



An interview with Francesca Verunelli by Marco Ligabue

FRANCESCA VERUNELLI, MARCO LIGABUE

This conversation is related to the essay by Marco Ligabue, *Time is on my side* included in *Nuove musiche*, no. 6, 2019, in the context of the project *Writing <--> Technology. Composers 1973-1983* (G. Albert, A. Valle, eds., *Nuove musiche*, 5-7).

MARCO LIGABUE Music is temporal art par excellence. No supremacy to claim, its being self-referential makes it such: sounds organize time. Your work fits perfectly into this picture. As you say: “sounds are used to write time and not time as a container of sounds”. And everything, in your writing, ‘bends’ to this vision of composing. I think of #3987 *Magic Mauve*, for example, where the exploration of a particular timbral region, by percussion and electronics, goes in this direction. Do you want to tell us something about it?

FRANCESCA VERUNELLI Yes, for me the sound is a tool to write the time. Sound owns a temporal life that is inescapable, because it cannot exist outside time. Therefore when we listen to a sound we necessarily listen to its temporal form. The harmony contained inside a single sound – its harmonic or inharmonic content – is a temporal form but also, for its part, it forms the time. Thus in the microscopic.

You quote #3987 *Magic Mauve* but the same could be said about an orchestra piece : the question of timbre doesn’t exist outside time, just as much as there is no harmonic syntax outside time.

Furthermore harmony and timbre are both part of the same thing since a timbre owns a complex (in)harmonic content that – precisely like the symbolic harmonic content of a written chord – acquires its ‘sense’ inside the temporal discourse.

The classical harmonic syntax is but a way to structure time, a system of relationships which is able to create tensions or directions because those ‘arrows’ can be measured by the ear. And classical orchestration consists in modifying, enriching, simplifying or anyway altering in many different ways the harmonic discourse through the spectral

content of sound- elements at stake (it's enough to see what happens to a brass instrument's sound that follows the indication "from *ordinario* to *cuivré*" to realize how much the timbre is always a question of harmony, and therefore a question of harmonic discourse, and ultimately then a question of time and form).
Eventually all in music is a function and a dimension of time.

M. L. Reading the scores and also hearing your compositions, the personal relationship you have with electronics is clear. I find it original. I think of Berio when he said that ideas existed before the instruments, first we think about what we want to achieve on the level of sound and composition and then we look for, or eventually build, the instruments we need. Or Ligeti and Boulez, which have taken ideas from electronics and then implemented them in their instrumental compositions. Let's not talk about Stockhausen and the three time domains in music, each of seven and a half octaves. Leaving aside who knows how many others. I would say you're in good company. Wouldn't you?

F. V. Yes in fact I agree with Berio's statement that ideas pre-exist the means. Although the means can be source of inspiration and reflection – you quote the eminent examples of Ligeti and Boulez. The way technology affects our sound-world and ways of listening enters the thinking of music. But it's not enough *per se*, without passing through the 'digestion' of the spirit. The staggering progress of the electronics means interests me a lot – on one side as a laboratory of ideas, on the other side for their impact on the human being and concerning how they manifest themselves in human beings.

M. L. I saw the video of *Man sitting at the piano I*. I find the theatrical side of the relationship between man and machine interesting, but I would like to explore a little more deeply the relationship from the point of view of the compositional strategies that you develop between the flutist and the player piano. Would you like to talk about it?

F. V. This will surprise you but I didn't think at all to the theatrical aspect of the relationship man-machine.

For me the question was : what is the electronics without any electronics sounds ?

As we said before, since for me the fundamental point is how to write time, I wanted to strip the electronics of all electronics' sounds to keep but its temporal essence. Ultimately an electronic temporality that lives in very classical sounds, even 'obsolete' we could say. The classical piano and flute duo.

Both instruments are played going along with their nature – i.e. the way the instruments themselves are built for. I say this because the piano could be used as a sound generator instead of 'played' to generate a number of extra-ordinary sounds. From Cage on the preparation and the use of the piano as a sound source capable to generate many other sounds different from that of the string hit by the hammer never stopped to enlarge.

But I wanted to use the instrument almost solely with its 'ordinary' sounds, precisely to limit as much as possible the focus on timbre in itself and center the focus on time. An also – of course – on time as a generator of timbre.

This is mostly the case of *Man sitting at the piano II*, where the work on time produces 'timbres' – or rather illusions of timbre – that are quite far from the sound of piano as we

know it, without altering at all the mechanism of sound production.

