

## PREFACE

## Mario Bertoncini - Portrait of a radical innovator

by Gianmario Borio

Mario Bertoncini is one of the most coherent supporters of the aesthetic orientation that can be defined, not casually, “experimental music”, particularly in its tendency to radically question all rules to which the conception, production and reception of the musical object are linked.

As for John Cage, the first authentic “experimental composer”, the statement “*we don't compose relations between different sounds, but sound itself*” is valid for Bertoncini too.

After composition studies with Goffredo Petrassi (Roma, 1951-60), Bertoncini attended the seminars given by Bruno Maderna (Darmstädter Ferienkurse, 1960) and Gottfried Michael Koenig (CEM-Studio Utrecht, 1962), and he subsequently adopted a method of composition, in line with the principles of the “*Informal*”: sound is not a given agglomeration of discreet entities that can be defined *a priori* in a unidirectional way, but rather a variable and unstable complex of such entities. The recognition of this concept led the composer to the abandonment of the tempered system of intonation, and at the same time prompted his growing interest in a non-conventional use of traditional instruments.

Two works from the early 60's constitute an important turning point towards a very personal style, which, without the least bit of compromise with respect to its radical nature and innovative research, has been constantly evolving up to today: *Tune*, for suspended cymbals, and *Cifre*, for two or more pianos. In *Tune*, each one of the performers uses a set of five suspended cymbals with different tunings, which are excited with various mallets (for tympani ones, or made of rubber, wood, iron, etc.), jazz brushes, metal thimbles, “free” fingers, bow, or through a single nylon or horsehair string, overstretched at the edge of the instrument. Bertoncini uses the rich spectrum of the idiophones decomposing it into a harmonic conglomerate made up of a mobile and “chanting” contrapuntal texture. Rhythm, a determining factor of figures and motifs, becomes here an integral part of a constantly renewed sound matter.

In *Cifre*, Bertoncini invented a variety of preparations for the piano, in order to obtain from the instrument the maximum amount of echoes and resonances. The performer acts on the strings and the sound board by means of percussion mallets, rubber cylinders, cowbells, iron brushes



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and a bamboo pipe used as a plectrum. The “regular” sound of the piano, obtained acting on the unprepared keyboard, is carefully avoided; that unilateral approach is replaced by a rich palette of plucked, struck, and rubbed sounds which literally reveals a sound world unheard before. In addition to all this, we should not forget Bertoncini’s peculiar performing technique which he contributed to the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza (he joined the Group in 1965), which became also evident in several live performances: long drones of continuous sound, generated by inserting a horsehair bow between the strings of a piano, which are then rubbed in the same way as those of a violin or a cello. In these moments of the composition, the total abandonment of the traditional mode of attack of the piano appears to be an irreversibly accomplished fact: the piano, already transformed into a plucked and percussion instrument, now becomes also a bowed instrument and therefore turns into a – let’s say – total piano.

It is then an inevitable consequence that – in order to notate such an unusual sonic environment – traditional notation, even if enriched with new signs, becomes inadequate. In order to find an optimal relationship between notation and execution, Bertoncini has developed a writing method that can be probably defined as a mixture of elements taken from traditional notation with a sort of tablature and action notation. At a superficial level, his scores from the 60’s would appear to belong to a very popular trend from that period: the so called “graphic music”. In reality, Bertoncini’s written musical representations are far from both the uncertainty of improvisation and the indulgence for indeterminacy or from any specific formal variability. The starting point of an execution of a sequence may become uncertain or even unpredictable. However, unpredictability does not affect neither the quality nor the development of the sound events. The interchange ability between the beginning and the end can be once again taken back to the aesthetics of the Informal, from which Bertoncini’s entire work clearly takes inspiration, although with deviations and variations along the path. The single works show a clear personal imprint, not through the pre-ordination of a formal plan in time – in other words through a dramatically and architectonically frozen form in a unidirectional development – but rather through a very precise definition of the single sound events. As a consequence, the main compositional event is the construction of sound – and I mean this in a direct, not metaphorical, sense.

In the following years, the event of construction of sound shifts from an imaginative level to an almost artisan sculptural work.

With admirable ingeniousness and an undeniable disposition toward manual work, Bertoncini started modifying various traditional acoustical

instruments, then almost inevitably shifted to the invention and construction of never-seen-before sound objects. In *Epitaffio in memoria d’un concerto* (1968) there are three sound sources, that involve the correspondence between the act of writing on (or scratching, rubbing etc.) on a sonorized surface, alongside with its phonic results: a resonating chamber on which are placed a minuscule harp (the strings are made of horsehair), a small circular metal plate and a little gong; a copper plate excited (or scraped, rubbed etc.) with various plectra; a blackboard on which, using chalk, the performer transcribes excerpts taken from Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Capricorn* and then erases them with an appropriate eraser. The sounds produced by the three performers are conveyed into an analogical “*tape delay*” system – one of the aims of the piece seems to be the homogenization of disparate material fragments. In *Scratch-a-matic* (1971) the piano strings are excited at their nodal points by nine direct current motors, thus producing a dense texture of harmonics. An here too it is required the use of amplification and live electronics. *Alleluja* (1982) takes advantage of the relative ease through which the pianist manages to produce a coordinated “game” of very fast polyrhythmic figures, using only the mechanical escape action of a grand piano, with a spinning semi-circular loom attached to it; the loom supports seven gongs suspended horizontally, parallel to the keyboard.

