

≈ | Introduction

Every culture, every society knows and cultivates riddles. Nearly all the leading figures in cultural history – Da Vinci, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe, Poe, to name just a few – wrote riddles. Their scope ranges from the playful and diverting realm of an unburdened pastime to the sophisticated atmosphere of conundrums on philosophical and religious matters. In the case of Oedipus and the Sphinx – probably the most famous of all riddles – it was indeed a deadly serious matter: the travellers who were not able to solve the Sphinx’s deceptively simple question were devoured by the monstrous hybrid creature. Oedipus found the solution and caused the Sphinx to throw itself into the abyss out of pure despair, as it saw no more reason to live once the riddle had been solved. In other instances as well, riddles could be a matter of life and death. The so-called ‘neck riddles’ (German: ‘Halslösungsrätsel’) exist to the present in traditional cultures, but have also found a place in fiction. A condemned person is offered the chance to save his neck by propounding a riddle the judge is unable to answer.

Not every riddle is life-threatening. However, not being able to solve a conundrum can at least cause embarrassment and a feeling of humiliation. Of course, losing face is not as dangerous as losing your neck. But regardless of whether we struggle with brain-teasers on our own or in a group, in case of failure we feel excluded from a real or imagined circle, from those who are capable of understanding the author’s intention. Every riddle situation could in fact be seen as a contest: between the inventor and his public on the one hand and between the addressees among themselves on the other. In each case, a trial of strength takes place. Even if many riddles can be regarded *sub specie ludi*, they pose a problem that needs to be solved. No matter how playful or serious their intention, riddles are a subtle way to attain (or lose) power and to display (or forfeit) superiority in competence and cleverness.

Because of their special form of presentation and communication, riddles have attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines, who variously focus on their literary, psychological, philosophical, sociological and anthropological facets. This seems to be at odds with the

riddle's appearance in today's popular culture. Judging from the wealth of books such as *Jumbo Jokes and Riddles Book: Hours of Gut-busting Fun!* or *Mein bunter Kinderrätselspaß* – to name just two examples with especially imaginative titles – nowadays riddles are often associated with the realm of childhood learning and/or dismissed as a mere diversion, serving only to give us a good laugh. Today riddles are indeed mainly found in close proximity to crosswords and Sudokus, and one quickly forgets that they have a long-standing tradition and – contrary to our present-day perspective – were often considered pinnacles of learning and wisdom. Conundrums frequently touched upon fundamental metaphysical and religious issues. Above all, they can be found in many literary masterpieces in poetry or prose and offer thought for extensive theoretical reflection.

A crucial question – or rather a series of questions – immediately comes to mind when thinking about riddles: what is it that drives people to express themselves in a dark and untransparent manner, in a way that is not immediately understandable and needs to be unravelled first, like a knot that must be untied?¹ And why are so many people attracted to riddles, and why do they want to take up the challenge and get involved in the process of deciphering the riddle?

Whereas we usually associate riddles with literature, this book is about riddles in the music of the Renaissance. For the non-musicological reader this might come as a surprise. How can a riddle be expressed in music? What is it we have to guess? As we will see, the key to a musical riddle always resides in the notation. It is the written form that the composer conceives as a conundrum that needs to be solved. The early modern period was the heyday of musical riddle culture. Composers revelled in wrapping their music in an enigmatic guise and leaving it up to the performers to figure out how to interpret it. They deliberately complicated their musical texts in order to engage the performer in an insiders' intellectual game, a process of obfuscation, discovery and delight. The enigmatic element could be couched in a well-known verbal inscription – taken from an astonishing variety of sources – which suggested the technique the singer had to apply to the notation. The encoding could also stem from an image, which often visualised the essence of the riddle and added to the symbolic qualities of the composition as a whole.

