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GIACINTO SCELSEI TODAY
(Prepared by Pierre-Albert Castanet)
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Proceedings from the *European Days of Musical Studies* meeting, which was held from 12 to 18 January 2005 in the Contemporary Music Documentation Centre (CDMC) in Paris, on the initiative of Pierre-Albert Castanet, were published at the beginning of 2008 on the 20th anniversary of the death of Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988). In the first ever publication on Scelsi in French, musicologist Castanet¹, an expert on the work of the Italian composer, attempted to gather authors of a variety of generations and vocations, such as ballet dancers, artists, composers, performers, poets and editors, aiming particularly at musicologists and music analysts, ranging from those who knew the author personally to PhD students and young researchers. Even though the meeting had an explicitly international character, most contributions to this publication were made by French and Francophone authors, which explains the reduced, on first impression, but still recognizable tone of the entire project.²

Compared to some earlier studies and symposiums dedicated to the life and works of the charismatic Italian author, the proceedings of *Giacinto Scelsi Today*, in line with the title, dare to take a step further toward the demystification and demythologization of the sphere of decades-long uncritically accepted points of view on his unique, self-governing and secluded creative manifestation that has no predecessors or successors. This is achieved most efficiently, but not entirely, through the contributions of musicologists and theoreticians of younger generations, especially those concerning themselves with particular genres within the framework of Scelsi's opus and his influence on the leading present-day French composers. In these cases, however, the analytic spirit on occasion seems to unconsciously yield the space to the uncritical transmission of alluring fragments of Scelsi's written documents, particularly those with messages on the cosmic force at the centre of the world, on sound as 'the first movement of the immovable' and concepts of time and space which are derived or adopted from Buddhism and Hinduism.

The aspiration of the preparer and editor of this publication to encompass lesser-known polyvalent aspects of Scelsi's creative work, such as poetry, dance and fine arts, and to observe them in their dynamic relation to music, should also be included as one of his special merits. The chapters 'Aesthetic Elements', 'Analytic Elements' and 'G. Scelsi and Others' include a total of twenty-nine eclectic contributions, sometimes without adequate justification, ranging from poetic dedications by

¹ P. A. Castanet and N. Cisternino, *Giacinto Scelsi – Viaggio al centro suono*, La Spezia, Luna Ed, 1993.

² The international scientific meeting on *Scelsi and France* was held at the Italian Cultural Centre in Paris from 2-4 April 2008.

Joëlle Léandre, contrabassist, and André Pieyre de Mandiargues, writer, through memories of figures such as Muriel Jaër, dancer, and essays on the nature of sound, prayer and meditation by Christine Menesson, Aurélie Allain, Fabrice Duclos and Castanet, to composition analyses for choir groups by Michel Rigoni, for string instruments by Jean-Paul Dessy, and for percussion by Christine Paquelet-Lussac, as well as analyses of particular major works like *Pranam II* by Grazia Giacco, *Konx-Om-Pax* by Harry Halbreich and *Quartet no. 2* by Marco Giammonni.

The chapter *Analytic Elements* emphasises the texts ‘Ambivalence and Ambiguity of Sound of G. S.’ by Pierre-Albert Castanet and ‘Poetics of Sound of G. S./Quatro Pezzi per orchestra’ by Georges Beriachvili. Castanet warns of ambiguous procedures in Scelsi’s compositions for voice and solo instruments, on the one hand, which he defines as authentic forerunners of modern monodic art, and Scelsi’s duos, on the other hand, in which the author attempts to remould duality into an integrated entity by using early medieval European polyphony techniques. Associating organum, bourdon and diaphony with their adaptation in Scelsi’s works, with numerous interesting examples, Castanet argues that the final result of these borrowings must be pseudo-archaic and ambivalent, homogenous on the outside and conflictual on the inside, which ‘on solitary timeless paths leads toward a new age’.

Georgian musicologist and pianist Beriachvili, who has worked in Paris for some years, believes, like his other colleagues, that sound and the poetics of sound are the key elements in Scelsi’s work, which fuses and absorbs all traditional parameters. His comparisons regarding the application of the same acoustic field principle with Scelsi, on the one hand, and Ligeti and Xenakis, on the other, guide him toward a cautious but clearly articulated conclusion on the erratic and occasionally disputable quality of the work of the Italian composer, and of the illustration and pathos in his most recent works, especially in comparison to the work of these two avant-gardists. ‘I’m not a modernist but a herald’, would probably be, as one of his formulae, Scelsi’s retort to these discrete critical observations, which reverberate in a dissonant manner in the prevailing fascination created by his heritage.

