

The “Sounds of Nature” in Salvatore Sciarrino’s Music between Environmental Evocation and Inner Dramaturgy: An Overview

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This essay focuses on the presence of environmental sounds, both natural and artificial, in the work of Salvatore Sciarrino. This is an important element of the composer’s output, one that alternates between direct evocation and a kind of internal dramaturgy that takes place within the listener, the former being the premise and origin of the latter. However, since this element is closely linked to the composer’s poetics as a whole, from his earliest works onwards, I begin by touching briefly on some general aspects of Sciarrino’s poetics in the context of his formative years: in this early phase of his activity, we can find what might be called the precursors of the features I will discuss in the following pages.

Salvatore Sciarrino was born in Palermo in 1947. As a teenager he participated in the climate of musical and cultural renewal that was a result of the city’s *Settimane Internazionali Nuova Musica*. In this culturally vibrant context, he studied privately for some periods with Antonino Titone and Turi Belfiore and substantially he pursued his musical education as a “self-taught” musician by learning his compositional craft outside the official course of study at conservatories. In an interview conducted in 2004 that appeared in Pietro Misuraca’s monograph on the composer, Sciarrino emphasized this aspect of his training, stating: “To be self-taught means to study the classics well and to breathe freedom with full lungs: freedom is necessary in order to successfully build one’s own personality. . . . To be self-taught means to never stop discovering and studying.”¹

1 “Essere autodidatta vuol dire studiare bene i classici e respirare a pieni polmoni la libertà: essa è necessaria per riuscire a costruire la propria personalità. . . . Essere autodidatti significa non smettere mai di scoprire e di studiare.” Pietro Misuraca, *Il suono, il silenzio, l’ascolto* (Rome:

During the first half of the 1960s, Sciarrino presented his first compositions to the public in the context of the *Settimane Internazionali*. In 1962, his *Frammento op. 1* was performed instead of the proposed *Canti di Bashō*, which the soprano Liliana Poli refused to sing. In September 1965, listeners had the opportunity to attend the premiere of his *Atto II per voce recitante, tre trombe e percussioni*, based on a text by the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō.² Although Sciarrino later disavowed these works and still considers the *Sonata for two pianos* (1966) as the beginning of his official catalog, it is worth considering the work performed in 1965. On the one hand, *Atto II* does not contain the stylistic features that Sciarrino's music would go on to develop in the second half of the 1960s. On the other hand, it already contains elements typical of his universe, such as an interest in Japanese literature and culture, sounds bordering on silence, and the presence of deeply evocative effects such as the sound of human breathing. In the case of *Atto II*, this element is literally produced by the performer:³ Indeed, recreated or evoked in various forms, it has been a constant in Sciarrino's entire output.

After these early works, Sciarrino quickly developed his own musical language, based on what he himself described in 1980 as “an organic conception of sound *in the inseparability of all its components*.”⁴ This holistic concept of sound and music includes not only the formal and external aspects, but is developed with a close attention to the phenomenon of musical perception. According to

Neoclassica, 2018), 9. From Susanna Persichilli, “Genio e regolatezza. Intervista a Salvatore Sciarrino,” *Falstaff* 3 (2004): 3. All translations are my own.

2 We can listen to the latter thanks to a recording included in the companion CDs to the volume on the 2003 *Settimane Internazionali Nuova Musica*, edited by Floriana Tessitore: Floriana Tessitore, ed., *Visione che si ebbe nel cielo di Palermo. Le Settimane Internazionali Nuova Musica 1960-1968* (Rome: Rai Eri, 2003).

3 Cf. the recording in Floriana Tessitore, *Visione che si ebbe nel cielo di Palermo*, CD 1, track 6, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04C8ae_MAJA&t=51s (accessed May 31, 2024). Edoardo Torricella: voice; Antonino Bitonto, Lamberto Spadari, Lorenzo Di Marco: trumpet; Mario Dorizzotti, Adolfo Neumeier, Giovanni Cannioto: percussion. Given the central role of musical perception in this article, I have chosen to provide the reader with references to performances on CD or available online, rather than reproductions of excerpts from the score.

4 “Una concezione organica del suono *nell'inscindibilità di tutte le sue componenti*”: Salvatore Sciarrino, “Flos florum. Le trasformazioni della materia,” *Spirali* 3, no. 11 (December, 1980): 11.

