

## Regression in Music or How to Communicate the Ineffable

**Abstract.** Psychoanalysis contends that the process of artistic creation is organized in two, ostensibly contradictory, yet balanced phases. According to Ernst Kris, they are a) the phase of inspiration: withdrawing from the objective reality and opening a path to individual, unconscious impulses; b) elaboration of the form the idea will assume to be communicated. The first phase implies “regression in the service of the ego”: abandonment to the primary process of mental functioning; the subsequent one is largely influenced by secondary processes. Reality testing, suspended in the first phase, acquires pivotal importance in the second. What used to be irrational, formless and archaic must be rendered in such a form that it can be shared. The inspiration phase is comparable with dreaming, when one abandons oneself to primary process functioning. However, the artistic creative act – however its inspiration phase may resemble a dream – requires a recombining of inspirational ideas into communication. The two phases are intertwined, not strictly chronologically following one another. In musical creation, these phases can assume extreme forms. Having its roots in the earliest stages of individual development, when the individual’s mental apparatus functions in the archaic, unconscious and preverbal mode, music is of all the arts closest to primary-process mental functioning. Musical processes (thematic work, elaboration of fundamental structures, shaping of global form etc.) are highly isomorphous with primary-process transformations. Even such compositions that seem highly intuitive, resulting from a fleeting moment of inspiration (e.g. Debussy), or such that purport to epitomize primal, irrational forces (Stravinsky, *Sacre*), are carefully crafted within a framework of cultural norms. The personality of a creative artist possesses both an openness toward one’s own unconscious impulses, the faculty of abandoning oneself to creative regression, and the ability to hatch communicable meanings out of the raw material of individual fantasy.

**Keywords:** primary process, regression, Kris, Varèse, Messiaen, Shostakovich.

One of the supreme attributes of human beings – the creative act – has always been a puzzling question that many schools of psychology have tried to probe. Among them, the psychoanalytic school emphasizes unconscious impulses as crucially (yet not solely) responsible for the creation of a work of art (see for example Waelder 1965). However, the statement that this highest human potential that we call creativity can be in such a close connection to the “dark continent” of human unconsciousness needs some justification. The aim of the present paper is to shed light on these intricate relationships. While the ultimate unraveling of the psychological foundations of artistic creativity remains (and will probably remain) beyond our reach, it is still feasible at least to peer into the roots of a work of art deeply buried in the unconscious mind.

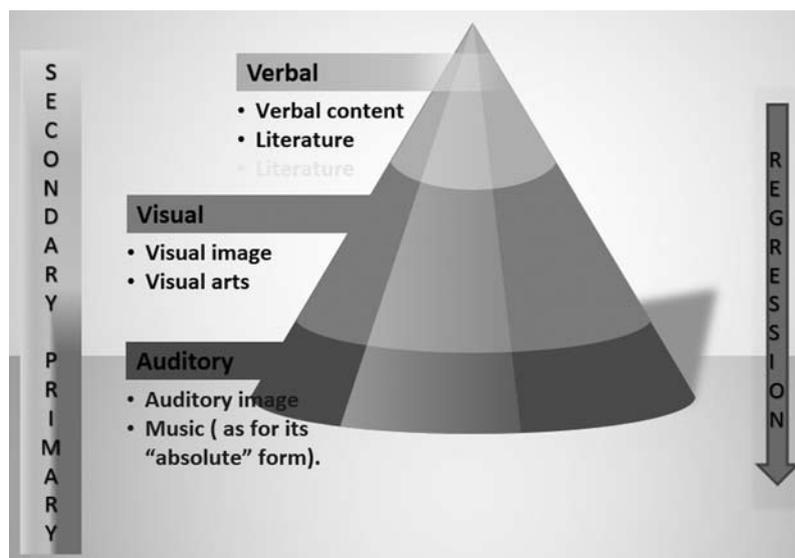
We will begin by quoting Sigmund Freud, whose words even more than a century later seem to capture some essential aspects of creativity:

“The energetic and successful man is one who succeeds by his efforts in turning his wishful fantasies into reality. Where this fails, as a result of the resistances of the external world and of the subject’s own weakness, he begins to turn away from reality and withdraws into his more satisfying world of fantasy, the content of which is transformed into symptoms should he fall ill. In certain favorable circumstances, it still remains possible for him to find another path leading from these fantasies to reality, instead of becoming permanently estranged from it by regressing to infancy. If a person who is at loggerheads with reality possesses an artistic gift” (a thing that is still a psychological mystery to us), he can transform his fantasies into “artistic creations instead of into symptoms. In this manner he can escape the doom of neurosis and by this round-about path regain his contact with reality” (Freud 1957/1910: 49).

