

La Note Juste. Julian Anderson Appraises the Work of the Enigmatic Giacinto Scelsi



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LA NOTE JUSTE

Julian Anderson celebrates the 90th anniversary of Giacinto Scelsi's birth

In what would have been his 90th year, Giacinto Scelsi remains one of the most controversial and misunderstood composers of his generation. The musical world seems split between those who worship him almost as a guru and others equally convinced of his fraudulence – neither of which estimations is helpful nor, I suspect, completely honest. Scelsi himself was in the habit of saying very little about himself or his music, even at rehearsals; at most he would offer a few oblique quotations from Hindu philosophy. Matters are complicated by Scelsi's notorious reluctance in later years to notate his music himself, employing an army of assistants and amanuenses to work under his supervision (being independently wealthy he could afford to do so). In fact there are simple explanations behind both of these attitudes in the music itself.

Scelsi's musical output mirrors the patterns of the century; indeed the image is of a composer positively eager, up to the 1950s, to rush from one fad to the next. He vouchsafed what he considered the essentials of his biography in a little free-verse poem printed at the head of Editions Salabert's catalogue of his works. Curiously, he omits to mention his aristocratic title – Count D'Alaya Valva – but *does* put in such exotic details as the reception at Buckingham Palace which followed his marriage in London to a cousin of the Queen, as well as his strange education (comprising 'fencing, chess and Latin') and his travels to Naples and India to study yoga. He was essentially self-taught in music, receiving informal advice from Ottorino Respighi before travelling to Paris and throwing himself into the dominant artistic trends of the time, notably surrealism and futurism. He retained particularly close friendships with the writers Henri Michaux, Pierre-Jean Jouve and Paul Eluard, as well as with Salvador Dalí (several of whose paintings he owned). He started to compose and also to write accomplished poetry in a free-verse French fairly close to that of Michaux.¹

The first acknowledged work is the symphonic poem *Rotative* for three pianos, winds and percussion, composed and premiered in 1930 under Pierre Monteux in Paris; as both the title (meaning 'printing presses') and the scoring might suggest, this is a post-*Noces* piece of futurist machine-music whose unrelenting repetitions closely anticipate some features of minimalism (it is published by Salabert in its two-piano arrangement). On then to Vienna, where Scelsi satisfied a growing curiosity about 12-note

composition in studying with a little-known pupil² of Schoenberg; he subsequently became one of the earliest converts to dodecaphony outside of the Schoenberg circle, his *Four poems* for piano of 1936 being the first 12-note music composed by an Italian, and very fluent they are too. Something of the mechanistic side of Scelsi's earlier music remains, and the harmonic texture is unvaryingly thick, with large cluster-like chords crashing across one another almost to the point of overload (this is especially true of another work written in the same idiom, the Second Piano Sonata of 1949). The works of the 40s abandoned strict serialism in favour of a more eclectic style with elements of polytonality and neo-classicism; influences that suggest themselves are Honegger and, as Harry Halbreich has suggested, Bloch.³ The bigger works in this idiom, the First String Quartet (1944) and the cantata *La naissance du verbe* (1947–48) sound as though they are trying to break free of the style. In the quartet this is made dramatically apparent in that after some thirty minutes of unremitting and – to this listener – rather turgid contrapuntal working, the last movement peels back the chromaticism in a wholly white-note coda, as if seeking salvation in an idealised cod-Palestrina. The cantata also exhibits counterpoint with a vengeance, featuring an ambitious neo-classicising fugue in its third movement; but as in the quartet, the music seems at its best when harmonically static, as in the still, hovering chords of the opening. For all their faults, what these two works conclusively prove is Scelsi's unquestionable professionalism; the composer of *La naissance* was no amateur and the work created a sensation at its premiere in Paris in 1950 under no less a figure than Roger Desormière.⁴

It seems that after completing the cantata, Scelsi suffered a mental crisis which resulted in total breakdown and hospitalisation. At all events, no new pieces were composed (if Scelsi's erratic datings are to be trusted) between 1949 and 1952. Reduced to a sort of zero point, Scelsi found solace in improvising; by repeating a single pitch on a piano, sometimes for several hours at a stretch, Scelsi found his mind calmed and his ear drawn into a new manner of listening which was to become fundamental for all his subsequent music – 'as if [he] were using an enormously powerful magnifying glass to discover a teeming life within the notes we thought were mere dots on paper.'⁵

