

Scelsi, De-composer

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Introduction

In 1983, I wrote a piece called *Désintégrations* for tape and instrumental ensemble. The goal of the piece was, in fact, to *integrate* computer-synthesized electronic sounds with the instrumental sounds of the ensemble as closely as possible. But to realize this goal, the instrumental sounds first had to be ‘disintegrated’—reduced to their elemental components—then recomposed, synthesizing the elements into new aggregates to produce, as desired, either timbre or harmony (depending on the weighting of amplitudes and the type of listening suggested by the context).

This almost ‘scientific’ approach to composition (though always with the goal of creating a rich and communicative musical discourse) may seem far removed from Scelsi’s musical aesthetic. However, ‘Scelsi’s decision, essentially, was to de-compose the sound into its spectrum, and not to compose (cum-ponere) sounds with one another’ (Castagnoli, 1987/1992, p. 259).

‘De-composing the sound into its spectrum’ is a good description of the departure point for the compositional method now called ‘spectral’. Though spectral music is very different from Scelsi’s in its sonority and structure, they share at least one trait: a similar attitude towards the phenomenon of sound.

The connection between my music (and that of other spectral composers) and Scelsi’s lies in this attitude, more than in a comparable style or aesthetic; the compositional techniques are completely different, except for a few superficial similarities (microtones, attention to dynamics, continuous processes).

But this attitude, shared by Scelsi, the ‘spectral’ composers, and many other contemporary composers of all kinds, is crucially important. It is a complete change of viewpoint, a wholesale reversal of the western musical tradition, which for centuries has been based on combination and superposition. We no longer seek to com-*pose*, juxta-*pose*, or super-*pose*, but rather to *de-compose*, or even, more simply, to *pose* the sonic material (*poser le son*¹).

The Invisible Border

Posing sonic material, simply offering it to the listener's hearing, is the primordial sonic gesture, the *om* of the yogi. The American composers Terry Riley and LaMonte Young (a friend of Scelsi's) have tried to recapture this gesture (in my opinion, naively and without success), as have vocal groups experimenting with the Mongolian techniques of diffracting harmonic partials. (The Harmonic Choir of David Hykes may be the best known, but this ensemble was preceded by the Rome-based group Prima Materia, whose members associated regularly with Scelsi.)

Musique concrete and electronic music have tried as well—both have usually failed because the sonic objects presented were too simple or too artificial. John Cage also made such an attempt, inviting us to contemplate a sound as a Zen meditator would contemplate the rising moon, or the trail of a rake in a gravel bed.

Scelsi was too deeply grounded in contradictory traditions to fall into these obvious traps. Unlike Cage (who wanted to break with tradition) and the minimalist and electronic composers (who generally lacked classical training), Scelsi had an intimate knowledge of western music. He was familiar with the chromatic language of Scriabin, with the neoclassical style of Malipiero and others, and above all with 12-tone music. It seems that he experimented with all of these styles; in any case, the few works that survive from Scelsi's earliest period show a mixture of influences with a dodecaphonic substratum.² We know that all these musical styles eventually became problematic for him, probably at the same time that he faced a personal existential crisis. A composer's techniques must correspond with his expressive needs, or else he quickly falls into artificiality or academicism. Scelsi, however, understood that the solution to this problem could not be a simple one. It would have been easy for him, steeped as he was in the influence and teachings of the East, to try to follow their musical practices: to adopt the slow evolution of the Indian *rāga* or the abrupt melismas of Japanese *Noh*, the complex rhythms of Bali, or the vocal techniques of the Tibetan monks.

I do not mention these non-European examples by chance; one can find, here and there in Scelsi's work, some reflection of these musics. But, though the East may provide inspiration, it is pointless to imitate an eastern mindset, which can only have value in the context of a specific culture, and still more worthless to ape the cultural manifestations of this mindset. As Scelsi was fond of saying, 'Rome is at the border between the East and the West.' In other words, the Western tradition is for him at least as important as the influence of the East.