Sciarrino’s reflections, which are confirmed by studies of musical perception, listening to music is a mental operation of synthesis and grouping, according to the principles of Gestalt psychology, and operates at both the micro- and macro-formal levels. Each element of a composition, down to the individual sound, must be considered as part of a larger body and must be observed within this global framework.⁵

In the light of this rather specific aesthetic conception, Sciarrino’s music, even from the late 1960s, reveals a number of unusual features, including the transfiguration of sound into slight nuances, often bordering on silence; the presence of silence itself; the search for a mode of listening capable of capturing these subtle traces; and the increasingly frequent reference to elements of physiology, such as breathing or the beating heart. It is within this framework that the evocation of environmental sounds—natural and artificial, internal and external—finds its place and meaning.

Let us consider the *Quintettino no. 2* for wind instruments (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon), written in 1977. This piece is an admirable example of Sciarrino’s “organic conception of sound” recalled above. In this work, key strokes, breaths and tongue strokes give rise to a rarefied kaleidoscope with a hypnotic *melopoeia* and, at the end, a percussive effect reminiscent of an accelerated heartbeat.⁶

Heartbeat and breath are the foundations of human physiology: by evoking the former and integrating the latter into the fabric of sound, Sciarrino, already in his first decade of compositional activity, introduced a shared “lexicon” with the listener. At the same time, he outlined an idea of composition as a kind of living organism. It is no coincidence that this aspect, perhaps more than any other, caught the attention of a keen and expert observer like the composer

5 For a reflection on this aspect and its consequences for Sciarrino’s compositional method, see Paolo Somigli, “Il processo compositivo di Salvatore Sciarrino: un esempio di logica creativa e di composizione ‘pedagogica,’” in *Creatività e Creazione artistica nella musica e nelle arti*, eds. Marco Bizzarini *et al.* (Naples: FedOA University Press, 2024) 147-157.

6 The effect is particularly evident in the performance by the Quintetto Arnold. Salvatore Sciarrino, “Quintettino No. 2,” on *Ricorrenze*, Quintetto Arnold, track 2, 2:55–end, Ricordi CRMCD 1010, 1990, compact disc.

Armando Gentilucci, one of the first to take an interest in Sicilian musician in the 1970s. In his *Oltre l'avanguardia. Un invito al molteplice* (Beyond the Avantgarde. An Invitation to Multiple), Gentilucci grasped the process by which Sciarrino conducts his musical discourse through a mechanism of “actual diastoles and systoles” that generates “an ‘animal’ expressiveness,” although he immediately questioned—and seemed to doubt in principle—whether this effect, in its undeniable acoustic immanence, was “consciously pursued with explicitly expressive intentions.”⁷

This question was soon to be answered, due in no small part to the frequency with which these elements reappeared in later works.

In the early 1970s, Sciarrino also made his debut as a composer for musical theater with *Amore e Psiche* (1971–72), which was performed in Milan in 1973 to a libretto by Aurelio Pes, *Aspern* (1977; Florence, 1978), and *Cailles en sarcophage. Atti per un museo delle ossessioni* (1979–80; Venice, 1980).

As is typical of his poetics as a whole, Sciarrino’s musical theater pursues a form of continuity with tradition, while at the same time avoiding any literal reference to the forms and models of melodrama. As the composer explained in an interview, I conducted with him in 2000 for *Il giornale della musica*, “theater—I believe—cannot exist without dramaturgical representation. . . . Theater without representability would be a paradox, like music that refuses to be performed. . . . The language of theater is a language of narrative.”⁸

Of course, “narrative” and “representability” do not mean banality. This is clearly demonstrated by *Vanitas. Natura morta in un atto*, for voice, cello, and piano, which draws on texts by a variety of authors in various languages, reassembled by Sciarrino himself to offer a reflection on the impermanence of things and the dimension of emptiness.⁹ The title of the composition refers to

7 Armando Gentilucci, *Oltre l'avanguardia. Un invito al molteplice* (Fiesole: Discanto, 1979), 89.

8 “Il teatro—secondo me—senza la rappresentazione dramaturgica non può esistere. . . . Un teatro senza rappresentabilità sarebbe . . . un paradosso, come una musica che rifiuta di essere eseguita.” Paolo Somigli, “Natura tecnologica,” interview with Salvatore Sciarrino, *Il giornale della musica*, October, 2001, 2.

9 On this work, see Sabine Ehrmann-Herfort, ed., *Salvatore Sciarrinos “Vanitas.” Kulturgeschichtliche Hintergründe, Kontexte, Traditionen* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2017); in the same

the Baroque pictorial genre that deals with the transience of life and its pleasures. Organized in five vocal sections preceded by an instrumental introduction, the work is ideally derived from *Stardust*, the American song of the 1920s by Hoagy Carmichael with lyrics by Mitchell Parish, of which, Sciarrino says, “[my composition] mysteriously preserves an ephemeral perfume.”¹⁰ In fact, Sciarrino defines *Vanitas* as a gigantic *anamorphosis* of that song.

