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The Music of Giacinto Scelsi

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Giacinto Scelsi who passed away in 1988, may belong to a relatively older generation in terms of his age among composers of the same period, when considering the year of his birth, 1905. However, it is evident that the music he left to posterity has begun to gain supporters for his vision of the universe, while still remaining luminous to this day, emitting a light which occidental music has rarely experienced. Giacinto Scelsi who, like Cage, began his career as a composer while studying twelve-tone music, faced or was obliged to face a significant turning point regarding musical composition before the end of World War II. He actually lost his way in a mental labyrinth where all disciplines regarding sound could be totally abandoned. According to the avant-garde musician Michiko Hirayama, who was Scelsi's long-time partner and collaborator -- and who is also my teacher -- Scelsi, who had by nature his own unique view of music, created even greater mental blocs and fell into the depths of illness, by studying twelve-tone music which was supposed to have injected liberal emanation into traditional compositional method (although it is not certain whether his illness originated entirely from his composing activities using the twelve-tone technique or whether it had already started to develop in him before that). During a time in Italy when the understanding and treatment of mental disorder was almost neglected, Scelsi had no access to treatment other than finding it by himself. He finally attempted to overcome his illness, which had resulted from his composing, by returning to the primitive act of closely listening to a single note. Shutting himself up in his apartment, he entered his own world, simply repeating improvisations which can be first achieved by 'closely listening to a single note'. Sitting at the piano, one hits a single key and produces 'a sound' to which a pitch name has been given, but the sound does not consist of only one sound element alone. When listening to it carefully, one should be able to hear multiple harmonic overtones derived from a single key. Scelsi entrusted

his mind to all of these overtones while continuing his spiritual excursion. He then further developed his own improvisation by moving back and forth freely between and among these overtones. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote as follows in his "Phenomenologie de la Perception"; There are colour amnesia "who cannot name colours set before them". When requested "to sort out samples according to basic color" and supposing that he manages after some difficulty to form a group of blue ribbons, if then the last blue ribbon they collect is 'pale' in tone, they could easily make an "unaccountable mistake" such as "he carries on by adding to the collection of 'blues' a pale green or pale pink". This shows that amnesia has lost the common ability to classify various colours under one category. Acknowledging that "we can ourselves experience something similar by taking up, before a pile of samples, an attitude of passive perception", Merleau-Ponty quoted the following from a paper written by a third party; "the heap seems unstable, shifting, and we observe an incessant alteration in it, a kind of contest between several possible groupings of colours according to different points of view." The term 'colour' here could be replaced with 'sound'. Scelsi also "reduced to the immediate experience of relationships". However, in his case, he tried to regain self coordination which could never be achieved if he were removed from music, by tenaciously tracing a single warp that is the harmonic overtones which have been discretely woven into the textile of the traditional sounds, namely, occidental music which became disentangled right before his eyes. At a concert hall in Rome during the 1950s, a man of small stature and looking somewhat like Bartok approached and spoke to Michiko Hirayama who sang the old Japanese folk song, "Sakura" which included a quarter tone. "Do you sing the quarter tone?", he asked. He then told Ms. Hirayama, who nodded to him, that he tried to compose using quarter tones through improvisation while playing piano at the same time every night. He asked her if she would come and visit him to listen to it. This was the encounter of Ms. Hirayama and Scelsi.

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Ms. Hirayama, who had been interested in the music created by a mysterious composer named Scelsi, soon began to visit him frequently. If he happened to have already begun playing piano upon her arrival, she would listen intently to the sound while remaining quietly on the stairs outside his door so that she would

not disturb him from his devotion to “his therapy”. After some time Scelsi completed a composition for Ms. Hirayama which she harshly rejected. This marked the beginning of their true collaboration. Scelsi, who had already denied entirely the possibility of musical composition using twelve-tone, re-discovered through this collaboration that improvisation was the means which could advance his own music. The composition; “Ho” for female solo consisting of five vocalise which took one year to write from the beginning of their collaboration, was the first fruit of their musical relationship. One may be able to retrace a part of this collaboration in the score of this music. Taking as an example, the fifth part of “Ho” unfolded clearly based upon one note ‘sol’, and it will become apparent when delving into the note further that it consists of ‘sol’ of perfect pitch together with a ‘sol’ lower by a quarter tone as the basic sound. The inspiration for this piece came from the very slight difference of these ‘sol’ sounds, which Ms. Hirayama had vocalised for Scelsi. It is a privilege granted to acoustic musical instruments that they are able to produce various nuances with one sound. For example, even when using an instrument such as the piano with its fixed intervals, a great pianist can play the same note while freely revealing its totally different expressions. When it comes to the human voice, these delicate differences are even more pronounced. Scelsi succeeded in constructing a short story by tracing the harmonic overtones pregnant in such differences while tenaciously repeating them. The harmonic overtone offers infinite freedom. In musical composition based on tonality, composers cannot help selecting notes as their biological sense tells them that this note cannot follow after this one and so on. With respect to composition using twelve-tone which supposedly eliminated the priority relationship of sounds, the tone row itself had limited and narrowed the scope for the selection of notes. Based on the serial technique, the note to be placed next is almost decided automatically. Meanwhile, composition using harmonic overtones allowed for the free selection of sound which was inconceivable by conventional methods of composition. For instance, by playing the key ‘fa’ on the piano, the eight or nine different sounds of ‘fa’, ‘fa’, ‘sol’, ‘la’, ‘si’ are heard simultaneously. Scelsi created music by dwelling on and following these sounds. As he was devoted to Indian ideas, such a method of composition might have been inspired by Indian music. The harmonic overtone is a naturally generated music which has existed since ancient times, in other words, a music given by God. In fact, only if there is air, wherever air exists, can a sound be generated and harmonic overtones will follow when the vibration of

