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ENTREVISTA

Emanuele Casale

“It wasn’t easy at all: we played contemporary music in front of 1200 people who don’t usually listen to it. We felt under enormous pressure, and, if that wasn’t enough, Chomsky talked about controversial issues. It went extremely well, but I’m sure someone will seek some sort of ‘revenge’ on me, either because of the music, or because of the political content of the work”



Sicilian composer Emanuele Casale’s musical activity is dramatically permeated with the urge to express concern for social and political issues: as a way to implement this, he stresses the need for a maximum clarity and transparency of the signifiers, which are essential in order to make meanings accessible by large and diverse audiences. One of the best examples of Casale’s work, in this sense, is Conversazioni con Chomsky (2010-2014), a “talk-opera” based on Chomsky’s political writings, and characterised by distinctive poetic devices such as the “sonorous interview” and the “musical debate”, developed in order to make the conveyed messages immediately clear to the listener, and assisted by an extensive use of videos: a first version of this work, performed by singer Cristina Zavalloni together with three actors and the ensembles Icarus and MDI, was premiered in 2010 in Reggio Emilia; the opera then underwent major modifications and was performed again on 24 January 2014, at the Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome – this time, Noam Chomsky himself was on the stage. I’ve asked Casale what exactly has changed from the first version.

The main difference is the absence of the actors from this new version: personally, I was against involving actors right from the beginning, as I feared acting might give a fictional flavour to the whole work. However, preparing an opera involves a lot of teamwork, and as a composer I often

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ANDREAS PRITTWITZ:

“Todos estamos deseando romper...”

Mario Muñoz Carrasco

VIAJE A TRAVÉS DE LOS SENTIDOS

Isla de Ailem Carvajal

Marta Rodríguez Cuervo

IMPOLUTO BARTÓK

Los últimos compases de Cuarteto Tokio

Juan Carlos Justiniano López

had to negotiate with other people, and give in some of my own ideas. This new version is closer to my original ideas: the “characters” are all on video – they don’t play a character, they talk as themselves. The “libretto” is then constituted by the content of these pre-existing videos. Chomsky was really brave and helpful; he also sent me a very nice email after the performance. It wasn’t easy at all: we played contemporary music in front of 1200 people who don’t usually listen to it. We felt under enormous pressure, and, if that wasn’t enough, Chomsky talked about controversial issues. It went extremely well, but I’m sure someone will seek some sort of “revenge” on me, either because of the music, or because of the political content of the work.

Your catalogue is also characterised by the coexistence of extremely varied languages, ranging, for instance, from the microtonal inflections of *Composizione per voce* (1997), which is a remarkable and rare example of a Sicilian text-setting in contemporary music, to the more “traditional” harmony of *A Victor Hugo Daza* (2006), dedicated to a Bolivian boy, murdered in 2000 by the military while he was taking part in the Cochabamba protests against water privatisation. I listened to *A Victor Hugo Daza* for the first time on a BBC radio programme: on that occasion your piece was broadcast together with pieces by Nono, Sciarrino and Gervasoni. When presenting your work, the radio speaker described *A Victor Hugo Daza* as a piece characterised by an extremely conventional language, almost as film music, and argued that you were trying to find new aesthetic spaces, in order to make your music different from that by Nono and Sciarrino. What do you think of this description?

It was a very superficial description. Mozart wrote only “conventional” music, i.e. music based on the typical technical, harmonic and stylistic convention of his epoch. He would often start from these “conventions”, formulating them using his creativity. Like Mozart, the 99.9% of composers has always worked in this way. Many people, often many musicians too, can’t really understand the difference between, say, a fragment from Mozart’s music and another one from the music by one of Mozart’s coeval composers. In order to really grasp the difference one shouldn’t stick to the surface, but go a bit deeper. Superficiality, in other words, is never a good thing.

Had I written a piece full of blows, noises and sighs, the radio speaker could have still said that my music was conventional, in that based on the typical “conventions” of some avant-garde music (i.e. the experimentations with timbre, the avoidance of any codified “harmony”, the escape from aesthetic explicitness, etc.), with which the academic world is literary obsessed. I remember the introduction to Samuel Adler’s book on orchestration. In a nutshell, it basically said this: “in 1979 I thought the future composers’ orchestra would become a special effects laboratory, with noises, scratches, blows, etc. Instead, in the latest years I realised that the younger composers look more and more at traditional orchestration”.