His solution was a radical change of viewpoint, a true revolution in thought. Such 'cultural revolutions' are typically Western phenomena—they make sense only in the context of Western culture. Thus, Scelsi's rethinking of the compositional process (and of musical listening itself) belongs in this revolutionary tradition. Perhaps he participates in the true musical revolution of this century. Schoenberg, in the final analysis, will have changed nothing: his compositional technique is nothing more than a negative image of the academic tradition. The real revolutionaries are those who have fundamentally changed our relationship to sound. And for a revolution to

have a bright future, it must be constructive and positive, not defined as a set of taboos (even if these taboos are discreetly called ‘constraints’).

One thinks, of course, of the other ‘reconstructors’ of this century, of Varèse and Ligeti, not forgetting all we owe to the experience of electroacoustic and computer music. Scelsi evidently had no scientific pretensions, which did not stop him from using avant-garde tools (for the 1950s) to help in the compositional process: an archaic tape recorder and two Ondiolines³. However, the important point is that a revolution in musical thought occurred almost simultaneously, starting from different premises, but leading to coincident results: on one hand, electroacoustic experiments, anticipated by Varèse, which led to Ligeti’s re-evaluation of the traditional orchestra (keeping in mind the extraordinary premonitions of Friedrich Cerha⁴); on the other, Scelsi’s intuitions, with no recognizable precursors, like a message from beyond. The coincidence itself is significant; the evolution of western music had arrived at a point of blockage where something truly new had to emerge, not just a simple patching-up of traditional techniques.

Silence Is Not Golden

The *Quattro Pezzi per Orchestra (su una nota sola)*, four pieces each based on a single note, are a radical product of this evolution. Were they mere provocation, or the result of a compelling necessity? At almost the same time, Cage composed his 4’33” of silence. Historically, these two pieces seem inevitable: we had the monochrome canvases of Yves Klein, the bicolours of Rothko, the book made up of blank pages. The silent piece, or the piece on a single sound, was clearly due.

But in Cage’s case, this step was essentially negative: the culmination of a particular crisis of musical aesthetics, the endpoint of a passé Dadaism; an inevitable ‘work’, I repeat, and one that had to be ‘written’ by someone. It was Cage ... it must have seemed like a good idea at the time.

The *Quattro Pezzi*, on the other hand, seem *positive*. They are not merely provocative—they have something important to offer. They are the departure point for a fruitful, ongoing adventure in composition and perception. The *Quattro Pezzi* are de-composed and re-composed. The almost complete abandonment of the harmonic dimension allowed Scelsi to confront other dimensions and to concentrate the attention of the listener on new sonic refinements. One can compare this attitude to that of the minimalists. In Steve Reich’s music, the renunciation of the timbral and harmonic parameters obliged the listener to concentrate on the evolving rhythms, or rather on the evolution of combinatorial figures made up of very simple elements. This renunciation of timbre and harmony may be aesthetically necessary: when Reich, and especially his followers Philip Glass and John Adams, try to reintroduce harmony, it inevitably leads to insipid colours, modulations à la César Franck and chord progressions from the harmony textbooks of the Belle Époque.

For Scelsi, the principal object of composition then becomes what he calls the ‘depth’ of the sound. It is primarily a question of working with timbre, taken in the

broadest sense: the global timbre of the orchestra as a whole. The composer is thus concerned with dynamics, densities, registers, internal dynamism and the timbral variations and micro-variations of each instrument: attacks, types of sustain, spectral modifications and alterations of pitch and intensity. String instruments are obviously ideal for such writing, because of their great flexibility and fine control of timbre, free of the difficulties of wind technique.

Scelsi's obsession with sound places him in an important movement in the history of Western music. Timbre, at first entirely ignored in composition, is eventually recognized as an autonomous phenomenon, then as a whole separate parameter; finally, it submerges, or rather encompasses the other dimensions of musical discourse. Thus, minute sonic fluctuations (vibrato, glissandi, spectral changes, tremolos) become not mere ornaments to a text, but the text itself.

This phenomenon is not limited to 'art' music. The same development is found in rock music, where the 'sound' takes precedence over melodic, harmonic and rhythmic substance (to the extent that these exist). Timbre is one of the most sensitive categories of musical perception—of auditory perception in general, since it is even at the base of spoken language. Our timbral perception is so acute that we can immediately identify the sound of a familiar voice on the telephone, even though it has been drastically transformed by the filtering effect of the telephone speaker.

