialectics. On the one hand he specified the relative autonomy of the processes of rationalisation taking place in different life orders and their points of connection and mutual reinforcement, whereas theories of reification deployed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (though not Adorno’s) tended to equate reification understood as objectivation of the spirit and economic reification (see Colletti 1979, especially 157-198). On the other hand, the creative process arises, and creative

decisions are made, not so much in the face to face and tension between the subject and the object, as Adorno suggested after Simmel, but in the confrontation of the artists with the conflicting forces shaping their ‘material’.

## Conclusion

Weber had wished to undertake a sociology of ‘cultural contents’ (which he referred to as comprising art, literature, and ‘*Weltanschauung*’/ science) and their relations to the economy once he had completed his analysis of the relation of ‘structural forms’ of social action to the economy (in *Economy and Society*) (2004: 76). In subsuming both arts and science under cultural contents, Weber pointed to the tight relation he established between scientific and artistic creation: thus the inquiry of ‘Science as a vocation and profession’ into the ‘external’ (‘social’) conditions, the ‘inner’ dynamic of rationalisation of science and the interrogation on the possibility for ‘vocation’ in such configuration, could have been carried out for art domains and artistic vocation as well. Indeed ‘vocation’ designates that steadfastness in one’s creative will or desire which impels one to confront the tensions besetting the domain of deployment of such desire: in other words, the creative ‘stance’ (Frade 2013).

The last paragraphs of each of the two sections of the ‘Music Study’ lead to an acute perception of the impasse at which Western harmonic music had arrived – and of the reasons for such impasse, not only for composition, but for the manufacturing of instruments, for practice and listening as well. The musical situation seemed to beg creative gestures (in principle not limited to compositional acts – but also technological invention, musical exploration) that did not withstand tensions which had become frozen, but rather reinstated them and redefined their terms: a vindication, ex-ante, of the “‘Schoenberg event’” (Nicolas 1997: 200)?

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the state of the art see Wierzbicki 2010 (although the reader must be cautioned against the very problematic character of that article). Following Christoph Braun (1994), admittedly the authority on Weber’s writings on music, I refer to Weber’s main publication on music as the ‘Music Study’ as it mostly corresponded to what Weber considered as history and only to a more limited extent to his conception of a sociological study (and this despite the fact that Weber himself referred to his study as ‘*Musik-soziologie*’, e.g. in his correspondence with his wife and his friend the pianist Mina Tobler). Braun has established that Weber had worked on the study in 1912-3, and that he went back to it in 1917 (as shown by his discussion of music in his essay on ‘The Meaning of “Value Freedom” in the Sociological and Economic Sciences’ – referred to as ‘Value freedom’ essay in this article) and then again in 1919/1920. The manuscript remained unfinished and was published as such in 1921 thanks to Marianne Weber’s transcription (Braun 1992: 135-9).

<sup>2</sup> For ease of reference I systematically quote MS first in the volume edited by C. Braun and L. Finscher for the MWGA (2004), and then in the 1921 edition by Theodor Kroyer and Marianne Weber, which had been the standard source before the Braun/Finscher volume. The MWGA volume indicates the page numbers of the 1921 edition throughout.

<sup>3</sup> This section draws on the work of Christoph Braun as well as the editorial apparatus of the MWGA volume. I have also resorted to the very useful reading guide proposed by Jean Molino and Emmanuel Pedler for the French translation of the MS (Weber 1998). Finally my overall reflection on Weber, music, and the shaping and possibility of the creative stance, has developed through countless discussions with Carlos Frade.

<sup>4</sup> This universal force is of a general character and gives rise to the most varied processes of rationalisation (1991: 209).

<sup>5</sup> These logics must be understood as ‘immanent’ (Weber 1991: 214) to the ideal-typical life orders/value spheres, since it is these logics which, so to speak, sustain the ideal-typical consistency of the orders and spheres, a consistency never achieved in reality. This concept should thus be

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distinguished from the alleged “inner logic” of sounds’ referred to in MS in an allusion to Riemann’s theory (2004: 207; 1921: 46).

<sup>6</sup> The group of ‘professional musicians’ Weber had in mind was the aiodic group (singers in Homeric times). See glossary in Weber 2004.

