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## *Salvatore Sciarrino. The Sicilian alchemist composer*

**ABSTRACT:** Salvatore Sciarrino (Palermo, 1947) began his career in the fervent climate of the six *Settimane Internazionali Nuova Musica*. Still very young he attracted the attention of the musical world, with his sonorous invention full of startling innovation that was to make him one of the protagonists of the contemporary musical panorama. Sciarrino is today the best-known and most performed Italian composer. His catalogue is a prodigiously large one, and his career is dotted with prestigious prizes and awards.

Alchemically transmuting sound, finding new virginity in it has for fifty years been the objective of his music. Timbric experimentation is the goal of his virtuosity. The prevailing use of harmonic sounds and other subversive emission techniques make his sonorous material elusive, incorporeal, particularly close to noise: hence not sounds in the traditional sense, but ghosts and shades of sounds, systematically deprived of the attack and situated in a border zone between the *being* of the material and its *not-being*. The sound comes out changed by the osmotic relationship with silence: it is a mysterious epiphany, a “presence” that strives to appear on the surface, living and pulsating almost according to a physiology of its own. Hence it is a music of silences furrowed by minimal sound phenomena, for an “ecology of listening” – an antidote to the noise pollution of consumer society – able to clear perception, to sharpen auditory sensibility and to free the mind of stereotyped stimuli.

His music is not concretized in intervallic relations and in harmonic-contrapuntal constructive logics, but in complex articulatory blocks which Sciarrino calls *figures*. Even though the structural use of timbre becomes a disruptive fact, which brings an upheaval to the perception of pitches and seems to burn up every linguistic residue, in the *figural* articulation and in its perceptibility the composer finds a new logic and a new, infallible sense of form.

Musical discourse proceeding through complex wholes is mirrored in Sciarrino’s peculiar composition method. For him the layout of a score in traditional notation is preceded by a graphic-visual project (which he calls “flow chart”) allowing synthetic control of the form and highlighting the relationship between construction and space.

“Window form” had become a characteristic feature of his composition technique. With this term, borrowed from computer terminology, the composer indicates a formal procedure that mimics the intermittence of the human mind and that he considers typical of the modern and technological era. The gradual recovery of a new singing style is a central problem in his most recent production: psychotic and gasping utterance, *messa di voce*, glissandos, portamenti, slipping syllabification, incantatory and alienating reiterations avoid all danger of stylistic regression, shaping a new and personal monody, artificial and hallucinatory. The working-out of a personal singing style is Sciarrino’s main conquest in the last years. Hence his fundamental contribution to experiments in contemporary musical theatre and a particular flowering of vocal works that characterizes his most recent creative phase.

**KEYWORDS.** Sciarrino, Alchemist, Virtuosity, Shades of sounds, Silence, Ecology of listening, *Figure*, Window form, Singing style, Musical theatre.

A Sicilian in terra firma, I feel like a figure outside the orthodoxy of contemporary composers. Mine is a double vocation: the courage of personal solutions and, at the same time, the pride of the tradition, which still alive transfigures through us. (Sciarrino 2001, 201)

This is the definition given of himself by Salvatore Sciarrino, “a Sicilian in terra firma”, which is what he has been since the age of twenty-two, when he left Palermo (where he was born on 4 April 1947) and moved first to Rome, then to Milan and finally to a smaller place, Città di Castello, in Umbria, where he has lived for almost thirty years. At all events he began his career in Palermo in the fervent climate of the sixties and the six *Settimane Internazionali Nuova Musica*: there he had the opportunity to take an interest in the works of Evangelisti and Stockhausen; and there he began, still a teenager, causing great fuss and irritation.<sup>1</sup> In Palermo he attended the Institute of History of Music at the University (at that time directed by Luigi Rognoni), studying the works of the great masters of the past and, under the guidance of Paolo Emilio Carapezza, doing a critical edition of Sicilian Renaissance music. Right from the start we thus begin to see a fundamental aspect of his production, namely study, philological reconstruction and elaboration of earlier music. With his orchestral piece *Berceuse*, presented in 1969 at the Festival of Contemporary Music at the Venice *Biennale*, still very young he forcefully attracted the attention of the musical world, with his sonorous invention full of startling innovation that was to make him one of the protagonists of the contemporary musical panorama: “I had to start afresh, to invent my own impact with the instruments with a virgin hand and ear.” (Sciarrino 2001, 145)

Sciarrino is today the best-known and most performed Italian composer. His catalogue is a prodigiously large one, and his career is dotted with prestigious prizes and awards. Alchemically transmuting sound, finding new virginity in it has for fifty years been the objective of his music. Timbric experimentation is the goal of his virtuosity. His modernity does not therefore need new instruments, since he is able to transfigure the traditional ones. The prevailing use of harmonic sounds and other subversive emission techniques make his sonorous material elusive, incorporeal, particularly close to noise: hence not sounds in the traditional sense, but ghosts and shades of sounds, systematically deprived of the attack and situated in a border zone between the *being* of the material and its *not-being*.