The increasing focus on timbre also connects to non-European musics, where melodic or timbral ornaments are often considered an integral part of the discourse, or even an element of the modal system (as in Vietnam). In the Indian classical tradition, one could even say that the musical substance of a piece is nothing but the elaborate ornamentation of an underlying structure: the *raga*.

Certainly, Scelsi thought of these musics while defining his new style. There is thus a genuine relationship to the East, but a relationship that has been rethought, re-imagined in the mind of the composer. Thus, Pierre Menard rewrote *Don Quixote*. . . (Borges, 1956).

An Inner Mongolia

The titles of Scelsi's works often evoke a mythical (or rather, imaginary) inner Orient. According to the composer, titles such as *Khoom*⁵ or *Igghur* evoke a secret Mongolia of the spirit.

Some years ago, Salvador Dali made a short film called *Visions de Haute-Mongolie*.⁶ It showed abstract images that looked almost natural: geological shapes, patches of colour with blurred contours, dunes, lakes, lifeless rocks. Dali commented on these colourful, hazy forms in his careful Catalan accent, describing an imaginary world with his painter's eye: 'the great tyrant of the Mongols', 'hallucinogenic mushrooms'—a surreal landscape. But the 'Haute-Mongolie' was in fact an entirely inner Mongolia—at the end of the film it was revealed that all the images came from vastly enlarged photographs of the surface of a pen, where the metal had been corroded by acid. A striking parallel can be made between Dali's double exploration—the

exploration of physical matter, the exploration of the imagination—and Scelsi's: the exploration of the physicality of sound, combined with a similar fascination with an imaginary Asia.

This imaginary Orient is a constant theme in our Western culture. Dali plays with it, consciously or not, as does Ravel, when he has the simple words 'Asie, Asie' sung so voluptuously in his *Schéhérazade*. Certain names of places and people are capable of awaking a jumbled imaginary world: Samarkand, Angkor Wat, Borobudur, Teotihuacán. Perhaps it is best to let these names remain names, ignoring the potentially disappointing reality. There is in all of us an interior 'Elsewhere', which our culture, our collective unconscious, connects to the East: perhaps because that is where the sun rises.

The Aztecs also thought of an 'Elsewhere' in the East, from which Quetzalcoatl was to return; when the real East appeared in the form of the conquistadores, it meant the end of a dream, the dream of a whole civilization. It is the same in our music: should the real East be introduced there or not? When jazz-rock groups include Indian *tabla* players, or Menuhin plays *ragas*, it is not a mixing of cultures, as one often hears said, but rather a sort of cultural neo-colonialism: stripping civilizations of their content, which is even more exploitative than buying their cocoa at derisory prices.⁷

The East for Scelsi is an interior 'Elsewhere', but also a model that makes it possible to rethink the Western tradition. Reflections of this re-imagined Orient, or more generally of this 'Elsewhere', are strewn throughout Scelsi's oeuvre. To the titles of the works, often already very evocative, Scelsi sometimes adds explicit subtitles: *Khoom*, seven episodes of a story of love and death not written, in a faraway land; *Aiôn*, four episodes in a day of Brahma; *Hurqualia*, a different kingdom; and *Uaxuctum*, the legend of the Mayan city that destroyed itself for religious reasons, etc.⁸

This last example shows that the imaginary Orient can extend to the distant West, to vanished pre-Columbian civilizations and their mysteries. In the Western imagination, El Dorado adjoins the kingdom of Prester John and the marvels reported by Marco Polo.

But though these titles help to reveal the intentions and approach of the composer, we should not stop there. The vocal and instrumental techniques, the way time unfolds, and Scelsi's compositional approach also show reflections of the East. New performing techniques, sounds usually thought of as parasitic side effects of playing (bow sounds, breath, etc.), incantatory elements, ritual forms, stasis in motion ... these are all layers of an original, unique rhetoric.