<sup>7</sup> In spite of the unfortunate anachronistic reference to ‘aesthetic needs’, Weber’s concern is not to define what constitutes art in a Schopenhauerian manner as a pure object of selfless contemplation (Dahlhaus 1990: 39), but much more to relate the historical development of a partly autonomous sphere of music with the realisation that musical expression makes its own demands.

<sup>8</sup> The translation of *Richtigkeitstypus* literally as correctness type, as proposed by Hans Henrik Brunn and Sam Whimster, seems judicious (Weber 2012: 280). I provide a literal translation of *Entwicklungsmoment* as developmental momentum, rather than the more standard translation as developmental factor, as I believe that this is one of the instances in which Weber contrasts historical analysis, which looks at the inner dynamic of ‘areas of culture’, and sociology, which analyses the external influences on such dynamic. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>9</sup> It is thus ironical that Adorno qualified his appreciation for Weber’s study on the grounds that it merely staged the progress of rationalisation (1999: 5).

<sup>10</sup> Weber warned against the temptation of generalising the possibility that the “natural” affinity of sounds’ (through consonances) may have acted as dynamic factor for the evolution of music (2004: 179; 1921: 25) – a warning which thus put at a distance both Helmholtz and Riemann, however opposed their positions had been (Weber 2004, especially pp. 58-61).

<sup>11</sup> In Molino and Pedler’s assessment of Weber’s views of Pentatonic, Weber’s key arguments are still relevant today, even though many of the assertions of the text now appear ill-founded (unsurprisingly given the disparate and scarce evidence available at the time on this subject) (Weber 1998: 220).

<sup>12</sup> Compare Weber 1988: 438 and 507. The abhorrence of the middle ground is a trope of modern philosophy.

<sup>13</sup> The original paper was delivered in 1986 at the University of Princeton. An English translation was published in 1993 (see Bourdieu 1993: 182). My translation is slightly different.

<sup>14</sup> Weber stated most clearly how one should go about ‘empirical work’ in ‘the empirical disciplines’ in the ‘Value freedom’ essay: ‘Only one conclusion undoubtedly follows: every order of social relations, without exception and however constituted, is, if one wishes to evaluate it, ultimately to be examined with respect to the human type for which it, by way of external or inner (motivational) selection, optimises the chances of becoming the dominant type. For otherwise the empirical enquiry is not truly exhaustive, nor is there the necessary factual basis for a general evaluation, whether it is consciously subjective or claims objective validity.’ (1988: 517). Wilhelm Hennis (2000) has shown the centrality of the question of the fate of the human being and the type of humanity (*Menschentum*) developing in the modern world to Max Weber’s work as a whole.

<sup>15</sup> Weber also attributed the ‘practical’ dissemination of equal temperament to Bach, as was current in his time, but this somewhat unclear formulation does not seem to correspond to what has since been established, i.e. that Bach was himself no advocate of equal temperament (Braun 1992: 188, note 111).

<sup>16</sup> In this sense it is misleading to draw too neat a boundary between the two strands of the study as most commentators have done.

<sup>17</sup> Braun and Finscher explain that the relations between the organists and pianists and the corporation were ridden with conflict, including through legal means (2004: 274).

<sup>18</sup> Here the term field seems warranted, since the dynamic is fuelled by polar relational oppositions, as in Bourdieu’s understanding.

<sup>19</sup> Weber was also interested in the inward connection of the instrumentalist to music, e.g. through the choice of an instrument and the greater or lesser possibility of expression of one's singularity in performance (Honigsheim 1968: 88).

<sup>20</sup> For 'zusammenstieß'. I am grateful to Jean-Pierre Grossein for his insights on this key notion and for his translation as encounter. JP Grossein's incomparably rigorous translations and the editorial apparatus provided, including through highly informative introductions, have been and continue to be an extremely precious resource for my work on Weber.

<sup>21</sup> My analyses in this section differ from Christoph Braun's interpretations, as he subsumes *Kunstwollen* under 'life' in the ratio/life equation (e.g. see 1992: 131). Accordingly my understanding of 'spirit' is different as well.

<sup>22</sup> I cannot address Weber's analysis of lyric poetry in the confines of this article. However such analysis forms part of the wider research I am undertaking on Weber's cultural sociology.

<sup>23</sup> As explained by Braun and Finscher, the idea of the fineness of the Greeks' hearing was a trope at the time (Weber 2004: 54).

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