Forty years have gone by since, with a simple notational artifice, I found the way to represent this principle: ◦◁▷◦, a zero at the beginning and one at the end of opposite converging forks, thus aiming to express the nothingness that generates sound, to which it returns shining. (Ibid., 204)

These minute acoustic ghosts are agitated, in the first works, in turbulent weavings, dense and diaphanous at the same time: the individuality of the instru-

<sup>1</sup> For detailed documentation see Tessitore 2003.

mental timbres dissolves in unheard-of fusions and the “atomistic” purity of the notes is pulverized in the alchemic combustion of phonic material “that wants to re-distil the world into the original luminous sounds.” (Carapezza 1978, 4)

The sounds of Sciarrino’s synthesis are timbre in the pure state, alchemically transmuted “through the maximum articulation”:

Something fundamental is the tension at the limits of auditory perception, above all at the limit of speed, i.e. as we approach the point at which we no longer perceive a succession of sounds but a single sonorous event, exploiting a phenomenon definable as *auditory inactivity*. (Sciarrino 1976, 371)

Hence his music is not concretized in intervallic relations and in harmonic-contrapuntal constructive logics, but in complex articulatory blocks – which Sciarrino calls *figures* – in which timbric material, modes of attack, dynamics, rhythmic values and instrumental gestures are interwoven inseparably.

Never in my life have I put together pitches, and instead I have thought in sound figures [...]. We assist at a deliberate loss of the vertical and horizontal coordinates, which tend to annihilate themselves with the residues of the old logic in favour of the changing *continuum*, of timbre – or, more exactly – of sound in the inseparability of its components. (Sciarrino 2004, 54)

Even though the structural use of timbre becomes a disruptive fact, which brings an upheaval to the perception of pitches and seems to burn up every linguistic residue, in the *figural* articulation and in its perceptibility the composer finds a new logic and a new, infallible sense of form.

I do not know how conscious I was of what I was doing in the sixties. My effort was to overcome the conception of inert sound, and to *construct*, without returning to the melodic-rhythmic construction. Indeed, without even skimming it: an organic world wanted to be born, a very mobile one, regulated by the *Gestalt*, a sound entirely transfigured because of its intrinsic articulations. [...] already then there was arising a perspective “at a distance” of sonorous material, through wholes and not single sounds. (Sciarrino 2001, 145)

Musical discourse proceeding through complex wholes is mirrored in Sciarrino’s peculiar composition method. For him the layout of a score in traditional notation – always with very beautiful and careful handwriting – is preceded by a graphic-visual project (which he calls “flow chart”) allowing synthetic control of the form and highlighting the relationship between the construction and space.

*Berceuse* (1967–1969) presents a development that is still aleatory, but nevertheless with a result that goes against the compositional orthodoxy of the time: in it one can already recognize, indeed, the characteristic articulation of the breath of the sonorous material in periodic waves, according to accumulations and

rarefactions, expansions and contractions of the texture, Sciarrino being interested in the naturalistic, physiological connection:

Periodicity – Sciarrino says – was the first word that I uttered as a composer in the first important pieces; *Berceuse* is pure provocative enunciation of periodicity. [...] it is laying bare the mechanism of speaking, breathing, or big natural phenomena like backwash, atmospheric phenomena, the alternation of daylight and night, and so forth. It was really a zeroing of perception, but also the zeroing of an aesthetic. (Vinay 2002, 63)

In the subsequent works (...*da un Divertimento*, 1969–1970; *Sonata da camera*, 1971; *Grande sonata da camera*, 1972; *Rondo per flauto concertante, archi, due oboi, due corni*, 1972) the timbric intuitions of *Berceuse* are taken further and formally organized with absolute precision. “Auditory inactivity” is amply exploited in the first pieces for keyboard – *Prélude* (1969) for piano; *De o de do* (1970) for harpsichord; *Arabesque* (1971) for two church organs – where the struggle to transform the timbre of tempered instruments with mechanical action is translated into demands on the hands at the limit of what is conceivable, among hypertrophic ornaments and material flows of clusters and glissandos of various types. Sinusoidal figures (constituted by small direct and inverted turns with a separated final note, a true *topos* of Sciarrino) are then traced out in *De la nuit* (1971), while the outcropping shreds of Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit* render manifest the source of the timbric splendours and the *liquid* delights of this hyperbolic pianism. Revitalising the contemporary piano, Sciarrino thus goes beyond the sharp constellations of serialism in the Darmstadt manner, instead establishing an ideal bridge with the sonorous empirics of Chopin, of the most liquescent Liszt, of Debussy and of Ravel.

In the opera *Amore e Psiche* (1971–1972) – the peak and crowning of this first composition phase – the esoteric text by Aurelio Pes finds a formidable correlative in Sciarrino’s phantasmagoric orchestral texture and in the visionary nature of his acoustic ghosts. And the intangibility of the sonorous material also extends to the unusual treatment of the voice, which resorts to daring virtuosités and very rapid articulations (vibratos, portato trills, trills that gradually expand and contract) in order to free harmonics, to disperse the defined frequencies in undulatory flows, to erode every clear melodic profile. The song of Psyche in the middle-grave register, the over-acute one of the two Sisters and the countertenor one of Love thus tend to blend together; and all of them in the orchestra, “in an anxious flow, indistinct and oneiric, of sound and vocal material” (Vinay 2002, 49).

