On The Seven Words
Translated by Kathleen Antonioli and Eric Brandom

To what does the writing of a text for a musical work respond? To what does the writing of a text for a work of religious music respond? These are the two questions that we cannot avoid asking when we encounter a work from a contemporary composer, which refers very explicitly to a classical work with a religious subject and which includes a text from a contemporary author.

A supplementary question quickly arises. Is the question of the relationship between the text and the music entirely separate from the question of their religious character? Or on the contrary do the two tend, if not to become confused with one another, at least to fit together?

Let us begin thus: can I imagine being asked to write with a religious motif but without musical intent? I must declare right away that I cannot do it. What indeed could be asked of me? A theological commentary? A spiritual exercise? Again, I would have to be, in advance, religiously disposed. This, in any case, is why such things are not asked of me.

It is however true that I was once asked—once, one time—what I could say about preaching, on the basis of works that I had published under the category of the “deconstruction of Christianity.” The question surprised me considerably: it assumed that I could adopt a point of view internal to a Church (whichever one) while it is of course only outside of any Church—and any profession of faith—that it is possible for me to examine how Christianity defeats itself as a religion and departs so far from itself as to become unrecognizable. This simply means, at least, that the affirmation of the divinity of the man “Jesus Christ” or of anything that is attached to this “mystery” is no longer at issue.

It is just as well that it was not at all in this mode that Olivier Dejours presented to me his request—or his proposal—for a text for a work referring to The Seven Words by Haydn. Without a doubt he had in mind the fact that I had published two works on notions of “Christianity” or “god” envisaged in our context, which is to say that of the “death of God.” By itself, this indication already contains an obvious complexity related to the significance of making a request of an author known to be Christian. Thus such a proposal could exist only, really, if formulated by a Christian composer. (In the extreme case: when an opera was commissioned from Massiaen, he chose the subject—Saint Francis of Assisi—and composed the libretto and the music himself.)

It is true that Olivier also mentioned another text that I had written in posthumous homage to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. This followed the at once biblical, liturgical, and musical theme of the Lamentations because of the importance of this theme for Lacoue-Labarthe. And yet the least that can be said of him is that his refusal, even his rejection of religion was more than explicit: it was vehement. But he understood the Lamentations, those of Jeremiah, of Charpentier or of Couperin, precisely as the cry of one who knows that heaven is empty.
But there is more: Olivier Dejours had already brought up the possibility of asking me for a text, several years beforehand, and in a completely different context absent of any religious references. The request for *The Seven Words* therefore appears immediately as one among possible variations of an interest on his part for a certain type or register of writing, independent of any reference to a pre-determined content.

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This rapid scene-setting of course opens numerous questions, for which it is not at all certain that I will be able to provide satisfying responses.

It is not enough to declare, here is a work the music and text of which were done by non-believers. This affirmation raises at once two problems: first, what becomes of the religious subject when it is not treated in a religious perspective? Second: what exactly is meant by “non-believer”? Let us consider these two points in turn.

1) How can we affirm that the “perspective” of an artist is or is not religious? It is obvious that it was perfectly possible for Andy Warhol to paint his variations of *The Last Supper* just as Le Corbusier, an affirmed atheist, constructed the chapel of Ronchamp. It is no less obvious that Michael W. Smith, an affirmed Christian, composes and sings about expressly Christian themes, as does the orthodox Christian Arvö Pärt. In reality, no artistic, aesthetic, formal, or cultural criteria of any sort permits us to decide between the hypothesis of a religious disposition or the inverse. Such a disposition remains in itself entirely closed to formal production or creation (to each his own term). And yet, in using this word—“formal”—one can certainly not simply appeal to the distinction between form and content—this is simply to throw oneself into an ocean of esthetic debate. The religious “subject” is unchanged by the intention or the subjective disposition of the artist. There are, we know too well, pious images, hymns, and even architectures that ostentatiously display their religious intentions, but display no more artistic work than advertisements do. But this does not allow us to conclude that there is a relationship between the “pious” or the “edifying” and the properly religious intention because it is not difficult to imagine that the conceivers and artisans of what we call “objects of piety” might sometimes be simple publicists, serving enterprises the principles of which are to be religious.