To clarify this statement and explore its full potential for our paper, we will undertake a brief psychoanalytic excursion into personality development. The psychoanalytically-oriented developmental theory maintains that at the beginning of individual mental life only unconscious processes existed. The unconscious mind, or the *id*, has little connection to reality, to spatial and temporal constraints and the precepts of formal logic. This means that life in infancy is largely dominated by wishful fantasies. The developmental task of the ego will then be to serve the testing of reality and adaptation to it. The development that replaces these fantasies with the reality principle does not follow a linear path. There is no smooth progression, it is described rather as a process with ups and downs, and this fluctuation should not be confused with psychopathology. Nor is the process of transition from the one to the other ever completed: an average adult is also spending a significant percentage of their daily mental life withdrawing from objective reality and fantasizing. It may not be immediately obvious since adults tend to be less naïve and less willing to communicate their fantasies than children are, and would rather keep them to themselves. And if we seek a proof that every human *is* withdrawing from the sensations

of the environment, we need no better one than dreams. It was Freud’s great discovery that a dream, no matter how disguised the form in which it presents itself, is actually a fulfilling of some deeply repressed wish (Freud 1953/1900). This withdrawal from reality is called regression, a return to the earlier stages of development, in which fantasy takes over the reality principle. But it is crucial to note that there are two kinds of regression: one is pathological, may often be irreversible, and will lead to neurotic and/or psychotic functioning: a part of unpleasant reality is denied (neurosis), or reality as a whole is denied (psychosis). As this falls in the realm of psychopathology, it is of no concern in this article. What, in contrast, is of vital importance is the second type of regression that the famous psychoanalyst Ernst Kris named “regression in the service of the ego” (Kris 1952; more recently reactualized in Knaffo 2002). What is the difference between pathological regression, and regression in the service of the ego, the latter also known as creative regression? While the first one is permanent, with regressive swing moving against the will of the conscious ego, regression in the service of the ego is purposeful and controlled by the same ego. Creators, by their conscious will, sever the links with the external world to listen with their inner ear to their fantasies and unconscious impulses. This is comparable to the withdrawal from reality and entering the realm of dream that every human being undergoes. The following statement by Johannes Brahms is paradigmatic: “I am in a trance-like condition – hovering between being asleep and awake; I am still conscious but right on the border of losing consciousness and it is at such moments that inspired ideas come” (Abell 1955: 25). We have sufficient reason to believe that despite the tremendous changes in musical language and social circumstances that have taken place since, creative minds still find their ideas where Brahms found them.

A further question now arises. When the artist willingly and temporarily regresses to the earlier stages of mental functioning, to what stage of development will he regress? How “deep” will that creative regression be along the imaginary axis of the mental strata? In our previous work (Zatkalik & Kontić 2013; 2015), we proposed a model of the regressive depth, as shown in Example 1.



Example 1. Depth of regression

As can be seen, this model stipulates that the regressive path is the “shortest” for those artists who form their imagination through the verbal medium: the literary art. The visual artist will abandon the realm of spoken and written words, and will organize his fantasy by means of visual images. Finally, the musician will abandon both the realm of words and visual images, and will regress to the deepest level of the archaic psyche. This is precisely the reverse of the developmental process. At the earliest stages of development, the world was first represented through auditory images; visual imagery is meaningfully organized at a somewhat later stage, whereas the mastering of language, the development of the verbal-conceptual apparatus is due at yet a later one. It goes without saying that in this hierarchic organization from the most archaic to the most recent, the more recent developmental layers do not obliterate the archaic ones: they exist alongside each other and the mind is capable of fluctuating between them.

