

Notes on the Program

by Riccardo Schulz

THE COMPOSER

Fortune

Italian composer GIACINTO SCELSI (1905-1988) was one of the creative geniuses of our time—one whose legacy and artistry will continue to inspire, impress and mystify appreciative listeners and critics well into the twenty-first century. Amazingly, for a composer who died so recently (scarcely more than a decade ago), little is known about his life. He forbade anyone to photograph him, and he purposely and routinely changed or concealed details of his personal and public life even from those with whom he had daily contact. Born in La Spezia (Liguria) to an ancient aristocratic family, Count Giacinto Scelsi d'Ayala Valva was courtly and engaging, with a presence—and piercing blue eyes—that could overwhelm; less fortunately, neurotic episodes darkened long periods of his life.

Scelsi never attended a regular school, but instead was tutored privately at home. Nor did he have any regular academic training in music. He studied composition privately in Rome (no one knows for how long) with Giacinto Sallustio, a pupil of Respighi. Later he took sporadic lessons in Vienna with Walter Klein, a Schönberg student, and with Egon Köhler, in Geneva, a disciple of Scriabin. Scelsi spoke fluent English and French in addition to his mother tongue, and wrote many articles and two volumes of poetry in French.

Scelsi was not a composer who fit any previous historical model of the profession. He was independently wealthy, and thus able to create without the need to satisfy any segment of the public, no matter how common or esoteric. His social milieu was a strange assembly of wealthy friends in high society, Tibetan monks with whom he meditated and chanted, and the most famous musicians, poets, and painters of his day. Although a description of 'avant-garde' would not be inaccurate, he had little to do with and did not seek entry into any other current of music or art that was exploding in every direction from the intellectual and social chaos of the 1960s. Above all, he was a visionary who knew that his message would at first be comprehended by very few and that many years would pass before even the connoisseur could assimilate his intent. But his time has come: the history of contemporary music will have to be rewritten, for the second half of the twentieth century is now unthinkable without Scelsi.

Discovery and Obsession

Even for the avid concert-goer—the adventurous seeker of the new, the strange, the exotic, the unusual—Scelsi’s music will come as a revelation of the sensational, in the many levels of meaning of the word. Scelsi’s primary concern in music was with the basic elements of sound itself. He was obsessed, for example, with the sound of a single note—its natural components both above and below the fundamental pitch, its microtonal variations, and physical interactions that occur when elemental sound components are combined. The micro-intervals color and shape the sound, revolve it around a pulsating sphere whose center, in Scelsi’s own words, was always his destination. In aural and spiritual dimensions, there are clear parallels between Scelsi’s music and Carnatic (South Indian classical) music and Tibetan chant.

Some writers have claimed that Scelsi was the first Italian to write in the twelve-tone system, but there is no evidence to support this conjecture. After a few lessons with Klein, Scelsi lost interest—to him it was even more structured than the tonal system—and never pursued it. The inexorable pull toward Zen Buddhism and other oriental influences following a catastrophic nervous breakdown soon led him to a path that has few if any precedents in Western music.

Nevertheless, despite his obsession with a single note and his search for new structures (or eliminating them completely), some of Scelsi’s pieces use traditional compositional techniques of Western music. These include polyphony and counterpoint, which emerge as both ancient and modern musical artifacts—a juxtaposition of time created by looking to the unknown abyss of the future while at the same time recalling a known or imagined reconstruction of the past.

Mystery

In the 1960s, Scelsi engaged the string quartet Quartetto di Nuova Musica (Massimo Coen and Franco Sciannameo, violins; Giovanni Antonioni, viola; Donna Magendanz, cello) to study and play his music, experiment with sound and notation, and record and publicly perform his music in Italy and abroad. On one memorable occasion (he rarely left home during this period) Scelsi traveled with the quartet to Athens for the Hellenic Festival of Contemporary Music 1966, and the world première of his fourth string quartet. An ecstatic audience demanded a complete repetition of the piece as an encore.

