

## *The Phonology Studio in Florence – S 2F M*

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### 1. *The electro-acoustic music scene from the 50's to the 60's*

In those years electro-acoustic music was still the interest of a small elite only. Professional or even semi-professional equipment was quite costly and not easily obtainable; therefore, only universities and radio stations were in a position to set up an electro-acoustic music studio. Access to these privileged places (apart from brief visits) was not easy for those who did not belong to one of these important 'Churches' of contemporary music of the time.

This state of things motivated a number of composers – who were not members of these *élites* – to set up a small personal studio. In order to do, they had to combine their limited financial resources with a knack for finding good second-hand instruments and the collaboration of adventurous technicians, themselves fascinated by this new world of sound.

In addition to these practical aspects, there was also another reason to go freelance. The 20th century is often called the century of ideologies. If this was true for the socio-political sphere, it was also for the artistic sphere. The first decades after World War II witnessed sharp conflicts between artistic beliefs and currents and the newly arrived, electro-acoustic music, certainly could not avoid this climate. In part this was in line with the strong tendency towards ideological theorising that has always characterised the European musical tradition<sup>1</sup>. While in USA the followers of the so-called 'tape music', and especially Vladimir Ussachevsky, adopted a more or less pragmatic approach to these new instruments, in Europe the situation was different. For a number of years each of the principal centres followed one specific aesthetic line. Take, for instance, the contrast between 'concrete music', based on the elaboration of sounds registered anywhere, posited and practised by the Groupe de Recherche

<sup>1</sup> For ex., see Carl Dalhaus's comment, «Musical theory has always been a dogmatic construct». Carl Dalhaus, *Hermann Helmholtz und der Wissenschaftscharakter der Musiktheorie*, in F. Zaminer (ed.), *Über Musiktheorie*. Arno Volk Verlag, Köln 1970, p. 49-58.

Musicale in Paris, and the 'pure' electronic school of the WDR studio in Cologne, contrast superseded by Stockhausen with his *Gesang der Jünglinge*.

At any rate, if in that period a composer of electro-acoustic music wanted to work on his/her own musical aesthetics not in line with the important 'Churches', it was undoubtedly preferable to have a private studio, however small, where s/he could pursue his/her own theoretical and creative ideas without interference.

This was the case of three small private Italian studios that were founded in rapid succession between the beginning and middle of the 60's in Florence (the S 2F M founded by Pietro Grossi), Turin (the SMET – Studio di Musica Elettronica di Torino – founded by Enore Zaffiri), and Padua (the NPS – Nuove Proposte Sonore – founded by Teresa Rampazzi). The aesthetic approach of these three centres, although not identical, had much in common and expressed a similar critical attitude towards the mainstream electro-acoustic music, represented in Italy by the Studio di Fonologia Musicale of the RAI of Milan, founded by Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna. Inevitably at the time this also led to a certain distancing from the more recognised circuits of contemporary music.

## 2. *In Via Capodimondo 13*

*Nomen est omen*, according to the Romans, and the electronic music studio set up in 1963 by Pietro Grossi in his house in via Capodimondo, Florence, was, in a certain sense, a *caput mundi* of music, at least according to the opinion of the time, for its radical nature and utopian passion.

How did Grossi arrive at such a point?

Some brief biographic details<sup>2</sup> Pietro Grossi (Venice 1917 – Florence 2002) successfully combined his career as first cellist in the Florentine Maggio Musicale with that of composer. Up until the end of the 50's he wrote pieces of moderate modernity for orchestra and other groups. Many of his compositions received critical and public acclaim.

Then, quite unexpectedly, a sudden change occurred in his way of thinking and composing music. He opted for an extreme reduction in material and for formal developments taken exclusively from successions and groupings derived from combinatorial calculus. The line of work became more concrete in a series of pieces, called simply *Composizione* – from 1 to 12 –, for small instrumental groups. In the beginning of the 60's Grossi discovered electronic music and after a time working in the RAI studio at Milan decided to set up his own studio.