In facing staging problems – overcoming the reticence of the avant-garde – Sciarrino disclosed his deep and vital relationship with the tradition. And immediately his personal dramaturgy imposed itself: one antithetical to the demands of the ideologically engaged theatre then in fashion and rooted instead in an internal dimension, an oneiric and surreal one. It was a dramaturgy, above all, of a decidedly musical nature, always internal to the sonorous fact, beyond meta-

theatrical reflections and the search for new mechanisms of scenic structuring that kept other composers busy in those years.

During the seventies Sciarrino worked out in detail the premises contained in the first works, while he clarified his language and the *horror vacui* of the first scores began to fade away. So he explored the extreme resources of the violin (*Sei Capricci*, 1975–1976), of the viola (*Tre notturni brillanti*, 1974–1975), of the cello (*Due studi*, 1974; *Variazioni per violoncello e orchestra*, 1974), of the piano (*Etude de concert*, 1976; *1<sup>st</sup> Sonata*, 1976) and of their combinations in chamber music (*Sonatina* for violin and piano, 1974–1975; *Danse* for two violins and viola, 1975; *Trio* for piano, violin and cello, 1975); and he always did this creatively employing virtuosity of performance for the purpose of inventing sound.

Between violinistic and pianistic virtuosity in the Sciarrino version there must have occurred that short circuit that the violinism of Paganini had set off in Liszt, inoculating into him the virus of transcendental virtuosity, the inebriation of a person forcing the limits of an instrument in order to go beyond. (Vinay 2002a, 67)<sup>2</sup>

The link with the tradition, evident in the use of a historicized formal terminology, must not suggest the stylistic borrowings of neoclassicism or, worse, regressive nostalgias of a neo-romantic kind: Sciarrino uses the traditional terms because he uses closed forms and a language founded upon the dynamics of symmetry and repetition, but the articulations and the sounds are entirely different from the original prototypes.

Having denied, with the melodic-chordal framework, every residue of traditional *logos*, his music at all events goes back to considering, with ever-greater awareness, formal problems and problems of language. However, in him we must not seek the consequentiality of motif and theme developments, but the *gestalt* relations of equality, of similarity and of the contrast between the figures brought into play; and the criteria of distribution that regulate the assemblage in a temporal development that is spatialised and disposed with a careful strategy.

The tendency to stringency becomes even more marked in chamber pieces like *Di Zefiro e Pan* (1976), *Quintettino 1* (1976), *Quintettino 2* (1977) and *Attraverso i cancelli* (1977). And the “little poem” *Di Zefiro e Pan* (where the ten wind instruments, “like primitive reeds”, almost emit merely puffs) inaugurates the recourse to those fanciful and evocative titles, often of mythological inspiration, that to anyone skimming through the catalogue of Sciarrino’s works gives the impression of reading “the map of a Wonderland”. (Vinay 2001, xxv). An additional message is also brought in by the writings, often with a hermetic-oracular tone, with which Sciarrino accompanies every composition of his (the ones dating from between 1981 and 2001 are now collected in the previously mentioned volume *Carte da suono*).

<sup>2</sup> Many of these works (and subsequent ones) are devoted to a particular performer, who collaborated with Sciarrino to help him further develop his composition technique.

The auroral sounds of *All'aure in una lontananza* for solo flute (1977) – to be emitted “according to one’s own breath” – finally mark Sciarrino’s arrival at his most proverbial compositional dimension:

First quietness. Then sound, like the breath of the silence [...] Hence accustoming the ear to the imperceptible. The pianissimos that I require have to be placed at the limit of what man is really able to hear. While we are listening we become uncertain: something is coming, but what? Does the sound exist or not yet? The sonorous transfiguration of the indistinct produces the most anxious of magics, no longer being able to distinguish between presence and absence. (Sciarrino 2001, 180)

The sound comes out changed by the osmotic relationship with silence, it is a mysterious epiphany, a “presence” that strives to appear on the surface, living and pulsating almost according to a physiology of its own. Hence it is a music of silences furrowed by minimal sound phenomena, for an “ecology of listening” – an antidote to the noise pollution of consumer society – able to clear perception, to sharpen auditory sensibility and to free the mind of stereotyped stimuli.

It’s necessary to free the ear of the incrustations, to mend it and recover it from deafness. Nevertheless, are the conditionings that make the mind refractory, more closed than a deaf ear. Hence cleaning the mind means learning to create a void inside, to make way for the other that is unknown. (Sciarrino 2001, 249)

At the confines of the audible and the inexpressible, Sciarrino’s personal *cosmophony* is able, in the best compositions, to immerse the listener in a primary perceptive dimension, ancestral, panic. And at times the reduction to a “zero degree” of listening brings out primary physiological data – like the breaths of the flute or the cardiac pulsations suggested by tongue-ram on the bassoon – that make this music organic, bodily, participating in the essentiality of life.