2) Regarding the second question: the explicit confirmation of a belief remains subject to interrogation, as we have just seen. One can say the same for an explicit confirmation of an absence of faith. To be more precise, we must at least distinguish between three levels, and so this second response will be longer.

The level of religious observance, the level of intimate conviction, and the level of thought. The first level is that of ritual. It characterizes religion in the most ordinary fashion. The idea of “observance” corresponds best to the true first meaning of the word “religion.” Religious practice is not necessarily the translation of adhesion to the content at play in the rituals. The importance of integration and of social conformity cannot be doubted. Nor can that of its “security” function: ritual reassures in giving us a formal frame (here we can separate form and content) for the profoundly uncertain, even disturbing, domain of “meaning.” All the same, these ways of understanding ritual only hold for a society
that is already on the whole detached from religion. Where the cultural and social (even political) whole is structured by and steeped in a body of religious representations and practices, ritual can be said to be consubstantial to common existence, from which individual existence is hardly distinguishable.

The second level—of intimate conviction—represents an infinitely delicate zone where no observation can penetrate, not even that of a supposed “self-conscience”: the possibility of superstition, or crazy ideas, is never excluded under the name of “belief.” Also never excluded is the simple firmness without self-deception of a conviction accepting a mystery as a source of meaning, and conducting itself accordingly. All gradations are possible and only obvious actions, such as obsessive conduct or conduct unambiguously opposed to one’s engagements, can make a compelling difference.

The third level is that on which religion is freed from itself as ritual and representation, as happens in the great spiritualities of monotheistic religions. The direction is given in this saying of Meister Eckhart: “let us pray to god to keep us free and clear from god.” Here thought can only, on the one hand, recognize the inanity of the representation of a being freed from all the conditions of existence, and on the other hand recognize that there is no thought (or “mind” [esprit]) except in relation to something unthinkable. The result of these two necessities is the exclusion of that which resembles and “existence of God” and the demand to remain open to an absolute excess above what it is possible to conceive, represent, and conclude.

One sees that it is never possible to decide about the content of a profession of faith, except in a few cases where there is visibly an excess of conformism or a tortured imagination. The most “spiritual” figures of all faiths—those that we call “mystics,” always a risky term—all straightforwardly agree that it is impossible to give a testament of their own faith other than a nothingness of representation, knowledge, or mastery. It is indeed in the effective trial of such a nothingness that the only possibility of “faith,” entirely disjoint from all “belief” resides, which is to say a confidence in or a fidelity to the very fact that nothing can verify this truth.

It is not much easier to decide the content of a profession of non-belief. Nothing can assure us that one who repudiates all kinds of religious representation does not secretly—which means also unwittingly—give a divine role to some other thing: a person, an image, an idea...

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This may be particularly the case for those that we call “artists.” Isn’t an artist someone who gives the highest function of affirming a “meaning” in excess of any perception of knowledge or power over to a sensual practice disconnected from all finality? Whatever more determinate content one wishes give to the term “art”, so recent and endlessly discussed, so inseparable from the plurality of arts that are no less tributary to the singular idea of “art,” one cannot remove this affirmation of excessive meaning or an excess of meaning, and, one must make clear, to a sensual excess of sense.

What happened in 1500 when the young but already known Albrecht Dürer represented himself as Christ? Simultaneously the artist took the place of the Man-God, and made his art an homage to the divinity.
Analysis of Dürer’s gesture is certainly just as endless as any good analysis, and as any inquiry into the exact nature of a declaration of religious belonging, an affirmation of non-belief, or a subtle, more or less unconscious, assertion of art as a religion—even a divinity. (Such a claim might also be made of science, of power, or of love).

All these precautions might seem superfluous, and yet, they are likely to be necessary if we wish to be even slightly clear. Neither Olivier Dejoux nor I claim to make fully clear the personal sources of an enterprise that it is, in any case, impossible to reduce only to intent.

However, my goal here is not to speak about or for those who perform this piece, or who organize its performance, or who attend it or take part in it—this last hesitation might in turn raise an entire series of questions. But it is important to indicate that what I am trying to bring a little order to here, concerns not only a musician and a writer but also, piece by piece, a whole sociality out of which in fact come and to whom alone are addressed the gestures of musical and textual composition. It is also in light of this, and even in the end essentially because of this that it is important to disentangle a bit the question that seems to present itself as that of a “religious art” or not.