¹ See the title of a collection of essays edited by G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman, *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

From about the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, leading composers such as Antoine Busnoys, Jacob Obrecht and Josquin des Prez came up with some extremely complicated riddles in their masses, motets and chansons. They initiated the culture of the enigmatic in music, which was to continue for many decades – in fact even centuries. This is not to say that the Franco-Flemish polyphonists were the very first to conceive musical riddles – one needs only to think of some highly sophisticated puzzles from the *Ars subtilior* of the late fourteenth century or the anonymous ballade *En la maison Dedalus* (fittingly depicted in the form of a labyrinth, hence imbued with a high degree of self-referentiality) – but it seems fair to say that these are rather isolated examples that do not represent the musical state of affairs at their time. Around 1450, however, the cultivation of the enigmatic starts to gain much larger dimensions and becomes an integral part of musical thinking. These pieces provoked very diverging reactions – as most riddles do – from composers, singers and theorists, and turn up in all kinds of sources, including not only music prints, manuscripts and treatises, but also paintings, intarsia and even linen cloths as well. Their widespread transmission indicates that musical riddles inscribed themselves in the general taste for the enigmatic in Renaissance culture.

Although there are significant differences between literary and musical riddles in terms of conception, presentation and realisation, it was indispensable to approach musical riddles from an interdisciplinary perspective (both on the methodological and on the practical levels) in order to provide a comprehensive framework for the present study. Numerous theoretical works about the nature and characteristics of riddles exist. Even if most of them concentrate on the literary conundrum, they have proved to be crucial for understanding the riddle in music as well. Indeed, although riddles occur in various contexts, their very essence in terms of structure, working and purpose brings to light striking similarities across disciplines.

In a seminal article, Dan Pagis offered a concise definition of a riddle: ‘A riddle is only that text which is intended to function as a riddle – a text whose author . . . deliberately presents it to the reader as a challenge; and, naturally, a riddle is a text able to function as a riddle, a text suited to being a challenge, encoded through various devices, but still soluble through the hints it contains.’² Pagis’s definition is extremely useful, as it is at once very specific and broad enough to include manifestations of the enigmatic in other than literary contexts. In the following paragraphs, I wish to

² D. Pagis, ‘Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle’ in Hasan-Rokem and Shulman (eds.), *Untying the Knot*, 81–108 at 81.

develop further the points touched upon by Pagis and to highlight systematically the riddle's constitutive elements. This dissection is needed in order to arrive at what we could call an 'ontology of the riddle', which will form a solid backdrop for the rest of this study. In what follows, I will be using the words 'text', 'author' and 'reader/recipient' in the broadest sense. By considering a 'text' as a set of symbols that transmits some kind of informative message, an 'author' as the person who creates it and a 'reader' as the person who interprets the text, we can encompass literary, musical and other art forms and their respective manifestations of the enigmatic.

When rereading Pagis's definition, a series of terms immediately catches the eye. Of central importance is the author's intention: a riddle is a riddle only when it is intended as such. This may appear to be a trivial criterion, but its purpose is to exclude those texts that – for several possible reasons – are puzzling to us, but were not so intended by the author.³ A riddle is the result of the author's deliberate encoding. It is a text that wants to be a challenge for its recipients, but offers clues for its solution at the same time. But what exactly does this challenge consist of and how is it communicated to the reader? An essay by Don Handelman, published in the same volume as Pagis's article, offers several important cues.⁴ It will become clear that riddles – from the easiest to the most elaborate ones – present a very complex form of communication with a special motivational and cognitive structure.

To begin with, a riddle's challenge stems from its being addressed to a potential reader by way of a question: 'The riddle image is always conceptually a question, be it syntactically interrogative or not.'⁵ The question can thus be posed either explicitly – see, for example, the wealth of literary riddles that are written in the first person, which underlines their seeking to communicate with a potential reader – or implicitly, as in the case of musical riddles, but in both instances it is clear that they present us with a task that needs to be solved.⁶ They demand something from

³ As J. M. Ziolkowski, 'Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition', *Medievalia*, 19 (1996), 101–70 at 102 points out, 'a reader's perception of literary obscurity does not necessarily result from a conscious effort on the part of an author. Sometimes it results from our distance as readers from the original text and contexts.' Other reasons he mentions are vagaries in transmission and the linguistic shortcomings of today's readers.