Silence – Sciarrino says – is noisier than sound. You simply have to enter an echo-free room: then you can perceive the hiss of the blood, the intensity of the breath, the heartbeat. You need to know how to listen. Those who do not know how to listen cannot listen to my music, but will hurt it. (Cappelletto 1988, 2)

For Sciarrino silence is not absence of sound, but instead fullness of every sonorous possibility (just as white is the sum of all colours), according to a translation into musical terms of that cosmogonic principle of the Great Void – a sea of potentiality, a “quantal field” full of energy, the cosmic substratum of every phenomenon – that belongs to archaic and oriental wisdom and at the same time to the most recent conceptions of western science. As Sciarrino says:

Though being a mechanism born through compositional imagination, being born from nothingness and returning to nothingness bears with it remarkable philosophical implications. Silence is the *cradle* of all sounds. (Mazzolini 1990, 54)

A compendium of the production of the seventies – and one of Sciarrino’s greatest works – is *Un’immagine di Arpocrate* (1974–1979), a visionary fresco for piano, choir and orchestra whose title alludes to the Egyptian-Hellenistic divinity Harpocrates, a “symbol of hermetic silence.” (Sciarrino 2001, 163). In the abyssal dimension of this great adagio in five sections there is achieved the definitive abandonment of the formal traditional models “in favour of a musical form of a psychological-immanent type” (Angius 2003, 98) and there is delineated a way of cutting time that later became typical of Sciarrino:

Violent storms explode like cataclysms; they throw open windows of time and, through endless falls of glassy sound, a parallel dimension appears, another piano, another music, another whirlwind. Then the storms close up again, as suddenly as they had appeared. (Sciarrino 2001, 163).

These “windows” that open and close again on worlds extraneous to one another seem to transpose into a musical key certain conceptions of post-Einsteinian physics like the layer theories and black holes.<sup>3</sup>

The conception of the mystical Void as the hidden and inexpressible background of things (and therefore of things as ephemeral and transitory manifestations of an underlying essence) ends up removing all reality and consistency from the phenomenal world: at the borders of nothingness the sonorous material can therefore open up unknown premonitions or – and this is the other face of Sciarrino – open up again to the known, to what is held back in the meanders of memory, but to deform it perspectively and to disclose its deceptive vanity. Hence the forms and the ancient stylistic features, the references to the eighteenth century, the quotations and self-quotations that emerge in the “Singspiel in two acts” *Aspern* (1978) are to be “Ghosts and dust”. In this work the only singing character is a soprano that, in the orchestra pit, impersonates herself: in closed musical numbers, she intones famous verses by Da Ponte from the *Nozze di Figaro* (but disembodied from the music of Mozart) and two Venetian boat songs whose melody is used instead (from the *Dodici canzoni da battello su melodie veneziane del Settecento* worked out by Sciarrino the preceding year).

In *Cailles en sarcophage*, “Acts for a museum of obsessions” (1979–1980), the procedure of anamorphosis is applied to old American songs from the twenties, thirties and forties.

Songs, on the musical plane, represent to some extent the equivalent of flowers: beautiful, but ephemeral. Cultured music, with its pretension to universality, will never be able to render the sense of death that a light composition transudes. [...] Among the most abandoned and most lost memoirs, each of us has some song that, precisely

<sup>3</sup> Sciarrino devotes to the “window form” the last two chapters of his volume *Le figure della musica*. (Sciarrino 1998)

because it is linked to a certain period of our past, represents a concentrate of nostalgia. (Sciarrino 2001, 79)

Sciarrino elaborated cover versions of Cole Porter, Arthur Freed, George Gershwin, Duke Ellington and other American songwriters in the cycle *Blue Dream. L'età dell'oro della canzone* for soprano and pianoforte (1980). It is introduced by a short piano piece significantly entitled *Anamorfosi* (1980), in which a “mysterious object” – the famous *Singing in the rain* by Arthur Freed – emerges in a sophisticated combinatory game from the liquescent arpeggios of *Jeux d'eau* by Ravel (which in the final bars fade away in turn into the motif of *Une barques sur l'océan*).<sup>4</sup>

In *Cailles en sarcophage*, the transfiguration of instrumental sound reaches a high degree of naturalistic illusionism (typical of Sciarrino), that is to say the decidedly artificial imitation of familiar sounds of reality, the environment, physiology (crickets, night-time buzzes, puffs of a train on rails, steamboat sirens, cardiac pulsations, rustles of old disks, radio disturbance). Then an idea born here for the stage is developed in *Efebo con radio* (1981), a composition for voice and orchestra that hyper-realistically simulates disturbed broadcasts (songs and dance tunes from beyond the ocean, news-bulletins, advertisements), which in Italian houses in the early fifties were caught by old valve radios. This leads to captivating composition, not devoid of a genuine vein of humour and self-irony:

What in all the other compositions are my sounds, the precious material with which I mould my universe, here is humbly reduced to disturbance of transmissions or, more often, to sizzling passage from one to the other. (Sciarrino 2001, 134)

Lastly, “a gigantic anamorphosis of an old song” – Carmichael’s famous *Stardust*, also present in *Blue Dream* – is the “Natura morta in un atto” *Vanitas* (1981), in which the process of baring and zeroing of the language reaches an extreme limit.

*Vanitas* gravitates, as the very word indicates, around the concept of *void* and its representation, and around the concept of time; it is therefore a reflection on the ephemeral, a celebration of absence. (Ibid., 77).