In the last, shortest chapter, *Scelsi and Others*, we discover the unconventional relationships in which Scelsi was involved, the direct and indirect influences which he experienced and exerted, as well as the parallels and analogies which are easily identifiable with respect to his closest relatives, modern European authors. Friedrich Jaecker turns our attention to the Austrian composer Walther Klein, the author of esoteric texts and defender of dodecaphony, who ‘got the role’ of Scelsi’s professor and associate in some scores during the 1930s and 1940s, while, at the same time, the ‘other associate’, the controversial Vieri Tossati, who claimed to be the author of his most significant works (*Scelsi, c’est moi!*), is barely mentioned.

Nicola Cisternino connects the conception of Scelsi’s unrepresentative and static art with the sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, while Pierre Michel analyzes related examples of the treatment of sound, timbre, percussive rhythm and structure in the works of Scelsi, Bernd Alois Zimmermann and Klaus Huber, indicating ‘*the family of authors* who had been in search of new ways of communication,

which differed from serial and other techniques'. This extended family, as demonstrated in the contributions by Nicolas Darbon and Sophie Stevance, should additionally encompass György Kurtág and Arvo Pärt.

With respect to Scelsi's systematic refusal of any sort of discourse on his work, especially analytic or apologetic, his almost complete restraint regarding the questions related to the technical aspects of composing and absence of any desire to leave a trace of influence behind him, highlighting the details concerning the contact he had during the 1970s with Tristan Murail and a group of composers who had studied under Messiaen, such as Gerard Grisey and Michaël Levinas, not only lays emphasis on the insufficiently known dimensions of Scelsi's influences and relationships, but also casts new light on the extent of Messiaen's pedagogy and spectral music in general. Thierry Alla speaks of the 'intersection of waves' between Scelsi and Murail, who was at that time a scholarship holder at Rome's *Villa Medici*, of experiments with Martenot waves and ondioline, and of pre-electronic research which, as Murail noticed, were leading to the 'decomposing of sound into its spectrum'.

These influences have been spread further by the ensemble *L'itinéraire*, founded by Murail and Tessier in 1973, primarily through the music of independent French composers such as Dominique Lemaître, who dedicated his work *Ghirlandata* to Scelsi. In Lemaître's 'hedonistic lyricism', Sophie Stevance recognizes transcendental traces of the Italian author, which 'reflect the entire philosophic and existential thought of an epoch'.

This short review of the substantially rich proceedings dedicated to Scelsi would have been deficient if not for the retrospection of the motivating text *Poetry of G. Scelsi* by Jean-Baptiste Riffault, who contemplates three of his collections *Le poids net* (1949), *L'archipel nocturne* (1954) and *La conscience aigue* (1962), which were originally written in French. Underlining the lexical minimalism, repetitiveness and asceticism of expressions which dwell in the sphere of the four elements, with the aim to establish, through a primordial network of words and symbols, an atmosphere of meditation, cosmic order and higher reality, Riffault determines analogies between Scelsi's poetical and musical virtual pictures 'which get in touch with the hidden reality' to cause the release of all senses, approximating the aesthetics of Gaston Bachelard.

The proceedings of *Giacinto Scelsi Today*, include the most comprehensive chronological listing to date, compiled by Luciano Matinis and Sharon Kanach, a specialist on this author from the *Salabert* publishing house. It comprises about a hundred of Scelsi's works, based on a dozen various sources, ranging from existing incomplete catalogues to concert programmes and direct testimonies by authors. Among the valuable contributions for future research are a detailed discography, an index of names, a great number of scores and photos (although of bad quality) which demystify the 'faceless composer'.

It is regretful that a good opportunity has been missed, even twenty years after Scelsi's death, to bring off a complete catalogue of his works, as its gaps, according to some authors, undermine analytic

studies and, as if to meet the wishes of ‘heralds’, perpetuate the mystification of the ‘predominance of acoustic over semantic connotations’ and of a ‘higher reality’ as the only reality.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović