

## Still Harping on Music

"Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at 50 m.p.h. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them, not as sound effects, but as musical instruments. [...] Whereas, in the past, the point of disagreement has been between dissonance and consonance, it will be, in the immediate future, between noise and so-called musical sounds." On the double anniversary in 2012 of the centenary of the birth and the twentieth anniversary of the death of John Cage, the quote from *Silence* is a stimulus for the reinterpretation of some of his famous works, and the most suitable introduction for the journey to the centre of the harp's sound, from the sweetest and most traditional to the most unusual, unbelievable and unpredictable.

In this journey, *Sequenza II* by Luciano Berio is a true milestone. It is part of a larger project by the composer (fourteen *Sequenze*), who wanted to explore and investigate "the measures beyond the measures" in each instrument, in an instrumental theater where one must "renounce the ambiguous category of 'poetics'," as well as the expectation of that "language of other old emotions that time has linked to poetry." Each *Sequenza* represents a sort of "witness" to historical virtuosity and at the same time a stimulus for progress towards a new form of virtuosity through extreme exploration and experimentation of the technical possibilities of the individual instruments. In *Sequenza* for harp, traditional sound idioms are juxtaposed with more exasperated sounds involving desecrating "gestures" that require "tearing" at the strings, using the wooden parts and tail piece for percussion, the paroxysmal use of pedals and making noises by banging the metal strings.

In a *Landscape* (piano or harp) and *Dream* (the original for piano and adapted for harp) bear witness to a special aspect of John Cage's great focus on sound. Both works are composed following the rhythmic structure of a ballet by Merce Cunningham, and explore delicate and intimate sounds reminiscent of the impressionistic music of Erik Satie, the composer who was central to Cage's aesthetics. The immobile writing and circular development of the pieces create a contemplative and soothing dimension, a consequence of Cage's interest in Zen Buddhism. In *Postcard from Heaven* (1982), a random composition for solo harp or varied harp ensemble (up to twenty), the attention to the sound is further emphasized by the use of electronic devices, *e-bow*, delay and reverbs, and the superimposing of my live sound with a pre-recorded base where I play the parts of other harps, creating a kaleidoscopic multiplication of my sound image.

Again in *Silence*, Cage associated the idea of the musical material to something alive like a garden, where everything is constantly changing and evolving. For *Un giardino a mente vuota* (*An empty-minded garden*) (dedicated to me), Fernando Mencherini told me that he had been referring to precisely that idea, albeit *transformed*. In fact, the solo harp part has an effervescence similar to boiling water and musical material lives constantly in the cut-off point, where it is very hard to find well-defined units and proportions, which are essential qualities in a garden. In the version for harp and tape there are guitar sounds that create sinuous geometry and a sound that "insinuates its way into the corporeal world of the live harp, becoming a special imaginative support, its mental vegetation."

*Fall* for amplified harp and *live electronics* by the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, grew out of a pianissimo tremolo which gives life to rhythmic *patterns* consisting of groups of mostly constant notes characterized by their very special dimension and sound. In this work one notes not only a taste for very original sound, but also the ability, I would say typical of Scandinavian composers, to attract the listener's attention with the simplest means and draw it into a magical world of echoes, light and shadows.

*Reconstructions* for harp and computer, written for me by the American composer James Dashow, offers further exploration into the world of the harp's sound. In this piece there is a continuous game of dialectics and counterpoints between the harpist and the electronic medium. Often the sounds created with the computer seem to be elaborations or distortions of the sounds of the harp, while in other moments it is the harp, played with special techniques, that seems to imitate or provoke the computer to solicit a response. I've always found it extremely fascinating to show how the sound of the harp, a very ancient and also primitive instrument, is able to "compete" and interact with the most modern sounds: those created on the computer.

*Quaderni 6* by Maurizio Giri was composed for me for the live broadcast of electronic music on RAI Radio 3 for *Art's Birthday 2006*, to which broadcasters from all across Europe were connected. In this piece Giri wanted to pay tribute to Eric Satie, a composer who has influenced many contemporary composers including John Cage, and has contributed to the emergence of such different twentieth century musical movements as neo-classicism, *ambient music* and minimalism. Giri has made his homage with the creation of a piece he describes as "multilingual" because its different stylistic elements merge or contrast with each other according to a strict generative structure.

(Lucia Bova, October 2011)

## Biographical notes

Lucia Bova is Professor of Harp at the "Niccolò Piccinni" Conservatory of Music in Bari. After completing her musical studies in Italy, she received a French degree in harp, under the guidance of Elisabeth Fontan-Binoche, and was awarded the *Premier Prix à l'Unanimité*. She is dedicated to the interpretation and research of repertoire for solo harp and harp with ensemble with a special interest in modern and contemporary repertoire. Composers such as Mencherini, Dashow, Razzi, Chasalow, Saylor, Ambrosini, Morricone, Giri, Sollima, Fabio Cifariello Ciardi, Bellino and Podio have all composed for her. She works with various ensembles such as Alter Ego, Ars Ludi, PMCE and Dissonanzen. She has given concerts in prestigious concert halls in Italy and the United States, Canada, Brazil, Poland, Spain and Germany. She has made recordings as a soloist and in ensembles for BMG Ricordi, Universal, RAI Trade, Neuma, Capstone, Mode Records, Bongiovanni and Label Bleu. Edizioni Suvini Zerboni recently published her book *L'arpa moderna. La scrittura e la notazione, lo strumento e il repertorio dal '500 alla contemporaneità (The modern harp. Writing and notation, the instrument and the repertoire from the 16th century to today)* which will soon be translated and distributed in the international English language e-book format.

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