This also invites a logical conclusion: the organization, or the form that a work of art assumes, resembles the properties of the mental strata from which the creative idea originated. In our previous work (Zatkalik & Kontić 2013; 2015), we strived to demonstrate that musical structures and processes bear the imprints of the deepest levels of the archaic psyche, dominated by unconscious, preverbal primary processes. The fact that these deepest mental strata are preverbal, accounts for the cliché about the ineffability of music.

Real-life percepts when subject to primary processes tend to be heavily distorted. This is best observable in dreams, where the latent dream thoughts appear significantly transformed to yield the manifest content of the dream. Percepts can be fragmented, their fragments recombined, or fragments are made to represent entire objects (*pars pro toto*); several objects can be conflated, they coalesce into one; repetitions are frequent, and events in a dream are sometimes given the meaning opposite to the one they ostensibly possess (Friedman 1960). All these transformations have their counterparts in music. In previous articles (Zatkalik & Kontić 2013; 2015; 2017), we illustrated this isomorphism between music and primary-process mechanisms with a plethora of examples. To make our meaning clearer, we will here present several of them.

It will transpire that the music of the last hundred years or so is especially rich in primary-process transformations. Psychoanalytic advancements into the unconscious realm seem to be perfectly matched by composers' endeavors to probe into the same area and give it an audible form.

Condensation is often cited as one of the basic primary-process mechanisms. In dreams, two persons can coalesce. In music, two themes or two motives may coalesce to produce a new one (Ex. 2).

a) beginning

b) rehearsal 2, b. 3

c) rehearsal 6, bb. 14–15

Example 2. Edgard Varèse, *Amérique*

Different scales or modes merge into one another. The polymodal procedures of Béla Bartók are a case in point. His works are often based on various modes or scales (major, minor, octatonic, Lydian, Phrygian) combined in specific ways, prompting the Bartók scholar János Kárpati to observe: "...although the individual modes may appear as relatively self-contained, independent systems, they do lose their independence either partly or completely... and, producing a new quality, *merge* [italic ours] into one another..." (Kárpati 1994: 226).

Even broader principles of pitch organization, "musical languages", can be conflated in a single musical piece. The beginning of Dmitri Shostakovich's Twelfth String Quartet features a twelve-tone row, but imbued, permeated with tonality.

Example 3. Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 12

To begin with, the completing twelfth tone of the row is the tonic D-flat (the home key of this quartet) and with the penultimate A-flat, it forms a quasi-cadential gesture. The tonic arrival and the completion of the twelve-tone aggregate – two common goal-projecting strategies from the tonal and atonal domains, respectively – have colluded to produce the closure of the row, which at the same time initiates the subsequent statement of the first sonata theme. Furthermore, the dominant A-flat combines with the two most prominent tones: the first and lowest C and the highest G-flat in the middle, to form an incomplete dominant seventh chord. The A-flat itself, together with the preceding quasi-appoggiatura is also the axis of vertical symmetry. While the twelve notes are ordered in such a way as to conform to the normative dodecaphonic procedures, there are tonal undercurrents, unobtrusive, yet deeply embedded. Thus, two usually opposed musical languages are seamlessly welded together.

We take a further example from Olivier Messiaen's *Turangalila* Symphony (Ex. 4).

a) "statue theme"

b) "flower theme"

c) "love theme"

4-4 (02347)

4-27 4-z29 4-z29 4-z29 4-z29 4-27

4-4 ⊂ 5-4  
4-4 ⊂ 5-11    G8: 4-4; 5-4; 5-11  
4-4 Kh 5-4; 5-11

Example 4. Messiaen, *Turangalila*

What every textbook will tell you is that the Symphony contains several recurring, cyclic themes, most prominently the “statue” theme, also known as masculine, and the “flower”, the feminine theme; it is also common textbook knowledge that a kind of synthesis of the statue and flower themes is achieved in Movement VI (“love theme”).<sup>1</sup> Contrasting as the themes are on the surface, Messiaen scholars have always felt that they somehow belonged together (see especially Екимовский 1987: 150ff). And although set theoretical analysis may not always be suitable for this composer, in this case it reveals that with respect to the pitch content, the upper voice flower forms a set-class which is a subset of the upper voice statue set. The two sets also form a subcomplex (Kh) relation, and both belong to the same genus, Genus 8. Whatever the differences, there is a deeper, if concealed, affinity between them. In these deeper layers, inaccessible to consciousness, they form a unity. The manifest content is, however, highly fragmented. In the love theme, the three themes are clearly shown to be related in several significant ways: for instance, the pitch content of the beginning of the love theme is identical with the flower; these disguised relations clearly show how thoroughly and beyond recognition the latent idea is distorted in the manifest content. Condensation is again in action, and it also brings about affective transvaluation.

