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Recent Sciarrino Premieres

Ian Pace

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Prior to the UK premieres of Salvatore Sciarrino's *Lohengrin* and *Vanitas*, I had been more than a little sceptical about his music. His basic premises, exploring the limits of perception, the borderline between sound and silence, the abstraction of gestures and forms from the tonal contexts that supply them, all seemed fruitful compositional determinants, yet their actual embodiment was underwhelming.

Il motivo degli oggetti di vetro (1986-87) (recorded on the recent CD Dischi Ricordi CRMCD 1029) presents several minutes of naturalistic writing in the flutes, with sounds suggesting birds, crickets and a volcano, though the appearance of the piano at the end is presumably intended to shatter the representational illusion. This token gesture of critique hardly elevates the work much beyond a piece of film music. Even the much praised piano concerto *Un'immagine di Arpocrate* (1979), seems to spin out a rather frothy surface for an unnecessarily long time (despite the few points where the texture changes substantially) to the point where it can become tiresome. This is static music, but not sufficiently static as to undermine the nature of stasis.¹ A type of artiness and nostalgia prevails, though the essential emptiness is perhaps intended to represent the futility of a nostalgic view.² This is certainly a laudable achievement, but the work does not seem (to my ears at least) to exceed its conceptual nature to any great degree. Most of the sonic vocabulary has been exhausted quite early in the piece, and the extended programme that Sciarrino provides for the works is not really matched in substance by the music.

Perhaps these works suffer from over- 'conceptualization': the intellectual determinants exceed in importance the material work itself, which does at least need in some sense to justify its duration. But then the void, emptiness, critique of dialectical musical aesthetics, are all a fundamental part of Sciarrino's motivations, so am I criticizing Sciarrino for being himself?

¹ For more on this point, see my review of Emmanuel Nunes' *Quodlibet* in *Tempo* 198, p.63.

² Gavin Thomas's article on Sciarrino's work ('The poetics of extremity', *Musical Times* Number 1802 (April 1993)), in an absurd comparison with the composer 'he most obviously resembles' - Helmut Lachenmann - celebrates Sciarrino's work as 'an art of submerged nostalgia. He retains, however great the irony or distancing, an essential affection for what has passed' though this is 'too clear-sighted to be entirely comfortable'. There seems to be a sub-text at work here: Sciarrino's work is acceptable because the element of critique is sufficiently muted as to be unthreatening. This is born out by Thomas's earlier comment that 'Sciarrino's work lacks Lachenmann's socio-political subtext, its black humour, its visceral impact and destructive commentary on past models'. This seems to trivialize Sciarrino's very real intentions in all these directions, which are of course viewed as dangerous by the dominant aesthetic ideology in Britain today; yet the comment would seem to be undermined by the later remark that 'Sciarrino, like Lachenmann, stresses the elements of cruelty and irony, the dangerous dance at the limits of perception and performance in this music rather than the incidental seductiveness of its soundworld.' i.e. the above-mentioned qualities are acceptable when they can be ensconced in high-flown artistic terms, rather than nasty politics (heaven forbid!). Quite apart from this, the Lachenmann comparison has about as much validity as the frequent banding together of Ferneyhough and Finnis, and reflects the extent to which 'sound-bite' criticism, a clear product of the consumerist age, where surface style rules, has become prevalent in Britain today. If Sciarrino resembles Lachenmann because he uses extended instrumental techniques, then why does he not equally resemble Hespeler, Holliger, Globokar, Klaus Huber, early Kagel, or the Ferneyhough of the Time and Motion Studies and Unity Capsule? Or Chris Dench because he has also written numerous works for solo flute?

The point is best addressed by comparing Sciarrino with other composers who reject a sense of musical development. Cage's use of randomness generates energy and tension that is perhaps unattainable by human intention alone. Feldman, on the other hand, uses rhetorical devices which give the (mistaken) impression of formal procedures and development, but whose function is really to entice the listener towards the sounds themselves. The improvisatory qualities of Scelsi, or the sensation of entering a secular mystical experience in Radulescu's music, provide a powerful challenge to musical directionality.

Some of Sciarrino's music, in contrast, seems a little tedious, spinning out a musical surface beyond the point where the notion of emptiness has been fully apprehended. Such concerns are addressed much more succinctly in the very attractive string trio *Codex Purpureus* (1983), which members of the Arditti Quartet performed on 18 January at the ICA.

At least this was my view before hearing Sciarrino's two large-scale masterpieces in this vein. The first of these to be performed was the 'invisible action' *Lohengrin* (1983) for voice, instruments and three other voices (tenor, baritone, bass), which was given its UK premiere in a marvellous performance by the Finnish ensemble Avanti, with soprano soloist Raili Viljakainen, as the concluding concert (which also included works by Holliger, Donatoni and Lindberg) in the 1996 Meltdown Festival, on 6 July last. Sciarrino's text is derived from *Lohengrin fils de Parsifal*, Jules Laforgue's reinterpretation of the legend. The 'action' all takes place within the head of Elsa (the work is intended as a product of the concept of 'the voice and body as a universe', resulting in a 'monstrous landscape of the soul'), who in a Lacanian sense is never quite selfidentical, so that the inner drama is between the perceived Elsa, the perceived Lohengrin and the Elsa who perceives. All actual text (including at one point an imaginary stage direction) is spoken; around the words the vocalist pants, swallows, laughs, purrs, howls and much else besides.

The work is in four scenes, with a prologue and an epilogue. The first two of these contain dialogues between Elsa and Lohengrin, in which the latter responds to the yearnings and vanities of the former mainly with yawns and disinterestedness or even hostility. Parodying the role of the swan in Wagner's eponymous music-drama, Lohengrin imagines his pillow as a swan, and (according to the unacted stage directions) the pillow obliges by actually turning into a swan, which flies off with Lohengrin on its back. He is never heard again in the work.