Scelsi claimed to have visited Tibet, India and Nepal at some unspecified time before the 1959 Chinese invasion. Whether he

♩ = 120

EX. 1: THE OPENING OF *PWYLL* FOR SOLO FLUTE © G. Schirmer and reproduced by permission

actually did or not (and he could certainly have afforded to) he became a devotee of Zen Buddhism, meditating three times a day, adding a Zen sun-symbol to his signature and refusing to have his photograph taken or to give interviews. These might be seen as no more than the trappings of many a Western orientalist, and in a way they were, but they were also Scelsi's personal survival kit against recurrent personal instability and also against a musical world he found increasingly closed. His music had never been played much in Italy – although Giulini conducted an early work for strings in the 30s – and now, for reasons still not fully understood, he became totally cut off from Italian musical institutions, notably the RAI. Part of the problem may have been Scelsi's political apathy; a man who had avoided the complications of fascism and the war by leaving for Switzerland, who was titled, independently wealthy and interested in Eastern mysticism was not a ready candidate for promotion by a musical society increasingly dominated by the Communist Party. There may also have been jealousy at an autodidact receiving distinguished performances in France and Belgium whilst these trappings eluded almost every other Italian composer of his generation except Dallapiccola. At the same time, and more controversially, Scelsi abandoned music notation altogether in favour of recording improvisations which were converted into score under his supervision by assistants, amongst them the composer Vieri Tossatti (whose own neo-classical music is so far from Scelsi that it is difficult to believe he performed anything but the most mundane services for the latter) and the cellist Francis-Marie Uitti.⁶ Scelsi also created pieces in collaboration with several performers, improvising with them until a mutually agreed result was arrived at – the *Trilogia* for solo cello (1959-66) and the *20 Canti del Capricorno* (1962-72) for female voice were created in this way with Uitti and Michiko Hirayama respectively. I would suggest that Scelsi preferred to start from improvisations for two connected reasons: it allowed him the freedom to investigate sound *per se*, unhindered by notational encumbrances; and he could tackle the problem of form – arguably the field in which he had hitherto shown the least skill – in a more direct, instinctive manner.

The results were a sharply increasing output – this despite the dwindling prospects of performance – an almost total abandonment of his favourite instrument, the piano. Perhaps due to his interest in oriental and ethnic music generally (he was also fascinated by Spanish, Mexican, Sicilian and even Welsh folk music, all of which he used in pieces from the 50s on) he abandoned equal temperament, using a clumsy but workable electronic keyboard called the *ondiola* which offered microtonal possibilities for his improvisation. An early product of this new period – though not, as it happens, using quartertones – was the lyrical flute solo *Pwyll* (1954). Scelsi suggested the music portrayed 'a priest calling the angels at sunset' (the title is a Welsh druid name) and the music is a pellucid modal study upon a melodic fragment which is developed principally by means of ornamentation and extension until it blossoms into extensive melodic statements of some complexity – without, however, departing from the basic key of F minor (see Ex.1). A fully fledged F minor melody is produced only in the coda, as if all we had been offered up till then were just shattered fragments of it. In its highly personal synthesis of folk-melismata and sheer obsessive repetition, *Pwyll* shows how far from the musical norms of his day Scelsi had by then departed; although subsequent works suggest some awareness of the younger serialists – notably the *Tre canti sacri* (1959), whose multiple word-splitting shows the influence of Nono – these are always in matters of technical detail, never in the outward style which retained extraordinary consistency from the late-50s onwards.

Today, Scelsi is principally known for such radical works as the *Four orchestral pieces (each upon a single note)* composed in 1959-60. These have been extensively analysed and written about elsewhere,⁷ and I do not propose to add much to these commentaries except to emphasise to those who don't know them that the 'single notes' are in fact far more than that, being a narrow band of frequencies (and each note is octave-transposed) around which the music oscillates, deploying quartertones, slow and wide vibrato, a multitude of varied playing techniques (excess bow pressure, changing bow position, varying the density and richness of the orchestration, etc.⁸). In this

Musical score for a string quartet, showing staves (i) through (iv) with various musical notations, dynamics, and performance instructions. The score is divided into two systems, with a measure number 170 in a box between them.