⁴ D. Handelman, 'Traps of Trans-Formation: Theoretical Convergences between Riddle and Ritual' in Hasan-Rokem and Shulman (eds.), *Untying the Knot*, 37–61.

⁵ E. K. Maranda, 'Theory and Practice of Riddle Analysis', *Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (1971), 51–61 at 54.

⁶ This is what C. Holdefer, 'Reading the Enigma: The Play within the Play' in S. Bikialo and J. Dürrenmatt (eds.), *L'énigme* (Université de Poitiers, 2003), 41–50 at 42 has called the riddle's ritualisation and celebration of difficulty.

the reader. With their interrogative structure, riddles seek to attract the reader's attention and to establish a contact with him. However, compared with an ordinary dialogic situation, the questioning character of a riddle is different.⁷ Shlomith Cohen aptly describes this difference as follows: 'In genuine questioning, the questioner seeks some information of which he is ignorant, and which he believes is accessible to the addressee. In the case of riddles, however, the riddler is in possession of some information which he manipulates the addressee into seeking.'⁸ In other words, a riddle is a question which already contains the answer.⁹ This recursive, autotelic aspect gives the riddle a high degree of self-referentiality.¹⁰ Apart from that, it is the inverted way of relating information that gives the author a special kind of power: he already knows the answer and invites the recipient to find it.

In considering the riddle as an inverted question, one can in fact distinguish a series of interrelated aspects, which help us to refine the riddle's special communicative status. First of all, through its interrogative nature, a riddle is targeted: it is meant to engage the attention of the reader in a particular way and – as Handelman puts it – 'it is purposive in its thrust toward the accomplishment and actualization of an answer'.¹¹ The author invites the reader to join his world, to explore it and to figure out how it works, but does so – deliberately – by way of a question. Once the reader has agreed to play the game, he is 'trapped' into the requirement of an answer.¹² He knows there is a solution, but only after he has spent enough time to unravel the riddle's meaning will he be able to find it.¹³

⁷ On the working of questioning in general, see J. Bruin, *Homo interrogans: Questioning and the Intentional Structure of Cognition* (University of Ottawa Press, 2001).

⁸ S. Cohen, 'Connecting through Riddles, or the Riddle of Connecting' in Hasan-Rokem and Shulman (eds.), *Untying the Knot*, 294–315.

⁹ See E. K. Maranda, 'The Logic of Riddles' in P. Maranda and E. K. Maranda (eds.), *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 189–232 at 192. Related to this is Handelman's remark that 'the answer to the riddle image both leads elsewhere . . . and returns to the question in the image – in this regard, the structure of the riddle is recursive, a structure that contains feedback' ('Traps of Trans-Formation', 42).

¹⁰ See Handelman, 'Traps of Trans-Formation', 43: 'The answer completes the question, and totally, thereby closing off question/answer as a whole – a self-contained unit in its entirety.'

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² According to Handelman, *ibid.*, 51, the riddle's intentionality is indeed similar to the principle of game, as it also operates with a set of rules: 'Like riddle, game is a purposive, causal structure with well-defined goals, that generates a limited number of outcomes.'

¹³ See also Holdefer, 'Reading the Enigma', 49: 'Behind its mystery lies the seductive implication that despite the perplexities that confront us, a meaning *does* exist, present and available, burning to get our attention.'