Vn. I

Vn. II div.

VI div.

Vc.

6-33 Kh 4-26; 4-z29; 3-11  
G12: 6-33; 4-26; 4-27

4-27 4-26 4-z29 4-26 4-z29 4-z29 4-26

Example 5. Messiaen, *Turangalila*, Movement VI, climax

<sup>1</sup> Such characterizations of themes originate with Messiaen himself (see Sherlaw Johnson 1975: 82ff, Екимовский 1987: 151).

The climax of the movement features a number of significant relations between pc sets, corroborating our conclusion about the underlying unity (Ex. 5). We draw attention to the 4–27 set, previously designated to the accompaniment, now transferred to the melodic voice – *displaced* in other words – and its shape and function radically altered (perhaps even turned into the opposite). The horizontal and vertical dimensions are collapsed, the figure-ground distinction blurred, the constraints of space seem to be obviated. These are again transformations most likely encountered in dreams, thus readily attributable to the workings of primary processes. Let us not forget, this most oneiric movement is titled Garden of Love’s Sleep. How else?

Another mechanism we will briefly engage with is fragmentation. One might almost call it the destiny of any musical theme to be fragmented, and at some future point reassembled. Tonality also, once established tends to be fragmented; the integrity of harmonic progressions is fractured, but also inevitably restored: the laws of tonality function as a musical superego. Contrariwise, some important tendencies in post-tonal music strive to present the musical flow as irreparably fragmented. Let us consider an excerpt from Edgard Varèse’s *Octandre* (Ex. 6).

Example 6. Varèse, *Octandre*

The basic unit, the cell, is no more than a chromatic tetrachord.<sup>2</sup> But even that splits into two interlocking trichords, and thus the greater portion of the first movement unfolds in perpetual redistribution of these trichords in time and space. And even that is not all. The second movement further breaks down these trichords, and the F – G-flat dyad is sustained for eight bars in the initial portion of the movement.

True, at the very end of the first movement, there is something in the nature of a reprise, but we would take the liberty of calling it a fake. To resort to a cliché: too little, too late, and somehow too out of context to be able to serve the formal function of a reprise. Unlike the tonal form, repetitions in atonality provide neither orderly and balanced architectonics of the work nor the narrativizing evocations of past events, nor yet the mastering of the separation trauma by regaining the object. They feel more like an emergence of the repressed; particles of the unconscious breaking out suddenly to the surface.

To generalize from these fragmentation examples: everything is amenable to fragmentation. Thematic material undergoes disintegration: in the 20th century, a considerable number of compositions dispenses with such entities as themes and hinges on motives or intervals. In the extreme cases of pointillist texture, as exemplified by Anton Webern, the very fabric of music disintegrates. Another process we have witnessed is the disintegration of the tonal system. Furthermore, in the unprecedented diversity of 20th-century music we can observe fragmentation of the system of values, the breakdown of cultural consensus, or – in keeping with the psychoanalytic spirit of this paper – the absence of an aesthetic superego. In aleatory music, even the agency of the creator undergoes fragmentation. Nor is discourse about music spared fragmentation. Theoretical approaches and analytical methods proliferate; scholars often seem not to be able even to understand each other: the situation that Kevin Korsyn aptly called Babelization (Korsyn 2013: 16).

<sup>2</sup> The idea of the generative cell in Varèse’s *Octandre* was discussed in Moura 2004, but in a rather different context.

All this has many ramifications. We could, for instance, attempt to provide explanations for certain tendencies in music from the past several decades by invoking the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut and his distinction between the tragic and the guilty man (Kohut 1977), as the present authors did (Zatkalik & Kontić 2017), but to follow these lines would greatly exceed the scope of this article.