Vanitas is a work of musical theater, but a very atypical one. It has no characters; it has no story, other than a reflection on the transience of things; it has no narrative or plot other than the idea of rising from nothing and returning to nothing; and it has none of the traditional forms associated with musical theater: Sciarrino describes it as “a Lied of proportions never heard before.”¹¹ Nor does it require a stage set: the author once defined it as a “hypothesis of poor theater,”¹² a work that is actually meant to be performed deep *inside* the listener and *by* the listener.

It is on this level that *Vanitas* is clearly relevant to our perspective. The work contains sound effects that are deeply evocative for the listener and at the same time consistent with the pictorial genre. I have already discussed this work in previous essays; here I will limit myself to recalling the sections of the fourth song, *Lo specchio infranto, ove si svela l’anamorfofi* (The Shattered Mirror, in which the anamorphosis is revealed), in which Sciarrino interrupts the flow of the music as if to suggest the existence of another dimension that emerges during these interruptions.¹³ This is

volume, see Paolo Somigli, “Die Komposition ‘Vanitas’ im Gesamtwerk von Salvatore Sciarrino,” 101–122. See also Paolo Somigli, “‘Vanitas’ e la drammaturgia musicale di Salvatore Sciarrino,” *Il Saggiatore musicale* 15, no. 2 (2008): 237–267

10 “Vanitas è una gigantesca anamorfofi di una vecchia canzone—*Stardust*—della quale conserva, in modo misterioso un profumo effimero.” Salvatore Sciarrino, “L’impossibilità di divenire invisibili” (1981), in Salvatore Sciarrino, *Carte da suono* (1981–2001), ed. Dario Oliveri (Rome: CIDIM, 2001), 79.

11 “*Vanitas* è dunque un *Lied* di proporzioni mai udite.” Salvatore Sciarrino, “Vanitas. Natura morta in un atto” (1988), in Sciarrino, *Carte da suono*, 80.

12 Sciarrino, “Vanitas. Natura morta in un atto,” 80.

13 The piece has a long history, which I will only briefly recall here. Originally a part of *Cailles en sarcophage* (*Camille*), it has a hypnotic, dreamlike quality, resulting from the piano writing in sestinas that recalls the first study of Chopin’s op. 25. The distribution of pitches is based on a basic form of dodecaphony, and on the continuous repetition on a high note of a small

done according to the compositional principle that Sciarrino himself refers to as “forma a finestre” (window form), a name inspired by the simultaneous presence of different windows on the screen of videogames and computers.¹⁴

According to this constructive principle, which Sciarrino also identifies in composers of the past, the sound texture is sometimes disrupted by cracks, through which another sound discourse suddenly emerges, and is ideally developed on another level that has remained hidden.¹⁵

It is during these interruptions that we hear the realistic, and slightly irregular, ticking of the mechanical clock and the singing of the crickets. On the one hand, these inserts are an acoustic counterpart to elements typical of the figurative *vanitas* (the destructive insects and the hourglass). On the other hand, their reference to common experiences conjures up inner images, associations, feelings and sensations in the listener, thus reinforcing the “poor theater” hypothesis mentioned by the composer.

interval reminiscent of the final scene of Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*. In 1981 Sciarrino drew from it *Il canto degli specchi* and, later that year, the fourth part of *Vanitas*, in which he proceeds as described above in the text. For listening, I suggest the performance by Sonia Turchetta, Rocco Filippini and Andrea Pestalozza: Salvatore Sciarrino, *Vanitas. Natura morta in un atto*, track 5, Ricordi, CRMCD 1015, 1991, compact disc, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiFSLLeLRi8I&t/=15s,27:10-33:53> (accessed May 31, 2024).

14 Cf. Salvatore Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica. Da Beethoven a oggi* (Milan: Ricordi, 1998), 97–98.

15 Sciarrino, *Le figure*, 113–115, as an example of this form in the symphonic traditional repertoire, Sciarrino indicates the concluding eleven measures of the first movement of Mahler’s First Symphony where (115) “continuity breaks into blocks with sharp edges, separated by silence. Inside the central windows, two elements are stirred, the struggle of woodwinds and the timpani. In the first window the two elements are continuous. In the second window they are partially overlapping. We heard them frozen as in consecutive snapshots, before they succeed, united in the third window, in forcing the silence and closing the movement”; (orig.: “La continuità si spezza in blocchi dai margini netti, separati dal silenzio. Dentro le finestre centrali si agitano due elementi, il dibattersi dei fiati e i timpani. Nella prima finestra i due elementi sono continui. Nella seconda finestra sono parzialmente sovrapposti. Li abbiamo sentiti bloccati come in istantanee consecutive, prima che riescano, uniti nella terza finestra, a forzare il silenzio e chiudere il movimento”). Even though Sciarrino does not mention Adorno and the passage is not the same, it is difficult, here, not to recall Adorno’s theorization of the “Breakthrough” in connection with Mahler compositional conception in measures 352ff of the same piece: cf. Theodor, W. Adorno, *Mahler. A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4ff.