The symbolism of frailty – the rose, the echo, the broken mirror – unites the seventeenth-century poetic fragments that, recomposed by the author, constitute the libretto of this stringent opera devoid of action; and a mezzo-soprano voice, a cello and a piano are its only protagonists, for a dramaturgy of absence that is totally identified with the minimalist reduction of the sonorous material: the piano, in a slow dripping, distances and obsessively reiterates its chords, which each time allow the constituent sounds to disappear one after the other, from the grave to the acute, “almost sucked in by silence” (so it becomes impossible to identify the

<sup>4</sup> For an interpretation that is not merely playful of these “twenty-two magic bars” see Angius 2007, 87–90.



old song underlying it); the voice too, echoed by the impalpable harmonics of the cello, is stripped of the virtuosities previously used, expressing instead a typical gesture – a long *messa di voce* followed by a zigzagging codetta destined to fade away quickly – which marks a first, important step in the direction of the conquest of a new form of vocal expression.

Fragments of old songs also emerge at the end of *Introduzione all'oscuro* for twelve instruments (1981), one of the most fascinating of Sciarrino's works relating to night. For Sciarrino the nocturnal itinerary is a metaphor of creative restlessness, a place of destabilizing uncertainty. The darkness of the night, peopled by acoustic ghosts, is the perturbing moment when one perceives the throb, the breath of things that man calls inanimate: "Things have life, at night... and the slightest noise becomes a ghost" (Sciarrino 2001, 115). Buzzes, puffs, ticks become the secret voices of silence. Man is transferred inside nature, inside matter. In the wreck of consciousness the boundaries between external reality and internal reality fade away. Then the spells of timbre mime the vital sounds of internal physiology, breath and cardiac pulsations, from whose accelerations and decelerations there springs a sense of anxiety and dismay.

The hallucinatory, oneiric, nocturnal atmosphere is then given a formidable theatrical transposition in the "invisible action" of *Lohengrin* (1982–1984), the libretto for which, by the composer himself, derives from a story by Laforgue, dried up and elaborated so as to increase the fragmentariness and ambiguity of a representation at the confines of consciousness and unconsciousness, real and surreal, dream and waking state, normalcy and madness. The action is defined "invisible" because, strictly speaking, it can do without the stage, Sciarrino having here fully accomplished his idea of theatricality intrinsic to the sonorous material itself. In the score we find the following epigraph: "these sounds are already theatre. They ask for no illustration, nor do they ask to be dressed out with images: they *have* their own image."

Though not specifically facing the issue of vocality – in that the recovery of the comprehensibility of the text is still obtained prevalently by recourse to recitation – the opera is "a sonorous cosmogony, all vocal" (Sciarrino 2001, 82). In this connection, the only actress-singer is engaged not only in the double personification Elsa-Lohengrin (with consequent timbric splitting of her voice), but also in illusionistically suggesting, with particularly inventive exploitation of mouth noises, a "monstrous landscape" ambiguously suspended between external nighttime reality and hallucinatory internal space: this leads to a whole repertoire of swallows, breaths, gapes, tongue snaps, cries, coughs, animal noises, sounds of teeth and saliva that shatter and destructure the verbal material, increase the oneiric dimension, blend and get mixed up – also thanks to the microphonic amplification affecting both the voice and the small instrumental ensemble – with Sciarrino's usual range of timbres, throwing open a kind of theatricality able to

consider in a very original way the twentieth-century tradition of the great nocturnal monodrama inaugurated by Schönberg with *Erwartung*.

During the eighties and early nineties, Sciarrino consolidated his international reputation with a long list of works for soloists or small ensembles, reformulating his old intuitions in more and more circumscribed areas and blending them with in-depth investigations of perception, with greater and greater stringency and precision of detail and increasing ability in the management of the temporal order and the internal geometries.

He made a remarkable contribution to the pianistic repertoire with his five *Sonatas*: the 1976 one was followed by another four, in which the continual challenge with the instrument resorts not only to speed, as in the first pieces, but also to a marked increase in energy, with gradual reinforcement of the percussive aspect. The fulcrum of the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Sonata* (1983) is constituted by the rapid chords with alternate hands, deriving from Liszt and Ravel and fleetingly used in the preceding piano works: they create a trembling and powdery texture that is continually interrupted – but at the same time originated and given a new thrust of energy – by the metallic sounds of chords struck in the extreme regions of the keyboard. What turns the sharp constellations of writing in the Darmstadt manner into a Sciarrino hallmark is the cultured challenge of the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Sonata* (1987), where Sciarrino exploits the resources of his hyperbolic pianism to re-found the groups of jumps so typical of the fifties (in which fragments of piano works by Boulez and Stockhausen are mixed together) in a flow of material able to pulsate in his own manner, periodically contracting and expanding. The dominant Darmstadt figure is nevertheless continually broken up by the interpolation of many other figures, with a brusque cut in the temporal continuity that clearly brings out, as in many recent works by Sciarrino, that “window form” that had become a characteristic feature of his composition technique. With this term, borrowed from computer terminology, the composer indicates a formal procedure that mimics the intermittence of the human mind and that he considers typical of the modern and technological era: from the remote control of the television to the “windowing” of computer means, from the photographic snap to cinematic montage, “every day contemporary man cohabits with these ideas.” (Sciarrino 1998, 97)

The use of the extreme registers of the keyboard becomes violent percussiveness in the 4<sup>th</sup> *Sonata* (1992), with which Sciarrino seems to forego his sonorous specificity for a jolting paroxysm that has few equals in the piano repertoire: simultaneous acute and bass clusters, implacably scanned and set at various distances from one another, interact with very rapid triplets in an inverse movement (almost clusters) played by the two hands in the central registers, forcing the performer to make sudden shifts from the extremities to the centre of the keyboard. From the obsessive iteration of this single gesture there springs a *tour de force* whose difficult management is further complicated by an ample range of differentiated dynamic demands (which vary the timbric physiognomy).

With the 5<sup>th</sup> *Sonata* (1994), dedicated to Maurizio Pollini, the cycle closed with a further challenge, namely the transformation of the mechanical and inanimate instrument into a “talking” one: very rapid triplets (almost clusters) join together in various combinations and seem to converse with and answer one another in an echo, in a sort of subhuman murmur. The same figurations, configuring a new style of instrumental recitative, then return with more dramatic connotations in *Recitativo oscuro* for piano and orchestra (1999), given its world premiere in London by Maurizio Pollini and Pierre Boulez (to whom it is dedicated).

Even more than the piano, the flute, an instrument closely connected to the physiology of the human body and the breath, is at the centre of Sciarrino’s compositional interests. Indeed, there was a great flowering of works, starting from the *tabula rasa* of *All’aure in una lontananza*, conferring a new physiognomy on the instrument, increasing its incantatory role and taking it back to its ancestral, magic essence. The new techniques of sound production (natural harmonics in *Hermes* 1984; tongue-ram in rhythmic succession and powerful jet-whistles in *Come vengono prodotti gli incantesimi?* 1985; an anomalous mixture of “glissando-trills” in *Canzona di ringraziamento* 1985; puffs, whistle-tones, key noises in *Venere che le grazie la fioriscono* 1989; breaths inside the instrument in *L’orizzonte luminoso di Aton* 1989; multiphonic sounds in *Fra i testi dedicati alle nubi* 1989) are however only the starting point for conscious compositional planning, closely correlated to the perceptive aspect: “It is not a matter of choosing more or less appropriate sounds, of embellishing the house, but rather of building new universes with the new sounds.” (Sciarrino 2001, 139)<sup>5</sup>

To achieve its spells, music of this kind also needs the natural reverberations of a suitable environment. This led to the project of *La perfezione di uno spirito sottile* (1985) for flute and voice, which came into being as a “ritual of music, to perform outdoors, near precipices, bluffs, curious rocks, or boundless plateaus” (Sciarrino 2001, 88). Alongside the two main performers Sciarrino requires an intervention by *aerial percussions*, i.e. bells and rattles hanging from kites which are to fly up at the moment indicated in the score. From the few words of the text (an orphic fragment from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) there starts the mantric repetitiveness of an extremely slow ritual, which concentrates with hypnotic fixity on a few intervals. In this context even the most worn-out linguistic elements once again find immediateness of expression: “One has to look for some moduli of song not weakened by banality, outside the historical codification of intervals, and hence a new use of *the same intervals*.” (Ibid., 97)

Hence, after *Vanitas*, *La perfezione* marks a decisive moment in the gradual recovery of a new singing style – a central problem in Sciarrino’s most recent production – that without going backwards finds a language proper to the voice (not as imitation of instruments) together with intelligibility of the text. The work is

<sup>5</sup> For an innovative analytical approach see Giomi-Ligabue, 1996.

dedicated to Luigi Nono, who four years later was in turn to dedicate to Sciarrino *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* (Sciarrino then directed the sound in this work for a recent recording). With Nono he effectively shares meditation on sound at the thresholds of silence, suspended temporality, and continual attention to the regeneration of listening, even if his sonorous objects appear sphinx-like and impassive compared to the dizzy expressive interiorisation of the Venetian colleague.

Other composers that he has several times declared he feels similar to are Gérard Grisey and Helmut Lachenmann, who like him work on timbre and reject the codified modes of attack. Sciarrino, however, moves in a different and independent direction with respect to poetics founded on analysis of the acoustic spectrum.

The flute also takes on a predominant timbric role in the numerous chamber works, together with the clarinet, the strings and the piano.<sup>6</sup> Among the numerous chamber works composed in the eighties we can mention the collection of *Sei quintetti* (*Codex purpureus*, 1984; *Raffigurar Narciso al fonte*, 1984; *Centaurio marino*, 1984; *Lo spazio inverso*, 1985; *Le ragioni delle conchiglie*, 1986; *Il silenzio degli oracoli*, 1989). In the big series there stands out, for representativeness and aesthetical result, *Lo spazio inverso* (1985) for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and celesta, in which on a persistent background sound (a suffused twin-chord of the clarinet, a recurrent figure in many works by Sciarrino) very conflicting sound events flow and face another, according to a typical stylistic modality:

The margins of thought, already created as such, are simply juxtaposed. No longer dissimulated, they will produce impossible contrasts – caesuras – violent cicatrices in the foreground. (Sciarrino 2001, 125–26)

Sciarrino's writing, more and more bare and rarefied, often comes down to a few isolated touches, as in *Il motivo degli oggetti di vetro* for two flutes and piano (1987), where the sounds perceived “one afternoon in July on the island of Stromboli” – cries of gulls and crickets, humming of blowflies, tapping of wood on a small boat, the rumbling of the volcano – are translated into highly stylised timbric artifices. And here one clearly notices the predilection for widely separated piano sounds in the hyper-grave and hyper-acute registers and for the single hyper-acute note only struck with the second escapement (with consequent prevalence of the noise of the mechanics over the perception of the pitch) which is a characteristic feature of Sciarrino's recent piano production.