This also implies that a riddle, besides being intentional, has a processual structure. As soon as he has decided to get involved, the recipient commits himself to a process of guessing and thinking, in the knowledge that no direct solution, no ready-made answer is possible. One is forced to unveil the coded message first. The way towards the answer is as important as the answer itself – this idea lies at the very heart of puzzling. This process of trial and error is what Charles Holdefer has called the ‘dramatization of the reading process’, which is caused by the fact that the text does not allow immediate understanding and forces the reader to cope with it: this dramatisation ‘encapsulates the task of making sense, and puts special emphasis on a certain aspect of reading: namely, when the reader struggles, and the text resists’.¹⁴ In other words: when a reader engages in a riddling context, he consents to torment – no pain, no gain.¹⁵

Consequently, there is always a risk involved with the solving of riddles. Depending on the specific context, different implications can be at stake. In literature, we often read about the person who, unable to give the right answer, loses money, land, the hand of a woman or – even worse – his life.¹⁶ In Finland, there is an interesting tradition, which – its ludic context notwithstanding – reveals a great deal about the riddle’s inherent functioning. It is told that persons who fail to answer a riddle correctly are banished to Hymylä – the imaginary land of Smiles, where all functions are turned upside down. Although the context is that of a game, persons are afraid of being sent there, as it means they have not penetrated ‘the interior boundary of a riddle’.¹⁷ Even if the aforementioned examples are fictional, they essentially point in the same direction: through failing to come up with the right solution, one is ‘punished’, excluded in some way or another. This exclusion can have concrete, material consequences (as we have just seen) or be situated on a more subtle, psychological level. Indeed, through

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁵ The riddle’s paradox of inviting and resisting is also expressed by C. F. Ménestrier’s *La philosophie des images énigmatiques* (Lyons: Guerrier, 1694): ‘L’énigme est un jeu qui cherche à donner du plaisir en donnant de la peine.’

¹⁶ The narrative and dramatic potential of these aspects seems to have attracted composers of opera as well. Most famous are the riddle scenes in Puccini’s and Busoni’s *Turandot*, where they occur in a marriage contest. In Carl Orff’s *Die Kluge* (after a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm), a clever peasant’s daughter is asked three riddles, after which the king wishes to marry her. Harrison Birtwistle’s *Gawain* is based on the Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, during the first act of which a fool presents a series of riddles at Christmas-time. Another interesting case is Eberhard Schmidt’s *Der Schuhu und die fliegende Prinzessin* from 1976. The protagonist (the Schuhu) is a bird-man who can see by night, solve all riddles and give advice, thus representing an all-knowing creature.

¹⁷ Quoted from Handelman, ‘Traps of Trans-Formation’, 45.

his defeat a reader can get the embarrassing feeling that his intellectual faculties are insufficient, that he is not among those who were clever enough to find the answer.

This circumstance also points to the social pressure that goes with solving riddles. They are a vehicle for confirming or denying someone's participation in a specific interpretative group. Through riddles an individual or a group of individuals can establish intellectual identity and authority. Riddles are an effective means to exert social power and to exclude the uninitiated.¹⁸ In short, when trying to solve a riddle, one does not want to look like a fool or – when several people are involved, as is the case with solving musical riddles in performance – to be inferior to the rest of the group. We even find evidence of this in the words of leading Renaissance music theorists such as Gioseffo Zarlino, who in his *Istitutioni harmoniche* explicitly states that a singer is forced to deal with all kinds of complexities 'lest he become known as a clumsy ignoramus'.¹⁹ And when Franchino Gafurio attacked some of Giovanni Spataro's enigmatic works, the latter took revenge by accusing his colleague of a lack of *subtilitas*.²⁰ Even if Spataro's condemnation is clearly motivated by strategic considerations, it nevertheless shows that nothing was worse than passing for an idiot who cannot understand puzzles.²¹

Due to their interrogative structure, riddles are innately interactional.²² Like no other genre, the riddle explicitly seeks – indeed, cannot live

¹⁸ To quote C. T. Scott, 'Some Approaches to the Study of the Riddle' in E. B. Atwood and A. T. Hill (eds.), *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1969), 111–27 at 112, engaging in a riddle also reveals 'the desire of individuals to gain admittance to "in-groups" of one kind or another'. It is not a coincidence, then, that in the late Middle Ages people started to do business with secrets, by putting their know-how at the disposal of those who wanted to pay for it. See especially D. Jütte, *Das Zeitalter des Geheimnisses: Juden, Christen und die Ökonomie des Geheimen (1400–1800)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

¹⁹ G. Zarlino, *Le institutioni harmoniche* (Venice, 1558), bk. 3, ch. 71: 'se facesse altramente, sarebbe riputato (dirò così) un goffo et uno ignorante' (p. 278).