Bertoncini’s activity is characterized by a constant interaction between the construction of sound objects and composition. The “*Homo artificiosus*” becomes “*homo faber*” and vice versa.

After his move to Berlin in 1973-74, Bertoncini begun to devote himself to the construction of objects based on the principle of aeolian sounds, which he used both individually or in groups of sound sculptures, according to the requirements of his various projects. At the Berliner Festwochen of 1974, he premiered one of his most ambitious works, *Vèle*. In this particular version, there were two large aeolian harps: one installed in the open air on the rear esplanade of the Berlin Nationalgalerie, and the other one inside the main hall of the gallery. The first harp, whose triangular shape resembled a wind-blown Roman galley sail, had an iron frame approximately seven meter’s tall. One of its sides, bent according to a logarithmic curve, provided a basic tuning – so to speak – to the 1500 very thin strings, and it naturally seized the impulses of the wind, without any intervention from a performer. The second harp instead, composed of a rectangular frame (200cm x 400cm), received on its metal strings the labial impulses of three vocalists who reacted to the sounds produced by the outside wind according to a predetermined code. The wind – the only “aleatoric” factor in this performance – made the strings vibrate; the resulting sounds were amplified through crystal microphones and diffused in the room through a quadrasonic system of

speakers. In another work of the same year, *Chanson pour instruments à vent*, the performer acts with both his breath and four nozzles of compressed air on an installation made of aeolian harps and “gongs”, thus varying ad libitum the intensity of the air blow. In *Venti* (1980-82) the number of aeolian sound generators makes the work assume almost orchestral proportions: twenty objects of different shapes and dimensions are made to vibrate by forty performers led by a conductor [note: a re-elaboration of *Venti* requiring two conductors is currently in progress. M.B.]

Even today, Bertoncini’s material constructivism gradually keeps on acquiring new accents that enrich the importance of the concept without altering its meaning. At the beginning of the 90’s he started working on a cycle of works to which he gives, with a retrospective – and somewhat ironic – look, the title of *Streichquartette*, String quartets. The first installation of this cycle was presented during the Darmstädter Ferienkurse in 1992. Using bows, four performers play a number of metal bars of different sizes; a resonating chamber is applied to each group of bars. In these never-seen-before objects, the bars assume the function that strings have in traditional bowed instruments. At the same time, the performing gestures and styles come from the intangible repertory of the classical quartet, somewhat parodied and relived with a bit of nostalgia. In addition, the form is derived from the historical tradition of the genre: four movements – an Allegro, a second movement (a paraphrase of pizzicato and “*col legno battuto*”), a third lyrical movement and, invariably, a finale in Presto (if we can talk about Presto, since the rhythmic accents are totally lacking!), ending inexplicably with the employment of compressed air and aeolian sounds. Two further compositions belong, among others, to the same cycle: *Solo*, composed by an assemblage of metal bars and metal spirals affixed to several resonating chambers, including a piano (everything connected through long thin nylon cords); and *Streichquartett Nr. 2*, a composition for the traditional instruments of a quartet on whose small aluminium supports are affixed to the bridges, holding four small bronze bars: the work is based upon the dialectical opposition between bar and string and also upon the interaction between the two systems of sound production.

Another field of Bertoncini’s activity which must be taken into consideration is a sort of multimedia production which he calls “*Theatre of Reality*”. The word “Reality” should neither be understood as an adhesion to a realistic dramatic form, in which moments of real life are artificially mimed on stage, nor to any epic or allegorical form of theatrical representation. The attribute “real” epitomizes a synergistic interaction between the objective character of sounds, chromatic and luminous events, and gestures produced by the movement of the bodies.

These are, in fact, audiovisual installations where the single elements are closely linked by a common function. The first of these theatrical/musical works is *Spazio-Tempo* for a variable ensemble of dancers/mimes and musicians, in which the gestures and movements of the dancers are directly transformed into sound. In *Chain Reaction* – an audiovisual action realized in collaboration with the kinetic painter Peter Sedgley, presented at the Haus am Waldsee Museum in Berlin in 1973 – two “stands” of musicians interact through a visual code with the diffusion in real time of sound (aeolian harps), colour and light events.

In 1986, Bertoncini invented and patented a contactless transduction system of dance gestures and sound which he named *Choreophon*. This acoustic/visual system, that makes use of three computer-controlled video cameras, although not yet utilized in front of an audience, further demonstrates Bertoncini’s persistent interest in going beyond all media barriers.

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