

contact

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A Commentary on my own Music

Personally, and on a purely aesthetic level, I don't have much to say that has not already been said in the various performance notes that preface my pieces, and in one or two articles, discussions, and interviews. It has been my conviction for a number of years that Music (and Art in general) must simply assume the humble task of describing its own end, or at any rate its gradual extinction. The logical corollary of this is that every work is merely a *fragment* of production as a whole – or at least of everything produced within this frame of reference: and furthermore that production is only a *detail* writ large. As is well known, there is no place any more for exceptional Works, nor for artistic Beauty: for some time sounds have been mere pretexts, even if there are as many pretexts as there are people. Misunderstandings arise only with those who even unconsciously think of Music as discourse, and therefore unwittingly take it as the caricature of an arc describing a useless orgasm. Exaltation and depression have had their day: however you disguise them, they are modest symbols of a dialectic that is already extinct. A *forte* followed by a *piano*, a *high* note followed by a *low* one, a *gentle* timbre followed by a *harsh* one: all per se dialectic, the germ-cell of a larger Sonata form. How can one avoid all this?!

This question began to obsess me towards the end of 1961; (at the height of the crisis, in the summer of that year, I had cheerfully adopted the role of the student, and followed one of Stockhausen's courses). It could be the subject of a much longer study; finding a response to it has been the dominant theme of my last twelve years' work (and not of mine alone, be it said). The introductions to my works illustrate, albeit briefly, how I have resolved it; to juxtapose some brief comments will perhaps give a cooler and more just perspective, leaving purely musical phenomena aside.

All this may well give rise to objections as legitimate as they are facile: does it not represent an anti-historic ambition to start again from scratch? Is it ultimately anything more than a useless facsimile of oriental stasis? The first point can be met by reiterating that the problem is how to end, not how to begin. As to the second, there is no exact geography of the human spirit.

I think that my most important works have been produced between 1956 and the present – and particularly from 1961 on. Up to 1959 I had worked on long or short *structures* governed by *measured* accelerations and decelerations, thus determining differing zones of density and tension. From 1959 to 1961 the same problems were resolved with structures that were not built up rationally, but determined by chance, although they were always 'translated' into specific notation: there was a need to suggest the various sound-agglomerates *visually* that was prompted by a certain type of painting current at the time, along with an investigation of silences as ('full') constructive elements, constituting a second dimension imposed upon the first. From 1961 new ideas began to develop, particularly influenced by informal abstraction in painting. The need to avoid hearing individual intervals or any other *detail*, and to wipe out any type of *articulation* led towards a sort of static attention to material (*materismo*), achieved by a close-knit counterpoint around a cluster that provided a pan-chromatic continuum, blotting out the perception of individual movements within it – though these in turn guaranteed a constant vibrancy. From 1966 on (*Reticolo: 11*), this counterpoint became more optical-illusory than

material.

The most characteristic aspect of the composers of those years (i.e. of a vast sector of the New Music from around 1953-61) is their objectivisation of the materials and systems employed: the composer brings his own works into being automatically, determining their destinies while they are still in the bud: almost as if he were deriving masochistic amusement from *not being their author* – revelling in an unnatural and self-wounding situation. The 'direct' mode of procedure, fundamental to all previous Music, repels him. He is fascinated by the ferocity that springs out from the *unforeseen* – well aware, and not merely from the craftsman's viewpoint, that if (whether by chance or by laws created on the spot, arbitrary yet complicated and subtle) he places A next to B, superimposed on C, countered by D, distancing itself from E, and massacred by F, out of it will come *in every instance* an exciting, unknown, diabolical monster. Much of that music, seen in score, simulates a hypocritical rectitude, a polished aptness, but it is angelic to the eyes alone!

Others (and not a few), entirely unaware not only of these inscrutable automatistic games but also (quite simply) of the cruel laws of Structuralism (nothing to do with literature, need I add?!) – a logic derived from the serial decomposition already under way in Webern – wrote *horizontally*, employing analogous amalgams *directly* and narratively, thereby falling into the same dilletantism as those who aspire to write counterpoint without knowing the rules.

A particular type of material-orientated Informality: a constellation spurting into life in a few seconds; either a single matrix imperceptibly 'varied', or several of them, brought together without concern for continuity. Avoid the episodic motet (another illness of those years: all those Suites!), the interval (caught in the raw – an insupportable historical *corpus delicti!*), 'formal' exaltations and depressions, the rhetorical *Höhepunkt* – all of them vices and nervous tics of the soul, presumptuous wishful thinking from false prophets. And what about ornamentation?! Think of all those closet Couperins!

In terms of craftsmanship it was necessary to start from scratch, and from the stylistically ineffable: a finely-wrought compound made from microscopic, jumbled details, an aimless continuum, a texture, a first-class cloth that could not only guarantee a fine garment if placed in the hands of a good tailor (though what a contradiction!), but could also stand up to being torn, abused, or daubed and disfigured. The close-knit complexity (and deliberate intricacy) within it could also legitimate any arbitrary incursions from outside.

All of this could only be obtained through an extremely dense counterpoint, relegating the 'parts' to the shameful role of inaudible, cadaverous micro-organisms.

The march of events must express only itself: great fluctuations only obstruct it. They are the residual caricature of a senseless dialectic.

Everything flows equally even in the most absolute immobility. Around us reality already moves more than enough: why try to imitate it?

The *end* germinates naturally from saturation and fatigue, but it is never definitive: through a desolate familiarity we suddenly fall into the infinite and eternal.

Aldo Clementi. Rome, September 1973
translated by David Osmond-Smith