The temporal writing is characterized by the work on duration thresholds and on the psycho-acoustical illusions that those bring about.

The flute plays thick microtonal chords, while the piano – despite being tuned in equal temperament – seems to melt into flute's harmonies thanks to the extreme speed allowed by the player piano.

Additionally the extreme speed allows a 'transient' harmonic perception : we have enough time to register the passing-by of a colour without having enough time to really 'see' it. Therefore the ear finds itself in a constantly shifting position that give rise to ambiguities in the harmonic perception.

M. L. A relationship that you have developed only in *Man sitting at the piano I and II* or a compositional attitude that you have adopted more generally?

F. V. In the case of *Man sitting at the piano II* the work is more centered around the rhythm and on rhythmical illusions, but always revolves around the same main question: stripping the electronics of electronics' sound to unveil even more cogently its essence limiting the sound material to well-known sounds like that of an acoustical piano.

This idea of electronics without 'electronics' interests me. And it's a guideline that goes through other works too.

M. L. When your compositional poetics started to define itself on the level of temporality – let's say, use of sounds to write the time, exploration of 'other' temporal regions, for rhythmic complexity or extreme speed, for example – you didn't know Nancarrow who, therefore, did not inspire your work, but with whom, when you came in contact with his ideas, you had an immediate feeling about "this temporal thing", as he said. Can you tell us about this path in the temporality of your poetics and the flavour that it acquired thanks to the meeting with Nancarrow ideas?

F. V. The beginning of this obsession with time forms dates back to the very first memories of mine I can trace back to. From my earliest musical listenings in my early childhood I remember already this kind of almost physical perception of musical time – its consistence being manipulated, twisted, distorted, distended, compressed. I wouldn't know how to tell this, but there was something of extremely clear and full of sense in the unfolding of musical time. In all that happened in the duration of the listening.

When I read the Nancarrow's interview you are talking about (where he expresses explicitly how his choice of the player piano was due to the possibilities that this instrument offers to manipulate musical time) I felt the affinity you talk about.

Because we live in a time where so many sounds are produced, more or less interesting or unheard of, a time in which the technical possibilities in the domain of sound are extending dramatically and in which we cannot do anything without sound. But the temporal discourse doesn't evolve much. Time-writing strategies are almost always the same. And maybe they are even getting back, in the sense that the unpredictable voyages that Beethoven makes us go through are more advanced and reckless than those of much music labelled as experimental.

M. L. In Nancarrow the use of irrational meters takes place explicitly, just take a look at the time signatures of his studies for player piano. However, it had to approximate the proportions, since irrational numbers by their nature can not be specified: π cannot be defined in a numerically exact way. He could simply use rational equivalents, but he did not. He was attracted by the beauty and complexity of the original proportional structure. It was enough for him to find, I quote: “some relations that were roughly what I wanted”. Your musical writing seems to point, in more than one case – *Unfolding*, *Cinemaolio*, the three pieces for player piano with and without *man sitting*, for example, each one with different nuances – towards this direction. You use rational equivalents, even extremely complex, but in that direction: a ‘quasi-periodicity’, a ‘time that makes and unmakes itself’, to quote you. What more can you add?

F. V. It’s a good point. In fact I’m pretty much interested in how the irrational of the real world can be approximated and trapped in the metric structures of musical writing. The natural world, even if we ‘suck’ it constantly, has a complexity that exceeds reproducibility. Musical language is artificial and codified. This approximation, which eventually is a reduction to an abstract model, allows us to ‘see’ what we normally see without seeing.

For example the motion modes of a random person in a random day are much richer and more diversified of those – few – that a dancer uses in a dance form. Yet it is precisely this reduction, this approximation, that makes them intelligible (and ‘visible’) to us.

How to reach a high level of complexity but intelligible – since an unintelligible complexity becomes noise and then automatically simple – by means of musical metrics is a question that interests me.

M. L. Even the timbre, however, interests you very much. From the evocative point of view too, of course, I think of the lingering “pungent flavour of the oil” of that voluminous mechanism in *Cinemaolio*, but not only. As I asked you before about #3987 *Magic Mauve*, you explore timbral regions, often trapped within a discrete and artificial temporal space, “the time of the artifice that’s the one of writing” and “the research in the instrumental world of the temporal expressive quality of the machine”, to quote you again. However, I find that often, in your work, timbre and time support each other to “raise the unheard from what is already more than known”, quoting you once more. Also on this you are in assonance with Nancarrow, not too interested in electronics as a timbres factory. But even Berio thought so. Would you like to focus on the ‘timbre’ aspect in your work?