This idea of “inner” theater takes on a particular form in the composer’s next stage work, *Lohengrin. Azione invisibile* (1983), winner of the Premio Italia in 1984. In this work, the characters, settings and sounds that surround the protagonist, Elsa, all originate in her mind and are not only produced mainly through the singer’s voice, as if coming from her inner being, but are also directed at the listener’s interiority. Sciarrino describes the work as “an entirely vocal cosmogony. Elsa, her mouth, is the radiating point, but we are at the center of it.”¹⁶ These elements are present from the very beginning of the work, as Sciarrino himself has written: “Bells in a whirlwind of sound (prologue through an open window). And then at once the crickets in the night. The howling of the dogs suddenly turns into a woman’s breath, panting, like an awakening. An animal sound interrupts the crickets.”¹⁷

In his *Come avvicinare il silenzio* (How to Approach Silence), conductor Marco Angius, one of the most respected interpreters and experts on Sciarrino’s music, aptly notes that such an opening immediately raises doubts in the listener: “Are these sounds produced by Elsa—with the help of a microphone—*inside* or *outside* her body? Are they verbal *tics* of a disordered personality, or a reproduction of the nocturnal sounds of the environment *outside* the ‘open window’?”¹⁸

Perhaps these questions must remain unanswered in this state of “perceptual uncertainty,”¹⁹ deliberately sought and reinforced by the composer. However,

16 “Una cosmogonia, tutta vocale. Elsa, la sua bocca, è il punto di irradiazione, ma al centro siamo noi.” Salvatore Sciarrino, “Lohengrin. Azione invisibile,” in Sciarrino, *Carte da suono*, 83.

17 “Campane in un turbine di suono (‘Prologo attraverso una finestra aperta’). E subito i grilli nella notte. Il latrare dei cani repentinamente si trasforma in respiro di donna, ansimante, come un risvegliarsi. Un suono animale interrompe i grilli:” Sciarrino, “Lohengrin,” 84. Cf. the performance by Daisy Lumini, Gruppo Strumentale Musica d’Oggi, conducted by Sciarrino himself, track 1, Ricordi, CDCRM 1001, 1986, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7s2f6FmEzw&list=PL9bf907nE0eYcgs1PcLVDa2WbkCk8CFWN> (accessed May, 31 2024).

18 “Questi suoni prodotti da Elsa—con la complicità del microfono—sono *interni* o *esterni* al suo corpo. Sono *tic* verbali di una personalità disturbata o richiami naturalistici provenienti dall’ambiente notturno *al di fuori* della finestra aperta?”: Marco Angius, *Come avvicinare il silenzio. La musica di Salvatore Sciarrino* (Rome: Rai Trade, 2007), 107.

19 Angius, *Come avvicinare*, 107.

another question can be asked, even if there is no single answer, since it depends on each individual and personality: how is the world that was conjured up by the voice of this “disordered personality” re-created by the listeners and in the listeners themselves?

Another interesting example of the use of external sounds can be found in *Omaggio a Burri* (1995), for treble flute, bass clarinet and violin. Sciarrino had a special appreciation for the painter and artist Alberto Burri, not least because of some particular aspects of his poetics, such as the physical quality of the basic materials he used in his works (torn burlap sacks, burnt and blown plastic), and their multidimensional structuring, which can recall the “window form” theorized by the composer. In *Le figure della musica*, Sciarrino writes of Burri: “While through a Fontana cut the beyond is barely intuited, with Burri it is shown lasciviously, without restraint.”²⁰ On the following page, in the caption to *Sacco* (1953), he makes an observation that can indeed be applied to the principle of his “window form:” “The holes of the foreground surface are slashed to reveal hidden and parallel dimensions. A layered universe, dreamed of by Dickinson and now hypothesized by scientists, is materialized in one image.”²¹

The work was composed in the year of Burri’s death. On the one hand, it unfolds according to the logic of the “window form,” but at the same time it evokes in the listener the sounds of everyday life as a kind of acoustic counterpart to the aesthetics of materiality typical of the visual artist and his creations. In particular, shortly after the beginning, we notice a constant, mechanical pulsating effect, alluding to a battery clock, a precisely and clearly reconstructed imitative effect.²² While in *Vanitas* the clock effect was intended to evoke the idea of time running out, in parallel with the pictorial genre of *vanitas*, here this hyper-realistic effect has a different purpose, related to the idea of a strong relationship

20 “Mentre attraverso un taglio di Fontana l’aldilà si intuisce appena, in Burri l’aldilà si mostra lascivamente, senza reticenze.” Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 137.