We can set out again from a sort of counter-example. It happens that about five years ago the philosopher Michel Serres wrote in accompaniment Haydn’s The Seven Words, played by the Ysaÿe Quartet, who were the ones to request it. Later, for a recording, the text was recited by the French actor Michael Lonsdale. This endeavor was quite different from ours, in that the text was the only new thing. The author of this text was not an affirmed Christian – and above all not a “Christian philosopher”— but at times gave certain interpretations of the evangelical message (for example on the theme of “adoption”) that can no doubt be situated within the influence of what was called a “demythologization”, even “deconstruction” of Christianity. Lonsdale for his part is a confirmed Christian who has already taken part in several other performances that were Christian in nature, alongside several others that were not marked as such.

(I note in passing that I only discovered the existence of this recording after the fact, and I have not listened to it, so as to not create any interference. More exactly, I have listened only to very brief excerpts, for a reason that I will explain later. Once the work to which Olivier and the Galuppi Quartet have invited me has indeed become public, I will turn to the whole work. Perhaps later the comparison of these texts will prove to be richly suggestive).
If I spoke of “counter-examples,” it is because it seems that the project of the Ysayë Quartet and Michel Serres is explicitly devoted to making Haydn’s text heard together with a text that returns to, that even amplifies and updates the words of Christ as the Gospels give them to us. The music and the text are interpreted. For our part, I can hazard the claim, using a disused term that Lacoue-Labarthe—him again—used and annotated, we use metaphrase. That is, to recover elsewhere (meta) by moving into another element rather than by reformulating the same element.

I am not introducing here any kind of comparative evaluation. That would be simply grotesque. I am trying to indicate this: in the text that I wrote, there is no longer in any way the assumption that we are dealing with the Gospel story nor with the man-god whose execution it recounted. And in a way, I can think that Olivier’s musical composition is at a similar distance from Haydn, who at the time was responding to a specific ecclesiastical request. Two presuppositions are at stated at once. The distance between the two can be fairly pointed out: the interpretation of a presupposition and the proposition of a metaphrase. This last, however, is characterized by Oliver’s choice, once my text was written, for the theme of melodrama in the strict sense of the word, equally distinct from song and text read without music. Equally distinct, therefore, from the oratorio (which Haydn’s brother, for his part, developed) and from preaching or meditation expected in religious ceremonies.

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This however is not the end of our interrogation. Because it could well be that for some among the musicians, artists, actors, and participants, it was simply not about all that, and that some—or maybe many—of them were interested in something else entirely. After all, the Ysaÿe Quartet bears the name of a musician who does not seem to have been of an especially religious disposition, while Baldassare Galuppi wrote many religious pieces alongside pieces that were profane, even burlesque, as it was natural to do in the 18th century particularly in Venice. Everyone involved here is interested first of all in music. What are we to say about this?

Let’s try to start back over from the beginning. This means first with Haydn, before becoming involved in a couple of forays further into the past. By all accounts, Haydn was a very pious Catholic. And his oeuvre bears several obvious marks of this, one of which is The Seven Words. Its original German title is a more religious formulation: Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze (The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour On the Cross). Stendhal relates that when Haydn was asked which of his works he preferred, this was his answer.

He wrote it in response to an advertised competition. Let us leave the telling to Stendhal: “About fifty years since, there was celebrated at Madrid and Cadiz, a service, called the Enterria; that is, the Funeral of the Redeemer. The gravity and religious feeling of the Spanish people, invested this ceremony with extraordinary pomp. A preacher explained, in succession, each of the seven words pronounced by Jesus from the cross; and the intervals left between each exposition, for the indulgence of the compunction of the faithful, were to be filled up with a music worthy of the greatness of the subject. The directors of this sacred spectacle caused an advertisement to be circulated throughout Europe, in which they offered a considerable reward to any composer who should supply seven grand symphonies, expressive
of the sentiments which each of the seven words of the Savoir ought to inspire. Haydn alone made the attempt...”