Almost all composers refer to a particular “sound world” when they write music. I personally tend to evaluate music on the basis of the energy that it emanates... That’s already sufficient to judge a work of art.

When composing *A Victor Hugo Daza* I wanted to write a piece for the people. One day I said to myself: why don’t you use orchestration in a more “traditional” way this time, maybe taking inspiration from old symphonic music? I like challenging myself all the time, I don’t want to crystallise myself in a monolithic way of conceiving music, e.g. only based on post-futuristic experimentation on timbre. I’m not interested in those composers who write always the same pieces for forty years... I often wonder whether they ever have the curiosity to discover new things. I need to be able to do many different things. I want to be totally free. I like working on elements of the avant-garde, but I’m also interested in rediscovering the past in my own way, and I like experimental rock and electronica. I don’t want to have any sort of constraint.

A Victor Hugo Daza is dedicated to a working-class boy! I didn’t want to make him roll over in his grave by writing a piece full of “non-conventional” blows, noises and sighs, which he certainly would not appreciate if he was still alive! Nono, for example, dedicated a piece to some workers... The work was booed by them... Well, to be honest I didn’t want to repeat the same fiasco with Victor Hugo’s parents and siblings.

This argument about Nono is very interesting. Do you think his approach proved to be a failure?

The study of Nono’s music could certainly be useful in the context of academia. On the contrary, his idea of presenting cultivated music to the factory workers proved to be a failure... although it was a very respectable and noble idea.

How important is, in your opinion, the influence of Nono’s work for politically engaged composers today? Do we have to necessarily consider him and his work? Or can we just

ignore his model?

It is possible to ignore his model. I respect Nono's figure, but I consider myself very distant from his example.

To what extent does this mirror the failure, as it were, of a part of the Italian left wing?

I believe the reasons of the failure of our left wing are to be found elsewhere. Left means also socialism, and socialism means sharing, equal and fair distribution. But history proves that in times of crises, as the one we're living in, fear brings about suspect and selfishness, which means people are no longer willing to share. Obviously, there is also the problem of our left-wing politicians, who proved to be incapable of communicating with the people, and this takes us back to the need for clarity and transparency. Above all, however, the hegemony of Berlusconi thought has practically wiped out the left wing.

Is this necessity of communicating connected, in your opinion, with a necessity of urging the people to act in some way?

In fact, the necessity of communicating and the urge for rebellion are strictly related. Also, I believe that we need a strong, steady, large-scale revolution. Italy is a country, which is "militarily" occupied by beggars. The actual beggars are those who ask for some change in the street, whereas these ones, our beggars, ask for much more money (I am following a thought I found in some writings by Osho).

Is this necessity any stronger for the artists/intellectuals who come from some particular places or regions?

In the Italian South this necessity of communicating is certainly stronger, at least for an intellectual.

Is this in any way related to your choice to stay in Sicily?

Initially I thought I could really make a difference, and change things, but now I'm maybe starting to be a bit sceptical. For any artist who remains here it is very difficult to disseminate their music to the rest of the world. Luckily there's internet and similar things that allow me to communicate with the rest of the world, but obviously it is not the same as living in a big city, where there are many more opportunities at one's disposal.

Apropos of Sicily, let's talk about *Composizione per voce*: why did you choose to set a Sicilian text?

I was intrigued by the idea of writing a piece in Sicilian, so I asked Biagio Guerrera for a poem, as he usually writes poems in Sicilian. I got this idea while listening to some old Sicilian records, mainly traditional chants. I wanted to listen to them just once though, in order not to be too influenced by them: as a result, the piece does not sound like our traditional songs, neither in terms of interval nor in terms of formal structure.

I suppose there are elements that might recall a particular tradition though: I'm thinking, for example, of the microtonal intervals, that somewhat evoke some inflections typical of some Sicilian accents; moreover, the use of a solo female voice makes me think about the funeral lament, a genre spread in the whole Mediterranean. Are these just coincidences?