Sculpting Time

In Scelsi's compositions, the instrumentalist or singer no longer merely 'plays the notes'. A sonic entity, perceived as a single whole, is sometimes represented by many musical symbols; in an extreme case, the whole score represents a single sound. We have to learn how to read music again, learn to recognize how a seemingly indivisible sonic entity can really be constructed by a whole set of musical symbols—the different

pitches, accompanied by dynamics markings, timbral instructions, and so on—representing only various moments within the evolution of that sound. Scelsi's intuitive grasp of acoustics is remarkable. He exploits, probably unconsciously, acoustic phenomena such as transients, beats, the width of the critical band, etc.⁹

This is particularly clear in the vocal writing, where the consonants act as attack transients, while timbre is controlled precisely by the vowels. In the pieces for solo strings, Scelsi frequently calls for a *scordatura* which makes it possible to play the same pitch (or pitches separated by very small intervals) on all four strings in the same position. This makes it possible to thicken the sound and to produce beats and micro-fluctuations that enrich the instrumental timbre.

We can make a distinction between two types of detailed work with timbre. The first type acts directly on the sound source: the placement of the bow, the choice of string, the precise description of dynamics and graininess, mutes (conventional or newly invented), nasal vowels, etc. The second type is a kind of additive synthesis. I use this technical term intentionally, rather than speaking of 'orchestration', since here the synthesis of timbre is often the essential compositional act. The composer is primarily interested in creating new sounds, not in dressing up pre-existing material.

This obviously leads to new demands on instrumentalists: on one hand, the mastery of precise playing technique, with micro-variations of articulation (tremolos, measured tremolos, tremolos on several strings), of timbre, of dynamics and pitch (trills, rhythmic trills, quarter-tone oscillations, small glissandi), and often the combination of all these techniques; on the other hand, in ensemble pieces, the ability to fuse the individual instrumental parts into a global resultant sound. These technical requirements are similar to those of 'spectral' music, where one needs the same fine control of timbre and where the effect of fusion is a main characteristic of the language.

In a way, the harmonic aspects of Scelsi's music are nothing but a by-product of this globalizing approach. Harmony in the classical sense is usually non-existent, reduced to a unison or an octave 'thickened' by the methods previously described. Yet sometimes there are sudden harmonic 'refractions': the unison is diffracted, reflected in new pitches. This phenomenon is very noticeable in pieces like *Anahit* or the Fourth String Quartet. Analysis shows that these harmonic refractions often use intervals from the harmonic spectrum, or subharmonics (from an inverted harmonic spectrum). These relationships, however, are warped by microtonal distortions or gradual changes in the pitch of the sounds. 'Almost-triads' create a strange, nostalgic effect, simultaneously familiar and unknown, approachable and inaccessible.¹⁰ More rarely, this polarization occurs on an interval, instead of on a single pitch (for instance, in *Pranam II*, entirely built on the interval C-sharp–E).

We cannot neglect another aspect of the music of Scelsi, which I will call 'incantatory'. His melodic fluctuations and use of quarter-tones are often related to incantatory techniques (frequent returns to the same pitch, the repetition and variation of short formulas), as are his rhythms, which are organized around a more or less hidden periodicity. Scelsi readily acknowledges his attraction to rhythmic incantation, to rhythms 'surging with vital dynamism'. Certain pieces evoke a secret

ceremony: *Okanagon*, a piece for harp, tam-tam and double bass, is subtitled ‘to be considered a rite, or if you will, the heartbeat of the earth’. Still more explicit are the *Riti*, three pieces titled *Funeral of Achilles*, *Funeral of Alexander the Great* and *Funeral of Charlemagne*. The music is not just evocative of ceremony, but a dreamed re-enactment of ancient music. The ‘Elsewhere’ is not only geographic, but also temporal. Many of Scelsi’s titles seem to refer to a mythic, Greco-Egyptian antiquity (*Okanagon*, *Anagamin*, etc.).

Scelsi subsumes the idea of rhythm into the more global concept of duration, anticipating the spectral composers’ conception of time. Rhythm is ‘a manifestation of duration’ that ‘connects the personal and relative time of the creative artist to cosmic duration, to absolute time’.