Without hesitating over Haydn’s religious fervor, or that of his sponsors, one cannot avoid remarking that such a context does not make it easy to untangle social expectations, the quest for prestige, artistic modes, and stature of sentiment and thought. It is however appropriate to note that this episode testifies to a time when it was still possible to gather together ritual convention, sensible representation, and the meaning of what Saint Paul called kenosis, the emptying of the divine into human death. It is instructive to compare Haydn’s work—which followed others by Schütz, Schein, and Pergolèse, among others—to what can be found at exactly the same time (all of this is happening in the years immediately before the French Revolution) in the Songs of the devoted soul, where the seven words with commentary in cheap verse are offered “to the tune of If you knew the secret of my soul.”

Such a comparison does not teach us much about the content of devotions or consciences, but quite a bit about what may kindle the artistic gesture: it is not piety in itself, which as such does not need to be put to music or on stage (I will return to this assertion) but it is well and truly at least the thought of true excellence in the aesthetic, in this case musical, order.

It is not a matter of separating the artistic from the religious, but of considering that the one has not, throughout history, strictly conformed to the other. Nor there even always been agreement between them. What was taking place in Haydn’s time—beginning long before—was a major displacement of such an agreement. Stendhal, later in his text, after having evoked a verse of Dante which speaks of songs “so soft that the obduracy of hell is melted by them,” declares of Haydn’s The Seven Words, “But of what use is it to praise them? It is necessary to hear them with the feelings of a Christian—to weep, believe, and shudder.” This sentence calls for infinite exegesis: One must not praise, which is to say wear oneself out with aesthetic commentary, but rather one must feel—with the ear, the heart, and faith. This is as necessary for receiving the music as it is for creating it. For all that, Stendhal’s sentence does not allow us to differentiate between aesthetics and faith. In saying “it is necessary to hear them,” it rather articulates a principle of identity between experience and judgment. With that, the transformation from an aesthetic of rules to an aesthetic of taste has already begun.

But “taste,” which is a term I am taking from the era in question, does not simply represent an arbitrary subjectivity which, as such, has nothing to do with the wager of faith, or not more than that of any other meaningful thought. It represents the autonomy of art as straining toward something that no pre-determined harmony can satisfy: toward what the same era called the “sublime”, a word Stendhal uses excessively. And this word means the sensible touch of that which is beyond sense.

This autonomy of art declares itself as such only from the moment when it can no longer appear as simply the instrument and the ornament of a ritual or a representation (of history, image, sacred text). This is what happens when the religious element ceases to structure the forms and thoughts of a society. Only three quarters of a century later, Rossini could address God thus in his “Petite messe solonnelle” (“Solemn little mass”): “Good God—behold completed this poor little Mass—is it indeed

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sacred music [la musique sacrée] that I have just written, or merely some damned music [la sacré musique]? You know well, I was born for comic opera [l’opera buffa]. Little science, a little heart, that is all. So may you be blessed, and grant me Paradise.”² Rossini was not mocking God any more than he was mocking himself: he is with God in a playful familiarity for which really only one thing is important: that the music is there. Buffa or seria (comic or serious), it is as music that it is sacred.

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I’ll be told: go further back and consider if music has not always been necessary to religious sentiment. This inquiry will invariably have an ambivalent result. We could, if we wanted to carry out the entire investigation here, begin with Saint Augustine. He knew the danger in the charm of musical as well as its jubilant force: the two faces, one might say, of adoration. In the same way the Church, following Plato, always sought to discipline, even to normalize, sacred music in its modes and colors and even in its relationship to the community of song. It is the same for all regulation, of passions or of economies: they demonstrate the irrepressible force of whatever they attempt to control.

Saint Augustine:

See how he himself provides you with a way of singing. Do not search for words, as if you could find a lyric which would give God pleasure. Sing to him “with songs of joy.” This is singing well to God, just singing with songs of joy. But how is this done? You must first understand that words cannot express the things that are sung by the heart. Take the case of people singing while harvesting in the fields or in the vineyards or when any other strenuous work is in progress. Although they begin by giving expression to their happiness in sung words, yet shortly there is a change. As if so happy that words can no longer express what they feel, they discard the restricting syllables. They burst out into a simple sound of joy, of jubilation. Such a cry of joy is a sound signifying that the heart is bringing to birth what it cannot utter in words. Now, who is more worthy of such a cry of jubilation than God himself, whom all words fail to describe? If words will not serve, and yet you must not remain silent, what else can you do but cry out for joy? Your heart must rejoice beyond words, soaring into an immensity of gladness, unrestrained by syllabic bonds. (Commentary on Psalm 32).³