The third scene is accompanied almost throughout by a high triad with added second, in second inversion, played on string harmonics and very quiet clarinet tremolos. Elsa imagines many voices calling her name, mocking her, accusing her of being a 'lost vestal virgin, your breast knows other caresses than those of the moon, so far away: profane hands have loosened your girdle and have broken the seal of your tiny solitudes!'. The net effect is extremely disconcerting. In the fourth scene, she appeals to her lost knight to return, then a swan supposedly arrives with a youth on its back; the choir gives voice to her desires, 'Will you dress up of my lost Being?'

It becomes clear in the epilogue that Elsa is deranged, living in a mental hospital, and blurs the boundary between her imagination and reality. This has been predicated by

the insanity of the soprano's vocalizing, and also the description of the nuptial villa, 'invaded by mad herbs. Echo corridors. Empty rooms ... smells of communal grave', which might be a cypher for the hospital itself. The soprano sings (for the first time in the work) using only four pitches, in the manner of a children's nursery rhyme, of the 'Joy of the clean linen, as if, during the week, we had never got dirty!' Thus all of the events might be merely a product of her deluded imagination.

The ensemble provides a tapestry of mainly unpitched sounds, sometimes naturalistic motives relating to the text (crickets, animal noises, bells), at other points commentating on the scenario or representing the sensations within Elsa's head - a type of psychological realism. The instrumentalists' parts are mainly sparse and on the threshold of audibility - except in the introduction, where harsh multiphonics in the woodwind make for a very uncomfortable sound indeed, and in 'dissolves' between scenes, where their music serves to represent the action (though of course with a degree of irony). The three male singers only enter at three points during the work. In one of these they are wordless, thus emphasizing the fact that they are no more than performers. The whole work never ceases to remind us of its own artificiality and the futility of untempered musical naturalism (this critique of a Wagnerian subject also extends to a critique of leitmotivic composition), which serves to make the impact paradoxically more real. The immediacy and power can hardly be described in words. I can only point people in the direction of the CD (Dischi Ricordi CRMCD 1001) to experience for themselves a frighteningly enticing dream-world, exploring with claustrophobic intensity the macabre regions of the disturbed mind.

Sciarrino states that 'Too often musical invention seeks its "raison d'être" on the stage. One forgets that the strength of a musical language lies in its ability to represent things; to conjure up illusions.' *Lohengrin* was conceived as a work for radio; correspondingly, the soloist and ensemble handled the theatrics of performance in a resolutely non-theatrical manner, performing with an extreme stillness that was most effective. The performance was magnificent in every respect, with absolutely meticulous attention to detail and real understanding of the nature of the piece. Raili Viljakainen was magnificent; she has the unenviable task of communicating almost every conceivable emotion whilst maintaining a sense of distance, to which she responded with almost unbelievable concentration and urgency.

Vanitas (1981), 'still life in one act', for voice, cello and piano, is a very different but no less distinctive work. It was performed as part of the Almeida Opera on 16 July by Susan Bickley, Frances-Marie Uitti and Rolf Hind. The title comes from the 17th-century genre of still life painting, representing objects which appear beautiful and are shown upon closer inspection to be empty ('vanitas' means emptiness). Sciarrino draws our attention to the fact that this genre suggested the passing of time and the transitoriness of things. The piece is in the form of an introduction (delicate cello harmonics and tremolos) and five songs, a critical 'take' on a Lieder cycle, using a variety of texts in English, French, German, Italian and Latin all relating to roses, flames, and the colour red; the death of beautiful things, Sciarrino says that 'the songs represent to a certain extent the equivalent of flowers that are beautiful yet ephemeral'.

The first song, 'Rosa', features a series of chords in the piano which lie somewhere between mellow jazz and late Feldman. Unlike Feldman, Sciarrino allows these

chords to resolve, but then has the pianist remove the notes individually, at different times. He also incorporates silences between sets of chords. The effect is beautiful but disconcerting in a manner I have heard almost nowhere else, the only possible parallel being the little-known music of Mark Taylor, who presents wounded triadic chords, which provide tension without any apparent means of release. In some other songs, the pianist's part is more florid, but obsessively circling around a few harmonies and figurations. On a few occasions it becomes a little violent, interrupting regular patterns with a cluster or a glissando.

Throughout, the singer's part is yearning, aching, but similarly meandering, with nowhere to go. The cello's part is more characteristic of Sciarrino's writing for the instrument, being often high, quiet, or in harmonics. In the final song, 'Ultime rose', after hovering around some high pitches as the voice and piano dissolve into nothingness, the cello plays an extremely slow descending glissando over a four octave range (lasting a whole six minutes). Another composer might have interrupted this to create dynamism and uncertainty, but Sciarrino is determined that we will be forced to experience this harrowing decay to the bitter end.

The performance, which felt at times a little uncommitted, took place on the mostly dark stage of the Almeida Theatre, with no action but continual changes of lighting upon the singer; at one point she is bathed in a red swathe of projected roses. This is diseased music, presenting something inescapably alluring, only to remind us that it is irretrievably lost, unattainable, which makes the fact of having been on the verge of partaking it all the more painful. The intensity of the sadness is a deeply wounding experience which it is hard to forget.

Anything of Sciarrino, including the works about which I expressed reservations earlier, is a good deal more interesting than much of what commonly fills British contemporary music concerts, and deserves more outings than is currently the case in this country. But *Lohengrin* and *Vanitas* in particular are, in my view, seminal works, which deserve a great many performances here. With these works still swimming around my head, it's time to reconsider *Un'immagine d'Arpocrate*.