Research on smothered timbres of the second escapement and on mechanical noises is radicalized in the second of the *2 Notturmi* (1998), with which, the series of sonatas having come to an end, he continues his investigation of the keyboard. To this first group in the same year there were added a *Notturmo 3* and a *Notturmo 4*;

<sup>6</sup> Sciarrino entrusted a concertante role to the clarinet in *Quintettino 1* (1976) and *Che sai guardiano della notte?* (1979); then he explored its solo resources in *Let me die before I wake* (1982).

and subsequently the *Due notturni crudeli* (2001), whose obsessive chords are reminiscent of the sounds of struck metal in the 4<sup>th</sup> *Sonata*.

In the meantime, Sciarrino's activity as a transcriber and philologist continued with no less fecundity. The pleasure of the artisanal experiment is satisfied by the numerous cadenzas written in an impeccable style, between 1982 and the 1991, for those Mozart *Concertos* – for piano, violin, flute and oboe – that have none; or by Rossini's cantata *Giovanna d'Arco* (1989), revised in the original version for singing and piano and then elaborated in an orchestration that endeavours philologically to reconstruct a reliable sonority. By contrast, a singular creative operation is *Cadenzario* (1991) for soloists and orchestra, which puts together in a bizarre collage eighteen of the cadenzas previously written for the Mozart concertos.

The issue of the singing voice is again addressed in the one-act opera *Perseo e Andromeda* (1990):

A *lyrical* opera – Sciarrino says – in the most authentic sense of the term, a work in which the voices sing, [...] and the voice does not imitate instruments any more, but is exploited in its most characteristic properties, meaning the possibility of intoning an intelligible text, and human expressiveness. (Mazzolini 1990, 54)

Here we clearly see the modes of vocal writing invented by Sciarrino: delays on the semitone and relative micro-variations; long *mesa di voce* followed by short codas sloping in zigzags; precipitous syllabification on descending microtonal glides; fragmentations and reiterations of the verbal utterances... Modules that break with traditional affective rhetoric, for a dramaturgy that, though recovering a certain narrative linearity, does not forego surrealist and alienating presuppositions.

The insular imprisonment of Andromeda, her bored complaint, the wind and the breakers that sweep the coast are translated into an idiom that is bare, persistent, repetitive, with the voice immersed in an acoustic environment that is entirely unusual: the fact is that for the first time the task of accompanying the characters is entrusted exclusively to digital sounds (produced in real time by a network of four computers) with which Sciarrino constructs very calibrated sonorous geometries and in the meantime pursues his beloved naturalism: "Hence grey and hoarse music, of stone, of sea, of wind, enwraps the spectator, projecting him into a technologically advanced dimension, and at once a primordial one." (Sciarrino 2001, 107)

In 1993 to the seven previous pieces for solo flute there was added the shorter *Addio case del vento* (where Mahlerian elements taken from *Der Abschied* in *Lied von der Erde* emerge like pale figures of memory). The flute is then present in the chamber ensemble of *Omaggio a Burri* (1995) and of *Muro d'orizzonte* (1997), while at the turn of the millennium a new flowering (*L'orologio di Bergson* 1999; *Morte tamburo* 1999; *Immagine fenicia* 2000; *Lettera degli antipodi portata dal vento* 2000) brings to twelve the present number of the solo pieces. Bare and desiccated stringency, with outcomes that are prevalently percussive and sharp

(tongue-ram, mechanical noises of the keys, sharp series of multiphonic sounds), characterizes these new sonorous objects, while Sciarrino investigates with more and more lucid awareness the mechanisms that inform the experience of listening. For instance, there is a study on time, *L'orologio di Bergson*, extrapolated (like *Morte tamburo*) from *Cantare con silenzio* (1999) for a vocal sextet, flute, percussions and live electronics.<sup>7</sup> The whole cantata is a reflection in musical terms on the concept of time, as well as on the notion of silence as utopian timelessness, as inexpressible fullness inside which the crucial events of every heard form are hidden: this leads to the fragmented verbal utterances, the highly reduced intervallic margins within which there moves the vocal writing, the predominantly monodic choralism: “lines suspended in the void, beyond there is little else.” (Sciarrino 2001, 183)<sup>8</sup>

The spatiality of sound is explored in two scores for abnormal ensembles, both written in 1997: *Il cerchio tagliato dei suoni* for 4 solo flutes and 100 migrant flutes – a real apotheosis of the favourite instrument – and *La bocca, i piedi, il suono* for 4 contralto saxophones and 100 saxophones in movement. The two ensembles are then put together in the enormous ensemble of *Studi per l'intonazione del mare* (2000) for 100 flutes, 100 saxophones, 4 solo flutes, 4 solo saxophones, percussions and countertenor voice. However, Sciarrino does not yield to the temptation to produce noisy mass effects, but uses his unusual orchestras to disseminate a dust of micro-sounds in space.

His interest in the saxophone quartet and his desire to enrich its repertoire led in 1998 to two collections of “concerto elaborations”: *Pagine* – on music by Gesualdo, Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, Mozart, Porter, Gershwin and others – and *Canzoniere da Scarlatti*. Some of these elaborations then went into the *Terribile e spaventosa storia del Principe di Venosa e della bella Maria* (1999), ten musical episodes inspired by the private vicissitudes of Gesualdo, with Sicilian puppets present on the stage.

Together with the discovery of the saxophone and the singularity of certain colossal ensembles, interest in Gesualdo and his music is a distinctive feature of Sciarrino's production at the end of the nineties (he revised four famous pieces by the Prince of Venosa in *Le voci sottovetro* 1998, for eight instruments and voice): an interest that comes to life in the two-act opera *Luci mie traditrici* (1996–1998), with which his long peregrination around musical theatre leads to “an opera in the full sense of the term”

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the formal artifice experimented with here see Angius 2007, 161–70.

<sup>8</sup> Extremely significant are the words set to music at the end: “With a perennial rustle / the void manifests its existence / it is the dazzling apparitions / of all possibles. Of them / the quantal void is an endless reservoir.”

It does not go back to existing models, nor does it dirty itself with cheap rhetoric. Its strength lies in the expression of the song, in the creation of a vocal style. A style again invented. (Sciarrino 2001, 186)

Now fully possessing that long pursued vocal style, Sciarrino reinvents a *recitar cantando* able to render every nuance of speech; not archaizing, however, but rendered ultramodern, utopian-future, from the work uninhibitedly carried out on verbal utterances since the time of *Vanitas* and *Lohengrin*. Psychotic and gasping utterance, *messa di voce*, glissandos, portamenti, slipping syllabification, incantatory and alienating reiterations avoid all danger of stylistic regression, shaping a new and personal monody, artificial and hallucinatory.

The working-out of a personal singing style is hence Sciarrino's main conquest in the last years. A particular flowering of vocal works characterizes his most recent creative phase, from *Nuvolario* (1995) for voice, flute, trumpet, two violas and percussions (on texts by the medieval Arab-Sicilian poet Ibn Hamdīs) to the variegated and refined miniatures of *Quaderno di strada* (2003) for baritone and fifteen instruments, *L'altro giardino* (2009) for voice and eight instruments and *Cantiere del poema* (2011) for voice and ten instruments.

In 2002 he was able to enact the long cherished *Macbeth* project, with which he overcame once and for all the dogmas of the old avant-garde to face "the great themes and the masterpieces of our tradition", without however giving up the idea of "always living in a renewed perspective". (Sciarrino 2001, 110) With the conquest of a new vocal language there seems to re-emerge the possibility of a theatre of human vicissitudes, in which some characters can be brought to life and their emotions can be represented: "Now I can create – Sciarrino says – all psychological inflexions of any character, any situation, through simple and functional means" (Vinay 2002, 62). In this way it is possible to recover the ancient function, a ritual and cathartic one, of the tragic.

The tragic, today all too often repressed, is essential to shaking us out of indifference. Horror continually mixes with daily life and, so that we should not be poisoned by it, we have to reawaken our social conscience. Hence the theatre can become commitment. Its magic makes the public a single person. Nothing constructs and reawakens like a theatre of the new. (Sciarrino 2001, 111)

Shades of individuals are the characters of this theatre of the archetypes; and shades of sound the oneiric instrumental "presences" – in which forty years of researches are summed up – that create its climate. Sciarrino's whole repertoire of rustle sounds, of puffs intoned at the limit of silence, of quivers and instrumental auras, of slaps of the bassoon with effects of cardiac pulsation, of trembling backgrounds of the steel sheet is unfolded in this opera; and a typical figure of his (also present in the *Studi per l'intonazione del mare*) are the sharp multiphonic flute sounds played repeatedly: combined with the tremolos of string harmonics, they

break in incandescent at the height of the night-time feast in Act II to emphasise the horror of the apparition of the bloody ghost, three times unleashing the longest and most apocalyptic *fortissimo* ever played in a piece by Sciarrino.

The climax of the opera, the scene of the apparitions, is one of Sciarrino's dramaturgical-musical high spots, also thanks to an ingenious capacity to allude to the distinctive places of so much melodrama: one amazing feature is the rhythmic continuum of the voices (exclusively on consonants: *m-n-m-n* etc.) which artificially recreates the excited and feverish atmospheres of Verdi's feasts, while the quotations (and self-quotations) culminate in the revisited fragments of the overture to *Don Giovanni* – for an apparition of the ghost of Banquo like Mozart's Commendatore – and of a Verdi aria from *Un ballo in maschera*.

Though having all the requisites for being an arrival point, *Macbeth* is not Sciarrino's final contribution to experiments in contemporary musical theatre. A new opera, born of an international co-production involving the Schwetzingen *Festspiele*, the Opéra de Paris and the Grand Théâtre de Genève, had its début in May 2006: *Da gelo a gelo*, "100 scenes with 65 poems", freely based on the *Diary of the Japanese poetess Izumi Shikibu*, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Afterwards, two one-act operas were added: *La Porta della Legge* (Wuppertal, April 2009) and *Super flumina* (Mannheim, May 2011).

Sciarrino is currently going through a particularly happy moment for creativeness and public recognitions. His already boundless musical production is continually expanding. New, fascinating titles will continue to come out of his compositional forge, involving ever new instruments in bold sonorous alchemies.

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Translate by *Denis Gailor*