²⁰ Letter from Giovanni Spataro to Giovanni Del Lago (1 September 1528), published in *A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians*, ed. B. J. Blackburn, E. E. Lowinsky and C. A. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 330–3 (Italian) and 333–4 (English translation).

²¹ One is also reminded here of the anecdote in Giovan Tomaso Cimello's manuscript treatise about a singer who – in the presence of the composer – was unable to understand a verbal canon in Josquin's *Missa L'homme armé super voces musicales*. The singer's failure is said to have caused Josquin to laugh – and probably to ridicule him in front of the others. See J. Haar, 'Lessons in Theory from a Sixteenth-Century Composer' in R. Charteris (ed.), *Altro Polo: Essays on Italian Music in the Cinquecento* (Sydney: Frederick May Foundation for Italian Studies, 1990), 51–81.

²² Cohen, 'Connecting through Riddles'.

without – the active participation of the reader. Riddles thus require an active recipient, who has to interpret the enigmatic formulation and to decode the author's intention. Without an assiduous reader, the riddle will remain a riddle. It asks for the perseverance and flair of a detective, who collects the evidence provided *in situ* and tries to make sense of it by being both intuitive and analytic.²³ This characteristic also seems to have inspired newer forms of literature. Indeed, Nick Montfort considers riddles as a prototype of the interactive fiction that underlies a whole range of today's computer games.²⁴ Without going into detail about the technicalities of the riddle's modern counterpart, it is indeed striking that at the centre of both phenomena is a puzzle that needs to be unlocked by the 'user'. The 'text adventure' (as Montfort calls it) that one witnesses in the process of solving puzzles is a remarkable feature of both kinds of literature. It is a way to engage the reader, to attract his attention and to have him play an active part in the creation of a work: 'Solving a riddle requires that the workings of the riddle's world be explored and understood and that its rules be discovered.'²⁵ What is more, through his active involvement, the reader or performer becomes a constitutive element in the process of the actualisation and materialisation of the text: the clarity that is achieved is the result of his reasoning. Indeed, it is suggested that he becomes a second 'inventor'. Even though the author is still in control, he forcefully integrates the reader in the realisation of his work.

However, the author should take care not to make his riddle too difficult. Otherwise, the reader might get impatient and peek at the solution right away – that is, if a solution is provided at all – or he might get bored and stop searching for a solution. As Pagis puts it, in those two cases 'the readers simply do not take part in the game, do not enter the riddling situation, and, of course, miss out on the pleasure of deciphering'.²⁶ We will see that this is exactly what happens with some musical riddles from the Renaissance: if a group of singers experienced a composition as too enigmatic, they gave up trying and laid the piece aside. Although such testimonies are not very frequent – they usually occur in letters and treatises – they offer concrete evidence of some singers' struggle with a

²³ See also the terms 'lecteur-chercheur' and 'lecteur-décrypteur' in J. Céard and J.-C. Margolin, *Rébus de la Renaissance: Des images qui parlent*, 2 vols. (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986), vol. I, 112.

²⁴ N. Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 35. ²⁶ Pagis, 'Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle', 84.

riddle and, not being able to come up with a satisfactory solution, their subsequent decision to leave it unsung. Evidently, such sources also allow us to assess the limits of knowledge and training within specific circles of musicians.

Because the reader's engagement is explicitly demanded, riddles are an interesting field for reader-response theory. Here, major attention is paid to the individual reader's response to a text. Contrary to other theories that focus primarily on the author or the work, the premise of this theory is that the 'implicit reader' is actively involved in the text by reacting to its indeterminacies, the expectations that are created, and the information that is given. The potential role of the reader depends of course on many factors, among them his preconception, his literacy and his general ability to engage in a text on the one hand, but also on the nature of the text. According to the advocates of the reader-response theory, literature that limits one's potential understanding to a single aspect – which is the case for so-called 'closed texts' – is less rewarding than 'open texts', as these leave more room for the reader's hermeneutic activity and allow multiple interpretations. In the case of riddles, the ambiguity and openness of the text are the very essence of its being. They are part of the author's strategy.