a substance is induced. Scelsi's music, which was composed without being in opposition whatsoever to such harmonic overtones which were played by nature, is itself very natural. All past composition methods are nothing but man-made sound systems. In such a way Scelsi made possible musical composition based on the harmonic overtones contained in a single note. Well, can one call this "composition" when it was created by innocently listening to a sound and then tracing a drama of harmonic overtones? The true nature of Scelsi's music is its improvisation.

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Another distinctive characteristic of Scelsi's music is the multiple application of the quarter tone. When listening to a particular sound and tracing several harmonic overtones, I often hear the quarter tone within such sound. Originally, in oriental music, it was regarded as a natural outcome that music attains maturity while very naturally co-existing with noise, which is evident for example, when one listens to the sounds of shamisen or koto. On the contrary, western music since Gregorian chant has treated any sound other than the perfect pitch as noise and regarded the elimination of it as progress. As a result of self-criticism regarding such progressivism, microtone music was suggested by Busoni and microtuning was practised by Vishnegradsky at the beginning of this century. I do not know how far they, who hewed their own path by regarding not only twelve tones but also twenty-four tones equally, attempted to escape from the strictly metrical quarter tone as a result, or whether indeed they could escape from it. The quarter tone which Scelsi employed however, was intrinsically far removed from a quarter tone in the literal sense of the word. It is not limited to the position of half the semitone. The quarter tone he pursued for his music existed not on the extended sound generated from the middle point between, for example, the tones 'mi' and 'fa', but always somewhere on the way to the next destination, after leaving such a tone and becoming independent. In other words, the quarter tone of Scelsi's music is an ambivalent mental exercise in pursuit of its fundamental tone. It represents a sense of release from restraint as well as tantalising mental conflict which one may experience when wishing to attain a certain ideal, but is simply unable to do so. It is also a shadowgraph of the conflicts which those with mental illness experience. For example, the act of drinking water when thirsty is a simple process in the case of mentally sound people; one wants to drink water, so

one drinks it. On the other hand, for those who suffer from mental illness, endless conflicts exist during the process, starting with acknowledgement of the glass filled with water, confirmation of his/her will, stretching his/her arm toward it, taking hold of it with the hand, and bringing it to the mouth. Anybody who has listened to such 'tones' will begin to let their own selves wonder about while losing their mental balance. What forms the music of Scelsi is a view of the world which is oriental and resonant with the eternal motion of nature, which is poles apart from those solid emotions which are carried through with such strong will as is heard in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. Scelsi apparently did not possess 'absolute hearing'. Although it is not certain whether he lacked it by nature, or lost it due to his illness, this as a result further intensified the idiosyncrasy of his music. It is assumed that contemporary music ought to be produced by composers with absolute hearing, it is also often expected of performers who perform their music that they have this same ability. However in reality, having absolute hearing could interfere in many cases with the creation of an intriguing piece of music. With this ability, one naturally hears sounds such as the siren of an ambulance and the beating sound of a drum while categorising them into a scale of do, re, mi....at a certain stage. All sounds at that point will be forced to take on a pre-categorised meaning. It is natural in principle for music to provide both performers and listeners with physiological comfort. However, this sense of comfort does not necessarily exist in absolute hearing. Among those who have absolute hearing, some are based on 442 hertz while others are based on 443 hertz. Contrary to the meaning of 'absolute', it is, although efficient, a mere relative function in the vast world of 'sound'. Natural music can never be produced when the human body, which is free by nature, is bound to a preconceived sense of values --- this is what one learns from Scelsi's music. Many people have told me that a new space opens up before their eyes and oddly enough each sound becomes intensely alive to their ears when they listen to Scelsi's music. This is because his music is actually nature itself, its essence being united as one with nature in a physiological sense. Some are simply perplexed by Scelsi's music. Today, people who live their lives surrounded by artificial objects, while longing for true nature, tend to feel an aversion to it.