There are in fact some deliberate references to traditional culture, such as the use of solo voice and the marked expressiveness of the piece as a whole. Biagio and I were also thinking about funeral laments when I was writing the piece. The Sicilian speech inflections were definitely less intentional: surely I have listened so many times to the cries of the peddlers in the street – especially when I was a child, in the 70s and 80s, I was exposed to so many of these things, which later must have been processed unconsciously by my mind. In every case, the writing of *Composizione per voce* was led by intuitive processes, as if everything was already composed in my mind. With regards to this, one thing worth mentioning is that Biagio wrote the poem after the music was already composed. Usually it's the other way round...

Talking about the poem, I believe it has a very recognisable narrative structure, with some typical literary *topoi* of the Sicilian/Mediterranean tradition, such as emigration, tragedy, despair, frenzy, revenge...

On the contrary, in our intentions it was written almost as a stream of consciousness, in which the meaning of each sentence has no connection with what comes before and after. Biagio tried to avoid clichés as much as possible. However, one can still perceive some sort of rhetoric,

especially in the passages about death. I wonder if it's the reader/listener who tends to construct some sort of "Sicilian rhetoric" on the basis of common linguistic/semantic associations... I mean, would the same poem evoke the same things if it was written in German? In general, I like to think of *Composizione per voce* as a surreal stream of consciousness.

What's your position towards this kind of misinterpretation of the composer's intentions (which is what I just did)? In other words, to what extent can a listener create their own text and their own narration on the basis of your work, and to what extent, on the contrary, do they need to stick to your original intentions?

Your question opens a very complex and interesting issue that concerns all music, and in particular wordless music. Music is made of signifiers, not of signifieds. Nevertheless, we can interpret it by means of suggestions, even to the point of identifying a very specific interpretation. However, in order to interpret music, one needs to be sufficiently creative: we never talk enough about the listener's creativity, which does not necessarily coincide with the performer's or the composer's creativity.

I'm hardly any interested in the meaning of a musical work: rather, what matters to me is the energy that it transmits. I believe musical communication is all about energy. Surely, we can then associate words and concepts to this energy, but this can only happen at a later stage, namely that of the "translation" of listening. Musical pieces are all about translation.

However, if a listener is not creative enough, they need meanings in order to understand specific types of music. In this case, words, metaphors, gestures, and so forth can facilitate the active participation of the listener. Nevertheless, I believe we can reach the "noblest" (I know how snob this term might sound, but please let me use it anyway, you got the idea) type of listening only when we stop needing to ask ourselves: "what does that mean?".

I've reflected a lot about the issues related to listening, and this is often reflected in the titles of my pieces: some of my titles have no extramusical content (e.g. *Composizione per voce* or *Composizione per cinque strumenti*), some of them are just numbers (2, 9, 11, etc.), and some other ones have nonsense titles, such as *Buongiorno stanza audace*; *Esistere, lago, nulla e un tempo*; *Allegro con bocca*; etc. These last three titles, for example, are a bit like music, in that they don't have a precise and univocal meaning, but are rather meant to suggest a number of meanings: thus, they're also open to a number of interpretations, as if they were microscopic musical composition made of words.

I am also aware that often people who don't have a specific educational background are not able to interpret certain types of music, however, I have met dozens of classically trained musicians who were totally tasteless in terms of music: as a matter of fact, then, undergoing professional musical training does not guarantee a good level of musical understanding, and general intelligence doesn't always come with musical intelligence. That's why I think the issue is very complex here, and that's why I try to rely on energy rather than on meanings. I believe the musicologists' job is exactly to give musical intelligence to those who haven't got it, they should be dealing with such issues as listening and divulgation. Composers are already busy writing, and sometimes they don't even think about "translating" their own music. Often I need to make an effort and explain my works, but that doesn't mean I can do it in an exhausting and satisfactory manner. I'm naturally inclined to think that the "explanation" of a work is the work itself: if I was to believe this, I wouldn't have anything to say about my music. When I compose I'm still convinced that my work is sufficiently self-explanatory, even though I've learned that this is not true.

Marcello Messina