It would be, of course, gross oversimplification to attribute the creative act solely to the functioning of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis contends that artistic creation is structured by two, ostensibly contradictory processes: one implies a withdrawing from the objective reality and acquiring the subjective expression of the creator; the other is the creative subject's tendency to communicate the idea to the other, with a special emphasis on the psychological equilibrium of the two aspects. Ernst Kris (1952) was the first to introduce this idea, and he regarded creativity as a two-phased process: the phase of inspiration, i.e. searching for a creative idea, suspending cathexes<sup>3</sup> with the other, opening a path to individual, unconscious impulses. This is followed by an opposite process: elaboration of the form the idea will assume in order to be communicated. The first phase implies creative regression and abandonment to the primary processes of mental functioning; the subsequent one is largely influenced by secondary processes. Reality testing, suspended in the first phase, acquires pivotal importance in the second. What used to be irrational, formless and archaic must be rendered in a form in which it can be shared. The inspiration phase is comparable with dreaming, when one abandons oneself to primary-process functioning. In a sense, dreaming is also a creative act. Dream, irrational as it may seem, represents intimate communication between the dreamer and his unconscious. But outside this channel, it is devoid of communicability. This, however, is of no importance, since communication with the other is not its purpose in the first place. On the other hand, the artistic creative act – however its inspiration phase may resemble a dream – requires a recombining of inspirational ideas into communication. Needless to say, the two phases are intertwined, not strictly chronologically following one another.

As long as we as creators are concerned with molding our ideas so as to be acceptable to the other, we are also exercising our empathic abilities. As a means to accomplishing this communicative task, the artist is obliged to put himself in the position of the audience. Kurt Eissler called this the *doxaletic function* (Eissler 1971). Let us consider the following situation. Suppose you were a composer writing music for a children's fairy tale. The tale itself, however appealing it may be for any child, contains many frightening figures and situations (wolves, dark forests, witches etc.). In order to write appropriate music, you will use your compositional skills, your knowledge of orchestration, harmony, form etc. Such knowledge is rational, belongs to the secondary functions of the conscious ego, directed toward reality, toward solving actual compositional problems. At the same time, music is there to provide, or rather to enhance tensions and relaxations. You may lack empathy for the amount of tensions that are to be presented to the ear of the child; you may frighten them, instead of offering the quantity of tension they may control before the resolution finally takes place. Such empathic abilities can hardly be learned. You must somehow be a child, become one, that is, invoke the child in you.

While these considerations apply to any form of artistic creation, it should be noted that in musical creation, the two phases can assume extreme forms. Having its roots in the earliest stages of individual development, when the individual's mental apparatus functions in the archaic, unconscious mode, music is of all the arts closest to primary-process mental functioning: creative regression, as shown in Example 1 is the deepest in music. As our examples 2–6 from the present paper, as well as those from our previous work indicate, musical processes (thematic work, elaboration of fundamental structures, shaping of global form etc.) are highly isomorphous with primary-process transformations (let us reiterate: transformations similar to those one encounters in dreams). Contrariwise – and probably precisely because of it – even such compositions that seem highly intuitive, resulting from a fleeting moment of inspiration (e.g. Claude Debussy), or such that purport to epitomize primal, irrational forces (Igor Stravinsky, *Sacre du printemps*), are carefully crafted within a framework of cultural norms.

Such passages from György Ligeti's micropolyphonic works as shown in Example 7, demonstrate the astounding level condensation can reach in music. One might say that this texture collapses upon itself, producing something in the nature of a musical black hole. This seems to originate from the deepest recesses of the archaic unconscious. Yet, at the same time, these passages are most carefully crafted, most precisely calculated. The extremes of primary and secondary processes collude to produce this music.

<sup>3</sup> In psychoanalysis: emotional charge associated with an instinct, or the process of investing psychic energy in an instinctual object.

Example 7. György Ligeti, *Atmosphères*

To conclude, we would first invoke the idea of Gilbert Rose, a musically competent psychotherapist, that music may be viewed as interplay between primary and secondary processes (Rose 2004: 20). Our present effort confirms this view, and further etches it by concluding that the personality of a creative artist possesses both openness toward one's own unconscious impulses, the faculty of abandoning oneself to creative regression, and the ability to hatch communicable, universal meanings out of the raw material of individual fantasy. The secondary processes are there to provide "objective" universals to subjective universe. The content of individual fantasy would remain forever at the level of the strictly personal, were it not for the creative elaboration it undergoes.