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I have no reserve of energy to talk about the

enormous number of instrumental pieces or magnificent orchestral works (especially the unparalleled piece for grand orchestra and chorus) which Scelsi bequeathed. However, it is certain that vocal music was the starting point of his music and the genre in which he could accomplish the most radical depth. Regarding vocal music in general, it is inevitable that its composition has to depend on the 'meaning' of words. On the other hand, Scelsi composed all his pieces for vocal music through the original 'improvisational' style which was released from the 'meaning' of words. This was possible for him as he employed the vocalise method using artificial language. Some of Scelsi's vocal music for example, forms a composition with the 'voice' imitating percussion. It is often required for such a voice to produce one sound while including two or more vowels in it. One sound uttered during speech delivered in a logically consistent manner, in principle contains only one vowel (with the exception of obscure vowels which some languages have). But when one is unable to articulate each sound due to loss of mental balance, many words pour out at once as though a dam inside had broken. For example, all sounds contained in a simple message for conveying one's wish such as "I want to drink water" could come out as one cluster of sounds. In this case even the sounds which one has uttered as meaningful words can be heard merely as a groan by others. In Scelsi's vocalise, a deliberate stratification of vowels bearing a close resemblance to such sounds uttered under an indistinct mental condition is frequently employed, for example, a mixture of the sounds 'a' and 'u' or travelling between them. This must have resulted from the aphasia that Scelsi himself experienced. These 'words' are extremely close to primitive gestures, and to sing them represents (borrowing once again the expression used by Merleau-Ponty), the method for "'singing' the world." Whether listeners find beauty in it or feel an aversion to it depends solely upon the performer's comprehension regarding Scelsi's vision of the universe. Those who have listened to his music performed at its best, will return to that primordial state before words were learned, while letting their bodies sway to the sounds which, while far removed from their daily lives are yet not unfamiliar. Listeners then become aware of the euphoria attained through the release of their archaic mental layers. "Canti del Capricorno", the most renowned of Scelsi's works is a representative compilation of his music, in which these unique visions of music and the universe are perfectly integrated. This music which was left as a musical score showing only a single voice together with a minimum ensemble, is so primordial that it may

sound as if it is beyond any comprehension on the part of the listener. However, it is certain that the profound and new world existing within this work connotes numerous tasks to be entrusted to composers of the coming generation. Furthermore, "Canti del Capricorno" possesses a profound hidden secret, in other words a challenge to its performer.

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"Ho", Scelsi's first composition for vocal music is a conceptual and classical work which represents most directly, the starting point of his music. In the following piece "Taigaru", he succeeded in giving body and substance to it through his colourful concrete expressions, while stepping into his own vision of the universe. What he portrayed in this piece was a fantasy landscape of Africa 'painted' by the world of harmonic overtone. Then, following the superb integration and purification of these accomplishments, "Canti del Capricorno" was created. Scelsi's music is tonality music, but not tonality music. This is because his music has its own sense of tonality which both performers and listeners can only be aware of by 'sensing', and which is not the tonality based on temperament nor mode. Ms. Hirayama and myself have indeed 'sensed' it entirely in our own ways and Scelsi himself has also stated clearly that this sense of tonality had its own significance as well as drama. "Canti del Capricorno" is, of all his works, the most dependant upon Scelsi's unique tonality, and as a result presents tasks to the singer that are extremely hard to deal with. In fact, it is impossible for one singer alone to sing the entire collection of these songs according to the score. This results from the fact that Scelsi wrote the score for "Canti del Capricorno" on the assumption that transposition should be made to the work as necessary. On the other hand however, he had strictly prohibited such transposition from disrupting each song's world vision. It is left to the body -- instrument -- of each singer with respect to which key each song should be transposed to. On the other hand, tonality cannot simply be determined based upon whether the singer is capable of singing the song or not. The factor in determining the suitable tonality for a song is the type and quality of harmonic overtone produced by a single sound uttered by the singer. To sing this work by ascertaining one's version of it -- richness of harmonic overtone is needless to say the most important element in determining the quality of a singer -- is in fact to expose one's ability as a singer while running the whole gamut of a singing career.

Richness of harmonic overtone enables us to extend the world of “Canti del Capricorno”, while the extension further advances the ‘singing’. As for myself, I believe that to bring my singing of “Canti del Capricorno” to completion and to pursue and find a new song is worthy of my lifetime devotion.

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Words from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's is quoted from “Phenomenology of Perception”, English translated by Colin Smith, Routledge.