A constant presence, in addition to Scelsi (plus his musicians and fascinated observers), was the noted Italian composer Vieri Tosatti (born 1920)—Scelsi’s amanuensis and collaborator for nearly three decades, from the mid 1940s to the early 1970s. Tosatti’s exact role in the actual creation and writing down of Scelsi’s music is unknown. Scelsi often referred to himself as a ‘messenger’ rather than a composer, and the extent to which

this was true in the literal sense is known today probably only to Tosatti himself. Now blind and living near Rome, Tosatti prefers to remain silent on the matter.

Despite a few live performances and a trickle of recordings from the 1960s on, most of Scelsi's music, especially the large orchestra pieces, remained unknown until October 1987 when they were presented in a series at the International Society of Contemporary Music Festival in Cologne. At the festival, Scelsi's music created an unprecedented enthusiasm—a thrill of discovery—for sold-out crowds. Since then performances of his works have continued to reach a wider public and a cross-over audience of symphony, chamber music, and new-music aficionados, as well as fans of new-age and psychedelic music.

THE MUSIC

Canti del Capricorno

Canti del Capricorno is a collection of twenty songs written between 1962 and 1972, mostly for and in collaboration with soprano Michiko Hirayama. Some of the *Canti* are written specifically for soprano voice, while for others the exact voice is not specified. Improvisation and 'personal inspiration' play a large part in the interpretation of the songs. The physical score is meant to be mental reminder and 'guide' for the artists; the essence of each piece depends largely on the aural presentation of the artists.

There is no word-text. Rather, the sounds are phonemes—speech-like cells, often jarring—that predate or transcend language as a means of expression.

Canti del Capricorno No. 1 (percussion and soprano) is a dark piece whose colors are emphasized by a difficult vocal technique that requires two simultaneous pitches to be produced. In some performances the singer also plays the gong.

Canti del Capricorno No. 2 (tenor solo) begins in the lowest register and morphs into a pointed middle register with the notes becoming smooth, fluctuating within their space. has the characteristic anapest rhythm (short-short-long) that was also heard in *Canto No. 2*

Canti del Capricorno No. 18 (soprano and percussion) evokes a primitive ritual. The percussion supports and propels the voice, engaging the singer in a fiery and urgent battle.

Canti del Capricorno No. 14 (tenor and percussion) is a companion to Canto No. 18. Primitive ritual is again suggested as the voice and percussion engage in a dramatic duel.

Canti del Capricorno No. 19 (voices and instruments) suggests the union of nature and mankind through the sounds of the breath as well as the plaintive sounds of the wooden flutes.

Canti del Capricorno No. 15 (for soprano) is an alternating earthly battle and celestial tranquility between the birds and the beasts—the five strophes of the bird alternating with the four of the beast.

The Large Pieces

Hymnos (1963), about eleven minutes, is Scelsi's longest continuous single movement. It demands a large orchestra divided antiphonally into two almost identical groups, symmetrically placed on each side of the central axis made up of the organ, the timpani, and the percussion. Five different types of mutes are required for the brass, and four types of sticks are used in the percussion section, which abounds in special effects.

The note of obsession, so typical of Scelsi, is the unison D (*re*) with which the piece opens. There are microtonal variations around the note, which struggles for survival as the tonal center moves first to F and then to B-flat. In aural and spiritual dimensions, there are clear parallels with oriental music.

Even for the well-immersed listener, the aura of a phantom choir that miraculously appears about halfway through the piece as a result of accumulated pedal tones and their harmonics is a chilling experience. The chant-like sounds that emerge in performance but are nowhere evident in the score are a nod to the title, *Hymnos*, a Greek word and the origin of the English word 'hymn.'

