

New old sounds for chamber music

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When we think of the 1950s, 60s or 70s music, we find that one of the most important parameters for the avant-garde composers' attention was timbre. Composers began to explore new sound possibilities, which may be produced by traditional acoustic instruments, including the voice, to add to the sound "menu" to be organized and developed in their creative works.

As the most significant examples of the music literature of that period, we can mention Luciano Berio's *Sequenze*, some of John Cage's pieces, as well as several compositions by Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Luigi Nono, Gerard Grisey and so on. In fact, it is possible to say that, in that period, many composers and musical interpreters were very much engaged in these experiments and investigations, which obviously meant also a graphical research, necessary to express all these new sounds in the score. We can also mention some composers such as Salvatore Sciarrino or Helmut Lachenmann, who use new sounds and the timbre parameter as the main structural function in creative investigations and compositions in a way that this becomes not only the central part of their work but actually their poetics.

Another contribution to this investigation comes from different music cultures, which means new instruments, new tuning systems or new music organization systems in a smaller world, where information runs quite fast. In this lecture, the point is not to talk about new possibilities for acoustic traditional instruments but to try to understand the real, concrete, utility of new ways of

producing sound, considering the anthropological and cultural function of music in the contemporary society.

In European society, music becomes an autonomous subject, the substance of an event that begins with the performance and concludes with the listening of the composition, without forming any opinion about its meaning, which is left to the sensibility of listeners and artists. It is clear that, when listening to music, the quality of the interpretation and the clarity of its perception are the bases for understanding its sense. Almost as a consequence, it becomes extremely important how music is written in relation to the environment, the space in which the performance takes place.

In view of these considerations, it is possible to say, and the musical literature supports the idea, that the physical space in which the musical performance takes place has or should have an important influence on music's *raison d'être*, on its aim and its material representation, the score writing. As a very significant example of what is expressed, we can mention the great polyphonic music composed for Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice, which was written considering the two different and dialectical sound sources (two choirs) placed on two opposite sides of the church.

It is well known that the characteristics of symphonic music writing are limited, if we consider the complexity of the instrumental possibilities. We can also speak of its richness, if we think about the timbre colors which may come from a large number of combinations: we know well how varied and powerful the sounds produced by such a quantity of sound sources can be.

We should also remark, since every "part" is a single part, how technically developed and complex, from an instrumental point of view, the musical writing for each instrument and the musical ensemble texture can be, considering the level of control that players can have on their single parts in chamber music. In both cases, the architectonic characteristics and possibilities of the physical space (the auditorium) in which the musical event (the concert) takes place influence musical writing, its audibility, its grammar, syntax and, above all, the composer's fantasy.

As an example: some time ago, a concert for guitar and orchestra performed in a big auditorium used to be a real torment for the guitarist, forced to try to make his part audible and varied without any possibility of playing with

dynamics and colors. It was also hard on the listeners, who could see the guitarist moving a lot but could hear almost nothing, wasting the dialectic relationship and suffering with the absolute imbalance between the two elements.

Obviously, these problems are easily solved today with suitable microphones and a high-fidelity amplifying system that give the soloist the possibility to express his abilities and his ideas. This also gives the listeners the opportunity to hear details of the soloist music writing in the right balance with that sonorous monster called the orchestra.

These considerations should help some reflections about how many contemporary composers use or have used certain experimental sounds without any relationship with the space where the performance was supposed to be, obtaining, if not a very poor result, almost nothing. Even if all those sounds were structurally necessary and part of the game in the theoretical project, the real, the acoustic, the sonorous concept would never reach the listeners, denying them of any possibility of musical comprehension and, at the end, all this new acoustic world would become just a menu of banal effects.

Air breath, breath with sound, tapped keys, slaps and other sounds used by wind instruments; harmonics, pizzicato, beats on the box or some other parts of the instrument and many other sounds used when writing for strings; prepared-piano sounds or resonances: all this may be, in some compositions, inaudible for the public, becoming just a quite boring choreography. As a result, those “sound gaps” derange the musical meaning and its comprehension, creating an authentic dyslexia between the score and its performance.

Considering these facts, a question naturally arises: is it possible, for composers, to let this acoustic world become something real and concrete – since it may become audible – an element to be considered structurally just like pitches, intervals or rhythmical figures?

It is probably possible to imagine a new acoustic physical space in which music that uses these sounds develops its nature and characteristics, because in its project and structure all these inaudible sounds become audible, and therefore usable as raw material to be elaborated. This space can be the disc; therefore, music written to be recorded and played or broadcast by CDs or

radio becomes a new music category to be added to symphonic and chamber music: studio music.

It is obvious that traditional music is also recorded and broadcast by CDs and radio. Interpreters and technicians are looking forward to find new spaces and technologies to improve music fidelity and reproduction quality, so that recorded contemporary music can reproduce well sounds that in live performances we do not notice. The point is not this but to create new music considering a new listening dimension and space that makes inaudible sounds a real parameter to be considered since, if recorded in studio, they become real sounds. With this new way of listening to music with a different level of attention and concentration, the listener becomes an active subject that puts a CD to play or switches on the radio, and chooses to hear a piece of music expecting to perceive sound details that are helpful for a better understanding of the structure and its meaning. Of course, this music can also be performed in live concerts. There is only one important requirement: the space must have a good amplifying equipment.

It becomes almost automatic to reflect upon the musical event's anthropological and social function and also the disc function, usually exploited only as a commercial and promotional vehicle. Thinking about commercial music – rock, for example – since the 1960s, concerts, tours and broadcasting were only promotional instruments for the commercial targets of recorded music. Under this perspective, the focus was marketing and profit. In recent years, the same technique has been applied to “classical music”, which means that the concert, which was the principal and final moment of a musical event, has changed its primary purpose becoming, as in commercial music, just a promotional instrument and a concert season only a discographic-industry side product. The consequence is that recording companies choose few artists to promote in concerts and commercialize in records.

All these thoughts make us reflect on recorded music in its artistic possibilities, the idea that the beginning and the end of a musical event take place in the moment of the reproduction of the disc and its listening. Therefore, composers should perhaps take advantage of this hypothetical “magical moment” to express as much as possible their ideas and imagination, using a more complete range of sound possibilities in their musical projects and considering also the new instruments of wide diffusion such as the Internet and free radios.