21 “I buchi della superficie in primo piano si slabbrano a mostrare dimensioni nascoste e parallele. Un universo a strati sognato dalla Dickinson, oggi ipotizzato dagli scienziati, viene a concretizzarsi in immagine.” Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 138.

22 Cf. in the performance by the Ensemble Alter Ego, Stradivarius, STR 33539, 1999, 1:19ff, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZ0AEDo1Mjw> (accessed May 31, 2024).

between musical experience and everyday life, and thus to the conception of music as a powerful means of expression and communication. As Sciarrino himself has observed about this composition: “If today’s music has any virtue, it is precisely that it is close to the thoughts and sounds of our time.”²³ On top of this effect, now clearly in the foreground, now hidden, various other sound events and pulsations appear or break through at different speeds, following the mechanism of the “window form.” In this way, we are confronted with a complex, multidimensional space-time in which the different levels interlock, until the end of the piece, which is characterized by fast, fleeting sounds that bring everything back to silence.

By the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, Sciarrino had firmly established himself as a composer of musical theater with *Luci mie traditrici* (1997–98), *Infinito nero* (1998), *Macbeth* (2002), and *Da Gelo a Gelo* (2006).

I will now focus briefly on *Luci mie traditrici*. Sciarrino composed this work after the 17th-century drama *Il tradimento per l'onore* (Betrayal for Honor) by Francesco Stramboli: a story of love, jealousy, betrayal and death, likely inspired by the story of Gesualdo da Venosa, which unfolds like a deadly, inexorable mechanism over the course of a single day.²⁴ In short, the quiet life of the married Malaspina is suddenly shattered by the arrival of a man (the “Guest”) who falls in love with the woman at first sight. His feeling is reciprocated, and the betrayal

23 “Se la musica d’oggi ha un merito, è proprio quello di avvicinarsi al pensiero e ai suoni della nostra epoca.” Salvatore Sciarrino, “Omaggio a Burri” composer’s note in the booklet for the CD Stradivarius (STR 33539, 1999), 4.

24 Cf. Paolo Somigli, “Stratificazioni compositive, temporali e drammaturgiche nel teatro musicale di Salvatore Sciarrino: per una lettura di *Luci mie traditrici*,” in *Musical/Realtà*, no. 128 (2022): 77–109; Christian Utz, “Statische Allegorie und ‘Sog der Zeit’. Zur strukturalistischen Semantik in Salvatore Sciarrinos Oper *Luci mie traditrici*,” *Musik & Ästhetik* 14, no. 53 (2010): 37–60; Marco Angius, “Cosa può un soffio,” in *Del suono estremo. Una collezione di musica e antimusica* (Rome: Aracne, 2014), 98–103; Pietro Misuraca, *Il suono, il silenzio, l’ascolto*, 179–185. For listening I suggest the performance conducted by Marco Angius (Nina Tarandek: the [woman] Malaspina; Roland Schneider: Guest; Simon Bode: Servant; Christian Miedl: The [man] Malaspina) at the 35° Cantiere Internazionale d’Arte di Montepulciano, Tuscany, 2010 (Euro Arts Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AedW7XmI9l-M&t=173s>; accessed May 31, 2024).

is immediate, but is unfortunately witnessed by a servant. The servant is secretly in love with the woman and, in a fit of jealousy, reports the betrayal to Malaspina. According to the laws of honor, the latter can do nothing but kill the man and the woman (and the servant himself). The music follows the drama from dawn to dusk, evoking the sounds of nature throughout the day.

The events in the first scene, for example, take place in the morning, and the music evokes the outside world by reproducing the twittering of birds: this contributes to the calm mood in which the Malaspinas speak, unaware of the events that are about to overwhelm them.