Hurqualia (1960) was the first of the Scelsi pieces for orchestra written at the height of the composer's maturity. As with *Hymnos*, Scelsi obsesses on a single note—in this case a different note for each of the four movements. The overall impression of the piece corresponds somewhat to the traditional notion of symphonic construction in four movements. Scelsi's subtitle, which is not likely to find contradiction with anyone who ventures within listening distance of the work, is "A Different Realm." *Hurqualia* (the *h* is silent) reveals a shocking Scelsi: the music is violent, impulsive, loud, fast.

The first movement, a kind of introduction or overture, begins serenely with sounds reminiscent of the mantra-like syllable 'Om.' It builds gradually to a massive and destructive explosion of brass and percussion. The percussion takes an active part, and the drums are struck *con la mano*—by hand—instead of with sticks, much in the manner of Indian tabla. The end is sudden, on a single drum stroke.

The second movement introduces tension of another sort, within a self-contained structure and under a surface of quiet expression. The central focus is on B-natural, with branches up to a minor third (D-natural) and shrinking to a conflicting and unresolved C-sharp. A melodic element, with violent rhythmic accents, is stressed in the third movement. The fourth movement begins (like the first) on E-flat, but the true pole emerges as B-flat. This movement is the richest and most complex of the work. The drums are again used as tabla, and enormous groups of clusters bring the piece to a violent climax.

Hurqualia is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, timpani, four percussionists, strings (but no violins) and three sets of amplified instruments. Scelsi gives instructions for the independent dynamics of three amplified groups (oboe, English horn, E-flat clarinet in the first group; horn, tenor saxophone, musical saw, viola, and double bass in the second; and two trumpets and trombone in the third). The origin of the title is unknown, but again, there are clear parallels with oriental music, especially Tibetan chant.

Konx–Om–Pax, a twenty minute work for choir and orchestra, is Scelsi's crowning achievement. The orchestra is the largest ever assembled by Scelsi. The piece is in three sections, and uses relatively simple material but projected onto an enormous landscape of sound.

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The order, structure, and detail of this piece surpasses any of Scelsi's previous works. Even the organ stops are meticulously specified, and the joining of 'all' in the third movement, combining the massive forces of orchestra and choir, makes an inevitable allusion to a previous 'ode to joy.' The title is the word 'peace' in three languages: ancient Assyrian, Sanskrit, and Latin. In a subtitle, Scelsi describes *Konx–Om–Pax*: Three aspects of Sound: as the first motion of the immovable, as creative force, as the sacred syllable 'Om.'

CHALLENGE AND HOPE

Such wildly different music demands a new approach in learning and playing for both the conductor and the musicians. There is no precedent for learning or teaching Scelsi's music; experimentation guides progress; perfection is elusive. At the very least, every technical and musical skill in terms of color and intonation that the musicians have achieved in their conservatory training is demanded in full measure; at the same time the listening mechanisms and parameters which musicians rely on innately to play accurately and musically are stretched to new limits. In the end the musicians have to use and

simultaneously abandon the very skills that are needed to play any music—and to make that leap into the soundscape that is Scelsi’s mind and music.

As a artist and as a human being Scelsi’s sole purpose was centered on a desire to listen to cosmic forces. This desire emanated from transcendental thought as he searched for the divine essence of religion outside of geographic and temporal borders. He used elements from known traditions to reach moments of transcendence, overcoming factors of conflict surrounding various individual beliefs. He wanted a religion and a way of life without ritual. He reached out, through his music, for entry into the profound realities of the universe, with undaunted spirit and a fervent hope for universal peace.

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Sources include articles by Todd Michel McComb and Harry Halbreich (translated by Elisabeth Buzzard); *Giacinto Scelsi* (a collection of essays published by Nuova Consonanza); *Giacinto Scelsi: Viaggio al centro del suono* edited by Pierre Albert Castanet and Nicola Cisternino (Lunaeditore, 1992); I am indebted to Franco Sciannameo for his valuable suggestions and personal recollections; and to Juan Pablo Izquierdo for his help in assembling these notes. —RS

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