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Interaction between noisy instrumental timbre and traditional intervallic systems in composers from Sicily, 1960–1985

ABSTRACT

Background

During the 20th century there was a constant interest in new music in Sicily (Carapezza 1980, Misuraca 2014). In particular, from 1960 to 1968 the regional capital Palermo hosted the festival *Settimane Internazionali Nuova Musica* (Tessitore 2003), which was a significant counterpart to other continental festivals — such as the *Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* or the *Warsaw Autumn* — and where important composers like Franco Evangelisti, Sylvano Bussotti, and Salvatore Sciarrino accomplished their first important achievements (Carapezza 1997, 2015, 2007). For a long time, Palermo was also the seat of the most southern musicological academic institute in Europe (Carapezza 2010), and its scholars, Nino Titone and Paolo Emilio Carapezza, were directly engaged in both organizing the *Settimane*, and teaching composition (Carapezza 2012, Lombardi Vallauri 2015). For these reasons, Sicilian composers from 1960 onwards have strived to combine the musical traditions of their cultural area (both popular and academic) with trends emerging from the rest of the world (particularly the French, German and American areas).

Aims and repertoire studied

My aim is to verify whether some common elements exist in the styles of the major Sicilian composers from 1960 to 1985, namely Salvatore Sciarrino (1947) and Federico Incardona (1958–2006), notwithstanding their paramount differences. I hypothesize that they both had the same proclivity as Evangelisti and Bussotti to use noisy, marginal, and impure instrumental timbres (Lombardi Vallauri 2010), integrating them with intervallic choices that refuse the neutralization of the traditional meaning of intervals (chiefly of dissonances) that is typical of multi-dimensional serialism. In particular, in searching for similarities and continuities (and even filiations), I will analyse *Ordini* (1955) and *Spazio a 5* (1961) by Evangelisti, *Due voci* (1958) and *The Rara Requiem* (1969) by Bussotti, *Berceuse* (1967), *...da un Divertimento* (1968) and *Vanitas* (1981) by Sciarrino, *Avec un morne embrassement* (1981) and *Des Freundes Umnachtung* (1985) by Incardona.

Method

The first standpoint of my discourse is timbral analysis, as timbre is the musical dimension in which the aforementioned composers primarily manifested their adhesion to the dominant trends of contemporary composition (Arbo 2004). However, I will also consider the intervallic systems on which they founded their techniques, because in this field they show significant

affinities with pre-existing styles. By combining these two approaches, I will carry out a diachronically comparative, stylistic analysis of the pieces listed above.

Results

Ordini by Evangelisti realizes the absolute disintegration of continuity in all the elementary dimensions of sound (pitch, duration, timbre, dynamics), as well as the absolute independence of each of those sound dimensions. Therefore it bans any figurality, intending the figure (*gestalt*) as a perceptually important (recognizable, memorable) interdimensional aggregation of a number of sounds. For this reason, more than any other work by the pre-eminent composers of total serialism, it sounds exactly how the abstract paradigm of total serialism demands. Serial disintegration renders the relations between sounds abstract, but this abstractness is compensated by the Varèsian materiality of sounds, which are instead much more material, and therefore full of *intrinsic* sense, the more they are released from a traditional *relational* sense.

If Varèse had emancipated percussions by definitely acquiring noise — in addition to the tuned sound — to the field of music, the operation carried out by Evangelisti in *Spazio a 5* is no less liberating, as it confirms Varèse's accomplishment by reversing it: also the tuned sound, also the voice is noise. Even, as it is said that octaves are dissonant in atonality, so in *Spazio a 5* the few traits of non-consonantal vocal behaviour almost seem to be out of place, barely evoking the classical singing style. The score provides for the possible intervention of live electronics, which however cannot to any extent make the sonority of this unconventional music more alien.

Through the mediation and according to the interpretation of Paolo Emilio Carapezza, who makes it the subject of one of his first critical texts (Carapezza 1962), *Due voci* by Bussotti is a decisive piece for Incardona in his formation as a composer: ‘for him, the work, which remained indelibly stamped on his mind, peremptorily testifies to the possibility of continuing to ‘think’ in music after Webern’ (Incardona 1999). In general, Incardona regards ‘Bussotti's music [...] as an uninterrupted path with the *espressivo* tradition’ (Incardona 1981b). Particularly in this piece, the two ‘voices’ are the human one and the ondes Martenot, so the piece shows that the *extra-ordinary* instrumental sound may also be expressive.

Instead, in *The Rara Requiem* Incardona finds another complementary foundation of his writing: the rooting in the harmonic bass (non tonal, though): ‘hyper-long values, immobile pedals or ascending by semitones, distributed to the instruments that have always carried the bass’ (Incardona n.d.).

From the beginning, critics became aware that the early models of Sciarrino's music were Evangelisti and Bussotti (Lanza Tomasi 1968, 96), very different from each other but

similar in their propensity towards residual sounds. The anomalous sound material, which functions in their music by single units, at an elementary level, is instead made pervasive by Sciarrino and generalized as stylistic regime. Such a feature is already evident in *Berceuse* (Misuraca 2008): in this piece (dedicated to Bussotti), Sciarrino aggregates what disintegrates in *Ordini*: the isolated points of sound-noise become a mass, a bundle, an inextricable agglomeration. And in *...da un Divertimento* Sciarrino also conquers — again, after the Evangelistian contraction and silence — the prolonging of the present moment, the immersion of consciousness in temporality and continuity.

After a decade, in *Vanitas* ‘the process of spoliation and zeroing of language reaches an extreme limit’ (Misuraca 2008, 61): exactly the opposite of *Berceuse*’s accumulation, therefore the long duration remains but the (vocal) melody comes to the fore. It adopts a formulaic conduct, polarly alternates the concentration on the minimum object and ornamental fancy, and passes continuously from diatonicism to chromaticism. Timbralism and *melos* keep a delicate balance.

Incardona determinedly re-establishes the primacy of the interval, recalling free atonality in *Avec un morne embrassement* and even reviving the twelve-tone technique in pieces like *Des Freundes Umnachtung* (Lombardi Vallauri 2012). The Palermitan stylistic genealogy is also recognizable in his case: he takes the immoderate desire of *singing* from Bussotti, and the anomalous timbral conduct from Evangelisti, bordering on what’s possible. In short, the essence of Incardona’s music consists of an extremely fine and exaggerated timbral, dynamic and rhythmic treatment of the basic intervallic material, aimed at emphasizing its expressive value to the highest degree. Rendering the series in a sheer melodic form, albeit extenuated and contorted and intricate in thick polyphonic textures, makes him the heir of the noblest Mediterranean tradition, both cultured and popular, and even the use of the quarter-tone series is an indication of Sicilian lineage (Crescimanno 2016).

Implications

The musical figures constructed in the analysed pieces are inextricably *timbral-intervallic* figures. Despite the modernity of style, the way in which timbre and intervals are elaborated is still connected to the Italian and Mediterranean tradition.

Keywords

Noise; interval; melody; figure; tradition.

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