The arrival of the guest disturbs this serenity: the woman is shaken by the event, and the man reciprocates her feelings. Although nothing clamorous happens, the music and the vocal emission in this scene are laden with a strong sensuality, as an anticipation and evidence of the adultery that will inevitably take place. Meanwhile, in the garden, the sounds are those of the late morning and the early afternoon. As Marco Angius points out in his *Del suono estremo*, the music reproduces, among other things, the chirping of cicadas typical of a Mediterranean summer soundscape:²⁵ in Sciarrino's words, this "conveys a not insignificant erotic potential."²⁶

As night falls, the affair becomes catastrophic: the man speaks with the woman and finally kills her in a room surrounded by the sounds of the night, and the audience can hear the nocturnal chirping of crickets that accompanies the wife's death. The presence of the crickets here is not accidental, and despite its apparent naturalism, it is much more than a description of the night. To better understand this effect, we can recall what Sciarrino writes about *Vanitas*: "The crickets in *Vanitas* [1981] are no longer the limpid memory of an evening long ago; rather, they regain their ancient appearance as destructive insects."²⁷ And

25 Angius, "Cosa può un soffio," 101.

26 "Poi i duetti delle cicale con un potenziale erotico non indifferente." Somigli, "Natura tecnologica," 2.

27 "Così i grilli di *Vanitas* non sono più il ricordo limpido tremolante di una lontana sera, ri-assumono bensì l'antico aspetto di insetti distruttori." Sciarrino, "L'impossibilità di divenire invisibili," 78.

referring specifically to their appearance and to the soundscape at the end of *Luci mie*, Sciarrino explains in the aforementioned interview for *Il giornale della musica*: “This sound . . . is . . . not just a presence; here everything begins to fade: the sound of the crickets themselves fades, it slides down. When the last scene of *Luci mie traditrici* ends, we lose consciousness, just as the protagonist loses consciousness. The music fades away and the sound of the crickets fades away with all the sounds of reality: it is the fainting of the protagonist, whose veins have been cut.”²⁸

After the experience of *Luci mie traditrici*, which was an immediate success, at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s Sciarrino’s catalog grew considerably, even including some works of truly monumental proportions, such as *Studi per l’intonazione del mare* (Studies for the Intonation of the Sea), for voice, 4 solo flutes, percussion, an orchestra of 100 flutes and an orchestra of 100 saxophones (2000).

The composer’s musical language has continued to reinvent the sound of instruments, discovering new forms of producing sound and exploring the realm that borders on silence, building works according to “window form.” In the process, Sciarrino has never ignored the listener’s individual mode of perception but has always organized his music in such a way as to keep the listener’s attention and interest alive, creating a listening experience that is not only acoustic, musical, or aesthetic, but also deeply personal and existential.

Studi per l’intonazione del mare was commissioned and written for the solemn reopening of the Basilica Superiore in Assisi, after its restoration following the damage caused by the 1997 earthquake. It premiered on a hot evening in August 2000, coinciding with the Jubilee events, though not in the planned location, but in the Cathedral of Città di Castello, the city where the composer lives. In this composition, Sciarrino sets a poetic text that he drew from Thomas Wolfe’s *Legend of the Three Companions* and the apocryphal Gospel *Pistis Sophia*. “The composition,” writes Sciarrino, “is based on an infinite reciprocal response between the small and

28 “Quando l’ultima scena di *Luci mie traditrici* finisce, noi perdiamo coscienza come perde coscienza la protagonista. La musica va giù e va giù il suono dei grilli con tutto il suono della realtà: è il mancamento della protagonista che è stata svenata.” Somigli, “Natura tecnologica,” 2.

the great”:²⁹ thus, thanks to the multiplication of minimal sounds, we experience the blossoming of gigantic natural phenomena. This correspondence between elements of different scales involves both the structure of the work and its poetics. The wind, the water, the waves, the rain, the sea evoked by the music are related to each other, and the waves, as Sciarrino writes, “are a form of communication between the surface and the world of the abyss”³⁰ because, more generally, as the composer reminds us, “everything is a wave: memories, time, energy, the pulsation of our blood.”³¹ At the end of the work, the instruments combine to create a thunderous rain effect, as if to set the scene and paint the image of St. Francis splashing through the puddles in ecstasy, asking the community for the stones to rebuild its church. The musical choice and its hyper-realism—as Angius aptly defines it³²—are closely related to the narrative situation. However, on the Italian summer night of the premiere, in the August heat, this effect deceived the listeners, giving them the illusion of a sudden godsent rain. Sciarrino recalls that most of the audience looked up at the windows of the Cathedral of Città di Castello, hoping to see the refreshing water.³³

It would be an oversimplification to dismiss even this effect as pure mimesis. In fact, Sciarrino, recalling this episode, insists: “My music makes us listen to reality in a new way, the universe of sounds is conceived as if it were alive, not as a predetermined set of data. The ecology of listening is bearing fruit, and here is a shining example of environmental music.”³⁴

29 Salvatore Sciarrino, “Studi per l’intonazione del mare,” composer’s note, <https://salva.toresciarrino.eu/data/composition/ita/174.html> (accessed May 31, 2024). About this composition, see Angius, “Cosa può un soffio,” 103–115.