This also means that the author must conceive his riddle in such a way that it contains both enigmatic and soluble elements. He must conceal and reveal, hide and show, at the same time. The challenge should be conquerable. As Dan Pagis puts it: 'The author is obliged to pose a riddle tantalizing in its opacity, yet fair in the clues it provides.'²⁷ The injunction is not new: in his letter *Ad Simplicianum*, the Church Father Augustine expresses this subtle balance as follows: 'An enigma . . . does not uncover the most evident aspect nor does it absolutely hide the truth.'²⁸ The same goes, of course, for musical riddles: here as well, the music is encoded and cannot be sung as such, but at the same time the composer offers clues – by way of an inscription, an image and/or musical symbols – that help the singer to unravel the composer's intention and allow a correct performance of the piece. As we shall see, in music treatises of the Renaissance, theorists were very well aware of this subtle balance. Writers such as Pietro Aaron and Lodovico Zacconi, for instance, explicitly thematise

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁸ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*: 'Aenigma vero . . . nec evidentissimam detegit speciem nec prorsus obteggit veritatem.' Translation quoted from N. P. Stork, *Through a Glass Darkly: Aldhelm's Riddles in the British Library MS Royal 12.C.xxiii*, Studies and Texts, 98 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 61.

the tension between revealing ('patefacere', 'manifestare', 'revelare') and obscuring ('occultare', 'nascondere') in musical enigmas and encourage composers to reach a reasonable equilibrium between them.²⁹

To describe this combination of opacity and translucence, I will use the term *obscurity* as a key concept. In theoretical reflections of the enigmatic from Classical Antiquity onwards, riddles were invariably associated with *obscuritas*. This tradition was passed on to the music theory of the Renaissance, especially in the definitions of canonic inscriptions, for which adjectives such as 'obscurus', 'velatus' or 'secretus' abound. In recent times, several noteworthy studies have been dedicated to the phenomenon of obscurity in literature.³⁰ As we shall see, obscurity is a concept with relative boundaries, as its interpretation depends on the perspective of the recipient, his experience and education. What is perceived as obscure by one person may be self-evident for another. Essentially, obscurity does not mean total darkness, but rather a state in between. Riddles play with exactly this twilight state: they are neither clear (for then they would not be puzzling) nor impenetrable (for then they would be a mystery or a secret) – their mixture has no predetermined measure. The riddle's obscurity makes it resistant to immediate comprehension and consumption. A riddle wants to tell us something, but does so in an indirect, i.e. encoded way. Because the riddle presents itself to us as a challenge, it stimulates our curiosity, it whets the appetite and creates certain expectations. We know there is a solution, but only if we search long enough will we be able to find it.³¹ This period of 'suspense' is an interesting psychological element that underlies every riddle, be it of a literary or a musical nature.³² A riddle occupies one as long as the mission has not been accomplished. The tension that springs from the act of searching is released in the joy of victory once the solution has been found. As Päivi Mehtonen formulates it in her

²⁹ See P. Aaron, *Libri tres de institutione harmonica* (Bologna, 1516) and L. Zacconi, *Canoni musicali* (Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana, MS 559; c. 1622–7). See also below, Ch. 3.

³⁰ See especially Ziolkowski, 'Theories of Obscurity' and P. Mehtonen, *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature: Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment*, trans. R. MacGilleon, Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Toimituksia, Humaniora, 320 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2003).

³¹ M. Long, 'Singing through the Looking Glass: Child's Play and Learning in Medieval Italy', *JAMS*, 61 (2008), 253–306 at 276 discusses the 'pleasure that proceeds from the fun of disorientation from which emerges triumph'.

³² In this respect, it is not for nothing that Freud considered the riddle as a prototype of exploration and curiosity.