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## Regresija muzikoje, arba Kaip komunikuoti tai, kas neišreiškia

### Santrauka

Vienas iš aukščiausių žmogiškųjų būtybių požymių – kūrybinis aktas – visada buvo keblus klausimas, jį bandė nagrinėti daugelis psichologijos mokyklų. Psichoanalizė, viena iš jų, pabrėžia sąmoninius impulsus kaip kertinius (nors ir ne vienintelių), atsakingus už meno kūrinio sukūrimą. Šiame straipsnyje gvildenamas kūrybinio ego vaidmuo kūrybinės idėjos ir kūrybinio akto komunikacinės jėgos koncepcijų kontekste.

Psichoanalizės teorija tvirtina, kad meninė kūryba yra sąlygojama dviejų neva prieštarų procesų: pirmas – tai pasitraukimas iš objektyvios realybės ir subjektyvi kūrėjo raiška; antras – kūrybinio subjekto tendencija komunikuoti idėją kitam. Psichologinė pusiausvyra tarp šių dviejų stadijų yra ypatingo dėmesio vertas aspektas. Ernstas Krisas kūrybiškumą traktavo kaip dviejų fazių procesą. Visų pirma išskiriama inspiracijos fazė, t. y. kūrybinės idėjos paieškos suvaržant kateksio poreikį, atveriant kelią individualiems, sąmoniniams impulsams. Vėliau vyksta priešingas procesas – formos konstravimas siekiant tinkamai pateikti idėją. Pirmai fazei būdinga vadinamoji kūrybinė regresija ir pasidavimas pirmapradžiam mentalinio funkcionavimo procesui, antrai fazei – antriniai procesai. Eksperimentavimas su realybe, suspenduotas pirmoje fazėje, antroje įgyja centrinę reikšmę. Tam, kas buvo iracionalu, beformiška ir archajiška, reikia surasti suprantamą formą. Įkvėpimo fazė yra prilyginama sapnavimui, kai pasiduodama pirmapradžiam funkcionavimui. Sapnas, kaip įprasta manyti, yra iracionalus reiškinys, jis atspindi intymią komunikaciją tarp sapnuojančiojo ir jo sąmonės: komunikatyvumo stoka šiuo atveju nėra reikšminga, kadangi komunikacija su kitu nėra pirminis tikslas. Kita vertus, nors meninio kūrybinio akto įkvėpimo fazė gali priminti sapną, inspiracines idėjas reikia pertvarkyti į komunikuojančias. Abi fazės yra susipynusios (negrįžta chronologine tvarka) ir eina viena po kitos.

Muzikos kūryboje šios fazės gali pasiekti kraštutines formas. Į ankstyviausias individo vystymosi stadijas (t. y. kai mentalinis individo aparatas funkcionuoja archajiniu, sąmoniniu ir ikiverbaliniu būdu) pretenduojanti muzika iš visų menų yra arčiausiai pirmapradžio proceso mentalinio funkcionavimo: kūrybinė regresija muzikoje yra giliausia. Iš įvairių pavyzdžių matyti, kad muzikinius procesus (temų plėtojimą, fundamentalių struktūrų organizavimą, globalios formos projektavimą) galime taikyti izomorfinių pirmapradžių procesų transformacijoms (pavyzdžiui, sapnui). Priešingai – o galbūt būtent dėl to – tokios kompozicijos, kurios atrodo netgi labai intuityvios, atsirandančios iš įkvėpimo momento blyksnio (pvz., Debussy), arba tokios, kuriomis pretenduojama įkūnyti pirmaprades, iracionalias jėgas (pvz., Stravinskio *Sacre*), yra kruopščiai įgyvendintos pagal kultūros normas.

Galima apibendrinti, kad menininko asmenybei būdingas tiek atvirumas sąmoniniams impulsams, gebėjimas pasiduoti kūrybinei regresijai, tiek mokėjimas modeliuoti perduodamas universalias prasmes iš neapdorotos sufantazuotos materijos.