30 “Esse sono una forma di comunicazione tra la superficie e il mondo dell’abisso.” Sciarrino, “Studi per l’intonazione del mare.”

31 “Ogni cosa è onda: i ricordi, il tempo, l’energia, il battito del nostro sangue.” Sciarrino, “Studi per l’intonazione del mare.”

32 Angius, “Cosa può un soffio,” 114.

33 Cf. Sciarrino, *Studi per l’intonazione del mare*. The effect is clearly evident in the performance conducted by Marco Angius with the Ensemble Algoritmo, Stradivarius, track 5: “III. Tra-verso piazze,” 7:26–9:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1XN1UrRdzw&t=539s> (accessed May 31, 2024).

34 “Durante la prima esecuzione, nell’afa pesante dell’estate, il pubblico alzava gli occhi verso le finestre, verso l’inaspettata frescura immaginaria. Come è possibile una tale memorabile sug-

The relationship between the natural and the artificial that emerges from this episode—indeed, the naturalistic rain effect is artificially achieved through an “unnatural” use of instruments— can serve as an introduction to *Le stagioni artificiali* (The Artificial Seasons), composed in 2006, the last work I will discuss in my overview.

Le stagioni artificiali draws our attention to the complex relationship between the natural and the artificial in the life of the modern individual, and to the fading of the rhythm of the seasons. At the same time, it is an allusion to the artificiality of nature as evoked by musical instruments and their unconventional, or “artificial,” treatment. This approach follows an artistic project which can be defined as promoting a peculiar “ecology of listening” that goes far beyond the musical and the aesthetic levels. In fact, the idea of this “ecology of sound” addresses (and targets) the individual as a whole, combining ecological and environmental dimensions with psychological and inner ones.³⁵ In the introductory notes to the work, the composer explains:

Many people follow the changing of the seasons; perhaps not many are able to read into them an intelligent and infinite plot. As Wells wrote, the beginning of the end is always inconspicuous: here are the songs of birds, flowers and butterflies, but they are out of time, gentle warnings of a catastrophe that even the climatologists are finally announcing. . . . Ecology is becoming one of the central topics in the debate of ideas, which makes it a cheap commodity. But even if we wanted to, it would be difficult not to face such great questions that affect the entire living planet and the fate of humanity. Let us imagine that in a listening experience we pass through

gestione? *La mia musica fa ascoltare la realtà in un modo nuovo. L'universo dei suoni è concepito come fosse vivente e non come un insieme preconstituito di dati. L'ecologia dell'ascolto porta dunque i suoi frutti, ecco un esempio lampante di musica ambientalista. Ma a che serve questa pioggia? Serve a presentare un'inedita immagine di San Francesco: sue le parole del canto, ci pare di sentirlo sguazzare tra le pozzanghere, folle e felice*: Sciarrino, “Studi per l’intonazione del mare.” (I quote here the entire passage, with the part translated into English in italics).

35 Sciarrino theorizes this aspect in a short newspaper article, unfortunately not included in the edition of his collected writings. Salvatore Sciarrino, “Utopia di un uomo in ascolto,” *Il Secolo XIX*, September 23, 1983.

intermittent acoustic environments. . . . The experience of a constant coming in and going out challenges, and changes, the experience itself; it also shows how much the environmental space can change one and the same subject.³⁶

However, the message, the world and the environment of the *Stagioni artificiali* are quite different from the clear, orderly ones of the other equally “artificial,” but more conventionally represented musical seasons: those depicted by a string orchestra and a solo violin in the first decades of the 18th century by Antonio Vivaldi, which the composition inevitably evokes. In fact, even though we cannot discern any reference that Sciarrino might have made, and despite the different overall acoustic context, the title and the instrumentation of Sciarrino’s work make it inevitable for listeners to form this association, since they are “listening persons” and as such, in the words of the composer, they “cultivate their individuality through listening; . . . to live one’s individuality means to know how to connect one’s experiences (including the experience of listening), to discover what resonates (or clashes) among them, from the everyday to the most sublime aesthetics.”³⁷ Thus, when we consider that Sciarrino pursues the ideal of a listener who is capable of bringing together her or his entire personality and personal experiences in the encounter with music, we cannot dismiss this association as unfounded or implausible.