Grossi began experimenting with his limited analogical instrumentation: a dozen sinusoidal oscillators, some of which also produced square waves, a white noise gen-

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of Grossi's artistic résumé and list of his works, see: Francesco Giomi, Marco Ligabue, *L'istante zero – Conversazioni e riflessioni con Pietro Grossi*, SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, Florence 1999; Max Jacob, *Pietro Grossi: un percorso nel Novecento*, Thesis, Department of Scienze della formazione, University of Florence, 1997.

erator, two filters – one a band-pass and one a third of an octave –, two tape recorders, and his relationship with sound and music evolved further. While his last instrumental works, though ascetic, were still well defined compositions, he now lost more interest in the process of composition, as we know it in recent western culture. The creation of pieces, with all that that implies at the level of invention and formal structure, seemed less urgent than a systematic, patient, and even more ascetic exploration of the new world of sound. He often maintained that even the most humble sound merited an exploration of the kind that was now possible in a much more accurate way than before.

For example, for the beats he chose an acoustic phenomenon that, despite its undisputed fascination, has usually been completely ignored by composers. In fact, it has been considered an annoyance and left to experts of psychoacoustics as an object of study. Grossi put together a systematic list of beats from combinations of 2, 3, 4... 10 sinusoidal waves, 1 Hz one from the other and started to work, assisted by a small group of collaborators: Riccardo Andreoni, electronic technician and multi-faceted artist who also contributed to the technical side of S 2F M, Jon Phetteplace, cellist and composer – who later took part in the well known group “Musica Elettronica Viva” in Rome –, myself, then a student of composition at the conservatory in Florence, and, occasionally, Paolo Dal Canto and Italo Gomez (later the partnership would broaden to include students in the electronic music course, as we’ll see shall below).

In all the works of this period, the micro and macrostructures were derived strictly from combinatorial calculus. In OM (from Bach’s *Musical Offering*) – which Grossi often called his farewell to the well-tempered system –, the notes of the famous theme were grouped into clusters according to a permutation ordering and the formal arrangement of clusters followed a scheme of the same type. Even the humoristic TRE SKETCHES (Three Sketches), where he used exceptionally concrete sound material; these were submitted to a rigorous permutation scheme.

Grossi maintained a strong tie between this attitude toward sound material and his ideas on methods of production, distribution and fruition of music. Grossi was convinced that electro-acoustic instruments as such had rendered obsolete the traditional concepts of composer and composition (in the sense of ‘closed’ work), given that each sound piece could be easily transformed, fragmented and reassembled once registered on tape, thus developing a new work also subject to the same cycle ad infinitum.

Grossi believed that musical composition should transform itself into an enormous, uninterrupted *work in progress* in which all the musical electro-acoustic centres throughout the world could participate. Naturally, this meant giving up the usual gratifications (in terms of fame and money) for participating musicians in that the resulting works were the fruits of a vast collaboration. In S 2F M’s early years, Grossi regularly sent sound material created in the studio (for ex., sets of sinusoidal waves with various frequency relationships) to other centres to be «used for various composing objectives», as he wrote in the accompanying text.

In addition, the electro-acoustic music that had freed composers from dependence on the good will and whims of instrumentalists, directors and singers, should have become a field in which personal ambition yielded to universal collaboration between

composers, so it was thought. Naturally these ideas were not only not understood, the musical establishment ridiculed them.

In line with his approach to methods of production, Grossi maintained great flexibility toward the distribution and presentation of his works. If I am not mistaken he was the first to create what they now call sound installations (n.b. the installation for the architectural exhibit “La casa abitata” at Palazzo Strozzi in 1965). At other times he interspersed fragments of his work or collective work – always under the initials S 2F M – with instrumental pieces performed at the “Vita Musicale Contemporanea” festival concerts, an event created and directed by Grossi.

If, as we have seen, the official musical world (i.e., the Florentine composers, with the exception of Arrigo Benvenuti who worked in the studio for a time) showed little interest in the Grossi’s work, there were, however, experimental musicians like Giuseppe Chiari and Vittorio Gelmetti who were attracted by the new possibilities and created works at S 2F M<sup>3</sup>.

Another important aspect of the studio’s activities was the very positive and stimulating contacts and relationships with the world of advanced visual arts. Besides, this was the case at all three ‘alternative’ Italian studios. In Padua, for example, there was close collaboration between NPS and the N group of visual artists, also dedicated to collective research. In Florence there were artists, in particular, experimenting with the so-called ‘programmed art’ (i.e., based on algorithmic procedures) like Auro Lecci, Maurizio Nannucci and Paolo Masi, and the critic Lara Vinca Masini, who collaborated with S 2F M. On several occasions sound and visual work belonging to related aesthetic fields were presented together, like the 1967 “Ipotesi linguistiche intersoggettive” show, presented in various Italian cities. Works by Grossi, Zaffri, NPS, Lecci, Mayr, and Nannucci made up the “programmed music” sections of the show<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. *At the Conservatory*

Soon after founding the S 2F M, Grossi let the ‘Luigi Cherubini’ Conservatory in Florence know that it would be possible to establish an experimental course on electronic music using his own equipment. Although not personally interested in this new world, Antonio Veretti, the director at the time, understood the importance of this offer, asked and received ministerial authorisation for the course. And so, in October 1965 the first course in electronic music in an Italian conservatory (and one of the first worldwide in a music school) was established.