I am not trying here to unfold all the consequences of a hypothesis that amounts to the claim that religion (at least in its monotheistic versions) canalizes an eruption of art that it cannot control. The business is indeed not only very complex, but becomes even more complex when one thinks that religion (at least in its Christian form) contains an energy that deconstitutes it and brings it out from itself—from rite and representation—finally exposing for all to see what I earlier called a relationship to the unthinkable. It is for this reason that it has become possible, today, to hear Christians say that Christianity is not a religion—even if those who say this understand it in fidelity to the mystery, for them real and historical, of the existence of the man-god.

And yet from this perspective, just as much as from a perspective foreign to this fidelity and therefore simply atheistic (even if this term might be suspected of a too-simple symmetry with the position of a

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³ Trans. DPO Conchobhair. Et Verbum.
god), another way presents itself of pursuing the question of the religious reference of an artistic work—in this case both musical and literary.

It is then necessary to begin with literature. The “seven words of Christ on the cross” became in our title simply “the seven words” through a double movement. On the one hand these are the words of some man, speaking from the place of a humanity without a world beyond. On the other hand, the reference remains to a religious tradition, without which the title “seven words” would be perfectly opaque. For a long time before Haydn these two words were enough to evoke what, even before being put into music—at least as far as we can tell—already had a particular quality that we must call at least in part literary.

These seven words are not a liturgical text (like a mass) nor the text of a hymn, (like the Stabat). Nor are they either in fact an evangelical text: they are drawn from the four Gospels. The words must be gathered together out of the three synoptics and the gospel of John. And there turn out to be seven of them. It is hard to believe that the four texts retained by the Church were chosen for this reason, even if the selection procedures for the canon were the result of very skillful maneuvering. Conscious work was required to note and isolate one number among all in all sorts of sacred or esoteric contexts.

This operation consists also of composing a sort of litany, detached from the story of the Passion, at once as the bringing together of moments of a specific message and as the creation of a sort of recitative sequence. The message, for its part, is in the isolation of the words of the dying victim. They are last words, and as such they seem to respond to the fullness of the mortal humanity of the crucified person for itself, after his life and his preaching, before his resurrection. Analysis must be pursued through each detail of the sequence, and the melodrama we present here is in some respects the product of such an analysis.

It happens then that the “seven words” are a special invention, even a creation, in which a spirituality of abandonment is closely linked to an utterance which separates out and details the words of this abandonment. So the abandonment is double: it is desolation, affliction, and relinquishing, letting go. The sequence of these seven words, isolated from their narrative context (arranged according to three movements, following, as I did, a tradition even more in love with measure) causes a word to ring out, which abandons itself in expressing its abandon. This is a way of coming to the last word not to conclude but to make heard the sovereign silence next to which the word that designates it dies.

What is this about if not poetry, and therefore also music? What is this about if not rhythm, cadence, a word held back or spoken, offered to its own limits? And what is this about if not this limit that music pushes back and transgresses, not exceeding it in the mode of a superior meaning, and yet nonetheless causing something to open that is outside of meaning, something that one must, at least, hear—as Stendhal says.

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4 This was already the case, as I learned after the fact, of a piece by Tristan Mural for orchestra, choir, and electronics, created in 2009. It is at least clear that the second of our motivations also applies to this work.

5 To be clear, one finds traces of the “seven words” in a manuscript at the Bibliothèque nationale de France dating from 1500, and 50 years later in the “Treaty of Prayer and Mediation” of Saint Peter of Alcantara.
Hearing in the meaning, or rather the tone, Stendhal gives it, can attend to religious dispositions or representations as well as to intellectual ones. And yet it does not require these representations, and above all is not satisfied by them. It cannot be summed up in the feeling of an emotion, at least if one understands by that word a more or less rough sort of immediacy. When Stendhal writes “it is necessary to hear them...to believe and to tremble,” the first verb resembles and surpasses the two others, *tremble* speaks of entering into resonance with what resonates in the word and cannot be said, *believe* speaks of remaining faithful to what the word names beyond all names.

Jean-Luc Nancy