36 “Molti seguono la vicenda delle stagioni; forse non molti sono in grado di leggervi un intreccio intelligente ed infinito. *L’inizio della fine è sempre discreto* scriveva Wells: ora ecco canti di uccelli, fiori e farfalle fuori tempo portano avvisi gentili della catastrofe finalmente annunciata anche dai climatologi. . . . L’ecologia sta diventando uno degli argomenti centrali nel dibattito delle idee e ciò la rende merce banale. Tuttavia è difficile anche volendo, non rispecchiare problematiche così vaste, che riguardano intero il pianeta vivente e i destini dell’umanità. Immaginiamo, in un percorso di ascolto, di attraversare ambienti acustici intermittenti. . . . L’esperienza di un perenne entrare e uscire mette in discussione e modifica l’esperienza in sé; inoltre mostra quanto lo spazio ambientale possa alterare un identico soggetto.” Salvatore Sciarrino, “Le stagioni artificiali,” composer’s note, <https://www.salvatoresciarrino.eu/data/composition/ita/202.html> (accessed May 31, 2024).

37 “Un individuo che coltiva ascoltando la propria individualità . . . vivere la propria individualità significa sapere collegare le proprie esperienze (anche, quindi, quelle dell’ascolto) le une alle altre, scoprire le risonanze (o le contraddizioni) tra esse esistenti, dalla quotidianità alle estetiche più sublimi.” Sciarrino, “Utopia di un uomo in ascolto.”

In conclusion, references to nature and its sounds characterizes Sciarrino’s entire output, from the very beginning of his public activity and at least a year before the first official work in his catalog. Despite the openly mimetic nature of these references, it has nothing to do with a form of external mimesis or superficial pictorialism. On the contrary, it proves functional to a key aspect of Sciarrino’s poetics: his ambition to communicate with the listener on a deeper level, based on the expressive power that music possesses and manifests, and on its ability to resonate with the total experience of the individual. In *Le figure della musica*, Sciarrino writes: “All those statements about the inexpressiveness of music, which have become a widespread and dominant opinion in our official culture, should be refuted. Their success is easy to explain, because sterilized music is less compromising than music full of emotion and personal involvement.”³⁸

References to the world of sounds, natural and artificial, surrounding us or even within us, reinforce this intention. Breathing, heartbeat, birds in the garden, crickets, dogs, bells, ticking clocks, rain: Sciarrino deliberately appeals to the inward subjectivity of the audience, making them active participants in the performance, which in turn takes place thanks to their memory and the associations these sounds evoke in them.

The listener, then, is at the center of Sciarrino’s thinking, as he points out in the 1983 essay mentioned above which—even though not republished—I consider crucial because of the synthesis and clarity with which it expresses Sciarrino’s poetics:

The ideal listener? There is no ideal listener . . . the only thing we can say is how each of us imagines “our” ideal listener, and then we can compare our utopias, our fantasies on the subject. . . . It is better to imagine how the listener can conceive of himself, and it is not a difficult task: even the composer should be able to pretend to be a listener.³⁹

38 “Sarebbero da sfatare tutte quelle affermazioni sull’inespressività della musica, che sono diventate opinione comune e dominante della nostra cultura ufficiale. La loro fortuna si spiega presto, perché una musica sterilizzata risulta meno compromettente di una musica carica di emotività e di coinvolgimento personale:” Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 18.

39 “L’ascoltatore ideale? Non esiste. . . . Si può solo dire come ciascuno di noi immagina un

If we follow the lessons of Umberto Eco's *Lector in fabula*⁴⁰ and his subsequent semiotic reflections, then the recipient never plays a passive or neutral role, but always contributes to the meaning of the work in ways not necessarily foreseen by the author. In Sciarrino's case, however, things are more complex. In fact, he deliberately creates elements that are intended to stimulate personal contributions from the listener and, we might say, to help each listener form an individual "version" of the work they are hearing. In other words, Sciarrino openly expects and stimulates the personal involvement of the recipients, even if he cannot (and probably does not wish to) anticipate what the effect and result will be on the part of the listener. What he seeks is a musical experience capable of stimulating a global, deep and interconnected reflection in the listener, a kind of "ecology of life" that is mediated by an "ecology of listening."

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"suo" ascoltatore ideale, e poi si possono confrontare l'un l'altro le proprie utopie, le proprie fantasticherie in merito. . . . Meglio immaginare come l'ascoltatore può immaginare sé stesso, e non è difficile farlo: anche il compositore dovrebbe essere in grado di fingersi ascoltatore": Sciarrino, "Utopia di un uomo in ascolto."

40 Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula* (Milan: Bompiani, 1979).

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