Grossi also showed his radicalism in his teaching methods. Because he believed that everything had changed with the introduction of new equipment and, therefore, that conventional music preparation was by now outdated and useless, the course

<sup>3</sup> For a brief overview of the S 2F M’s works, see LP *S 2F M*, LM86-1, included with «La musica – trimestrale di musica contemporanea», No. 11 (1986).

<sup>4</sup> *Ipotesi linguistiche intersoggettive* (catalogue), Centro Proposte, Florence, n.d.

was open to anyone within the limits of places available. This approach was debatable from different points of view, but it had without a doubt two great merits. One was to attract people with a certain intellectual curiosity working in different artistic fields (architects, painters, poets...) to musical experimentation and, thus, to the latest issues in music. The other, which mirrors the first, is that it opened the Conservatory, traditionally a closed and self-contained mini-world, to general cultural stimuli (in fact, during those years, conferences on the relationship between music and culture were being held).

The curriculum consisted of theoretical part made up of: group lessons on electro-acoustic issues (now and then supplemented by a course in mathematics) and history of electro-acoustic music, an overview of technical and artistic developments, along with the production of the various centres in existence at the time. In fact, the S 2F M had an impressive tape library. The practical part was made up of small group lessons and was divided between exercises aimed at familiarising students with the equipment and collaboration on technical projects of a certain importance (like the OM mentioned above). In addition, the students were encouraged to design and execute small personal projects, using when possible sound material that had already been created either together or by other students in the course. Given the heterogeneity of the students' backgrounds, not everybody completed the course or and created his/her own compositions. But there was a lively and interdisciplinary atmosphere that was in contrast with today's usual musical segregation. The Conservatory course also aroused the interest of renown scholars and composers like Mario Baroni and Mauro Bortolotti who commuted, one from Bologna, the other from Rome, to attend the lessons.

Among the public events which included the S 2F M, we should remember the 1966 Venice "Biennale" with "Musica algoritmica" and the radio programmes on electronic music supervised by Grossi and Domenico Guaccero.

Meanwhile Grossi was moving towards a new frontier: computer music. After initial experiments at General Electric-Olivetti in Pregnana Milanese, he managed to establish a lasting tie with the C.N.R. CNUCE computer centre in Pisa, where the Divisione Musicologica was created, directed by Grossi, who decided at that point to abandon work on analogue equipment. For this reason, by skipping the voltage control analogue synthesizer phase, the conservatory course in Florence thrived on the discoveries of the first Italian research in the field of musical informatics. The informatics course held by a CNUCE teacher for electronic music students of in 1968/69 was an important moment for joint collaboration between CNUCE and the Conservatory. Later on the students were able to go to Pisa for periodic visits and brief periods of research.

We could say that S 2FM's last major public appearance was at the "Convegno internazionale dei centri sperimentali di musica elettronica" (International Conference of Experimental Electronic Music Centres) at the Teatro Comunale in Florence in June 1968 in collaboration with S 2F M. It was the first major conference dedicated to the new sound dimension, which brought together exponents of almost all the important centres for the purpose of exchange, listening, and discussion. At the same time the conference represented the beginning of the end of a period when each centre jeal-

ously protected its own theoretical and aesthetic orientation, and encouraged greater 'globalisation' of electro-acoustic music, thanks to technical innovation.

#### 4. *Conclusions*

A more thorough evaluation of the S 2F M phenomenon would require an analysis of the cultural and artistic atmosphere of those years, very different from today's, which would go beyond this brief description. But, by observing – now largely from outside – developments in the last few decades in contemporary music, in general, and in electro-acoustic music, in particular, I think one of Grossi's great lessons should be reconsidered, which, as I explained, he tried to realise on a theoretical, artistic and didactic level: a steadfast and passionate questioning of the fundamentals of musical thought and practice to arrive at sometimes unsettling results that often go beyond aesthetic boundaries toward a new anthropological culture.