The rhythm thus understood may be an internal rhythm, which animates the work even when it is essentially a single continuous sound. Time becomes ambiguous, simultaneously static and dynamic. The global formal shape often seems static, while the details are very mobile. We do not find here the idea of process, which motivates so much contemporary music. Is this stasis, or the abolition of time, a glimpse of eternity? I think here of Messiaen, who also does not have a dynamic concept of form, but instead creates a design in stained glass, each instant autonomous and timeless. This could offer an explanation to what might seem like a formal weakness in Scelsi’s work: I am thinking of all the works in several movements, in which the relationships between the movements do not obey any perceptible logic.

Nevertheless, the strongest works tend to be based on a more rigorous formal concept. These are pieces in a single movement—*of* a single movement, one could say—an unbroken and irresistible gesture, like the slow and unequivocal rise of the Fourth String Quartet, or the similar rise, in three sections (the second a cadenza for the soloist) of *Anahit*, where the violin leads the orchestra in an endlessly ascending spiral.

These two examples clearly illustrate Scelsi’s compositional approach. Not the concept of development or motivic cells, of superimposing structures (or in fact of structures at all), not ‘com-position’ (to return to our introduction), but a global approach, drawing closer to the object in ever-narrower concentric circles. Once again, this approach recalls the East, and the aesthetic of the Zen calligrapher or painter.

But what is the object, and what is the model? Music always has a model, whether formal or natural. Even the most abstract art proceeds from models. What is Scelsi’s model—how can one analyse his music without resorting to a simple and useless description? The traditional tools of analysis are inappropriate, since there is neither material, nor combination, nor a clearly articulated form. There remains the study (perhaps with statistical methods) of shapes, densities, changes of register and thickenings, of their evolutions and relationships. We need a new type of analysis, more general and perhaps applicable to all types of music, an analysis that would go straight to its goal—i.e. to the composer’s intention and the effect perceived by the listener. Traditional analysis would be one possible subcategory in a larger scheme,

just as traditional compositional techniques and so-called systems—‘modal, tonal, atonal’—will undoubtedly be recognized in the future as aspects or facets of a more global reality, in which the relationships between musical elements will obey much more general rules.

If there is an underlying model in Scelsi’s work, it does not come from the Western tradition of form, the observation of nature or the construction of an original theory, but rather from elsewhere . . . or perhaps ‘Elsewhere’. Scelsi liked to describe himself as a mere transmitter, an intermediary between our world and a higher reality. Do images and ideas exist independently, waiting to be revealed by the artist/intermediary? For Scelsi, to compose was to ‘project images in the medium of sound’—as if images and sonic material pre-existed the musician. In the impossibility of finding precursors for his work, it is tempting, even for the least mystical of us, to accept his definitions.

Notes

- [1] Translator’s note: In French, one sense of the transitive verb *poser* is to place something into a position or context from which it can be appreciated.
- [2] See particularly the First String Quartet.
- [3] The *Ondioline*, created by the French engineer George Jenny, was a sort of prehistoric synthesizer, similar in many ways to the electronic organ and the ondes Martenot (another electronic instrument).
- [4] Cerha is the author of a series of pieces for orchestra, *Spiegel*, in which the orchestra is often treated as a generator of complex harmonies with strong electronic connotations. One finds a sense of time similar to the ‘smooth time’ of Ligeti, but also a great expressive force.
- [5] One could compare the word *Khoom* with the Mongolian word *khöömei*, which designates a technique of diphonic singing.
- [6] Two pictures by Dalí, in a frame shaped like a masculine and feminine profile facing each other, decorated the salon of Scelsi’s small apartment in Rome.
- [7] At least the cocoa remains cocoa—cultural exploitation can deform or even destroy the art that it imports.
- [8] In fact, it is not a legend—the ruins of Uaxuctún (which is the correct spelling) actually exist, though its destruction, like that of all the Mayan cities, remains mysterious.
- [9] Closely spaced pitches give rise to beats or ‘chorus’ effects, which enrich the sonic texture; when the pitches spread apart a little, one enters the zone of ‘dissonance’; when they spread further, one gets the sense of ‘consonance’. The notion of the critical band is in a certain respect a theoretical justification for the intuitive idea of the ‘depth’ of the sound.
- [10] Acoustically, the microtonal intervals produce beats and a clash of harmonics, which darkens or filters the overall timbre, thus producing an effect of distance (far away sounds are similarly filtered) that evokes a sense of nostalgia.

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