F. V. Let’s say that I cannot consider timbre *per se*, as an object or an effect. As you say, timbre is for me the carrier of a poetical and time-related ‘momentum’, and vice versa : the ‘unheard of’ is strictly linked to its being-in-time. A well-known or obsolete sound can definitely become ‘unheard of’ if it’s given in a poetical or structural context that makes it be so. With this said, obviously it happens to me to be very intrigued by sounds that I listen to or I find. But until they aren’t part of a global vision I keep them in the back of my mind. Sometimes they can be the thin end of the wedge : I need to see the whole before using a sound.

Or vice versa it happens to me to be looking for a sound for quite a time because I need a certain sound that would play a certain role inside a certain idea or intuition or vision.

I'm talking of vision because it's not just question of architecture or form, is much more – I would say it's the moment in which a music begins to exist as a whole, at least at the level of intuition. In the end is the part of compositional work that is probably impossible to verbalize.

This is why timbre and time are there from the beginning and are part of the same thing.

M. L. Electronic music inspires the quality of your instrumental gestures. Often unnatural, with *clear-cut* indication, with *on/off* attack, with total dynamic and spectral stability, or amplitude or reverse profiles. All elements also inextricably link the temporal aspect with the timbral one. It seems, however, that you always think of a *d'antan* electronics. What is now electronics – by means, by impact on genres, styles and repertoires – is something difficult to circumscribe and, even just a decade or so ago, almost unthinkable, especially for non- employees. But things come, sooner or later. In this Pietro Grossi was very right and we notice it today more and more, half a century later. Do you also consider this aspect ? Do you handle with these aspects ? How do you think your compositional future ? I do not say in the long term, let's say in the medium term, given the speed and voracity of our times.

F. V. There are two different aspects. One thing is what I can write in a score to a musician with an instrument in his/her hands – and there is where you find remarks like those you talk about – and another thing is my idea or practice of the electronics.

It's interesting thought that a marking as 'reversed' sound would make sense and be clear for everybody, as well as the idea of a 'clear-cut' sound, which is linked to the idea of tape and to the experience of having listened to the digital silence. Because those things are completely integrated in our background. To this extent the content is not anymore technical but philosophical. To give an example, for a musician to be as much 'active' in the production of the end of a sound as in the beginning of it is far from obvious. I'm interested in the audible that surrounds the contemporary human being and how this evolves: because this is strictly linked to the temporality-ies that the human person experiences (and those also similarly evolve). And music renews more deeply when it does it *vis-à-vis* of its time-writing strategies than when it produces potentially new sounds. This is why I'm saying that the content is not technical anymore but rather philosophical, and this is also why I don't want to give up on the human element and on the interpreter – because it's there where those unthinkable developments you talk about manifest themselves. And I don't see a deadline after which this relationship between the auditory on one side and the perceptive and temporal 'biology' of human beings on the other should stop to develop. And to be source of inspiration for the composers.

The future implications of the usage of electronics are huge and many of Grossi's forecasts already realized, especially that of an 'homeart' (already a largely common practice), and the fact the computer enables people not to care about what others are doing.

But Grossi says also something interesting when he says : "what I do with the computer is a proof, a proposal, I say: look what can be done, do it ! And consequently it loses the status of art-work; I offer a way of operating, suggest a way of working".

The electronics is for me mainly this, a laboratory of the thinking and a place where to test and reflect on musical ideas; the aim of this laboratory is the musical thinking itself, not necessarily a piece of music.

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Società con socio unico Università di Pisa

Capitale Sociale € 20.000,00 i.v. – Partita IVA 02047370503

Sede legale: Lungarno Pacinotti 43/44 - 56126 Pisa

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Singolo fascicolo: € 30,00 [estero € 40,00]

Acquistabile online su <https://www.pisauniversitypress.it/>

Per informazioni sull'acquisto rivolgersi alla segreteria della casa editrice Pisa University Press
(Tel.: +39 050 2212056 – Indirizzo: Lungarno Pacinotti 43/44 - 56126 Pisa – email: press@unipi.it)

La direzione della rivista esaminerà per eventuali pubblicazioni gli elaborati ricevuti all'indirizzo email:
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