System 1 (Measures 1-4):

- Staff (i): Violin I. Includes markings: *lc.*, *NAT.*, *tr.*, *p*, *mf*, *p*, *mf*, *TAST.*, *tr.*, *p*, *mf*. Time signatures: 2/4, 3/4.
- Staff (ii): Violin II. Includes marking: *tr.*. Dynamics: *p*, *f*, *mf*.
- Staff (iii): Violin III. Includes marking: *mf*. Dynamics: *mf*.
- Staff (iv): Violin IV. Includes marking: *ff*. Dynamics: *mf*, *f*, *f*. Time signature: 3/4.

System 2 (Measures 5-8):

- Staff (i): Violin I. Includes marking: *NAT.*. Dynamics: *f*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (ii): Violin II. Includes marking: *PONT.*. Dynamics: *mf*, *f*, *mf*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (iii): Violin III. Includes marking: *mf*. Dynamics: *mf*, *f*, *f*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (iv): Violin IV. Includes marking: *ff*. Dynamics: *ff*. Time signature: 3/4.

System 3 (Measures 9-12):

- Staff (i): Violin I. Includes marking: *PIZZ. m.s.*. Dynamics: *mf*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (ii): Violin II. Includes marking: *LEGNO*. Dynamics: *f*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (iii): Violin III. Includes marking: *IVC.*. Dynamics: *f*, *ff*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (iv): Violin IV. Includes marking: *IIIc.*. Dynamics: *mf*. Time signature: 2/4.

System 4 (Measures 13-16):

- Staff (i): Violin I. Includes marking: *(sempre TAST.)*. Dynamics: *mf*, *mf*, *f*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (ii): Violin II. Dynamics: *ff*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (iii): Violin III. Dynamics: *ff*. Time signature: 2/4.
- Staff (iv): Violin IV. Dynamics: *mf*. Time signature: 2/4.

EX.2: A DETAIL FROM THE FOURTH STRING QUARTET © Editions Salabert and reproduced by permission

context the entry of a new instrument can take on a status equivalent to the arrival of a new theme in classical music. Premiered in Paris in 1961, the *Four pieces* created no particular impression and were apparently not heard again for another 18 years.

During the 60s, Scelsi expanded from this deliberately narrow starting point to a reconsideration of harmonic phenomena. Initially, the 'single-note' style was transferred to large orchestra in *Aion* (1961) and thence to string quartet (in the Second Quartet, 1962). In the last movement of the latter, Scelsi made a tentative venture into harmony by allowing more than one pitch (sometimes three or four) to behave as the 'single notes' did in the *Four pieces* – each becomes a zone for quartertone oscillations, vibrato variation and so forth. The extremely rich result is developed considerably in one of Scelsi's finest works, the Fourth String Quartet (1964), in which he also found an ideal solution to his formal requirements: form as a gradual process. The quartet is based not upon single notes but upon a steadily ascending band of pitches starting around middle C and ending around the A three-and-a-half octaves above it. This trajectory is pursued at several speeds simultaneously, and as certain pitches ascend slower than others, their combination forms an ascending series of major and minor triads – a kind of tonality, but an evolving, unstable one in which one tonal centre is constantly transforming into another; all this, together with a steady intensification of dynamics and articulation, produces a feeling of inexorable progression and transformation which is sustained throughout. Ex. 2 shows one of the culminations of this process; the harmony centres around F and D. Each string of each instrument is retuned (facilitating double-stops) and each is notated on a separate stave, with its own changes of tone-colour and volume, resulting in an extraordinarily rich and intense sound-palette.

Arguably Scelsi's greatest work, the violin concerto *Anahit* (1965) develops the Fourth Quartet's ascending band idea into a more sophisticated formal plan.⁹ The piece falls into two large unequal parts, the second considerably shorter than the first, separated by a brief cadenza for the violinist; as in all of Scelsi's post-1959 music, the work has a tonic centre – in this case G. The G functions in a more shadowy, ambiguous way than either the single notes of the *Four pieces* or the ascending bands of the Fourth Quartet. For one thing it is not stated at the outset, where a cluster of quartertones around Bb, then around Db and Gb, form a Gb major chord. This is a deceptive opening – the Db falls silent and the Gb ascends to G, so that when the violinist enters on D (triple-stopped across its four retuned strings) we hear a root position G minor triad stated prominently and definitely as the home key. Ex.3 shows this moment: note the way the flutes' fluttersong in the second bar extends the grainy sound of the soloists' beats around D (symbolised by a dotted line). Such 'developmental' orchestration, with chains of timbres linking up to one another (for example: beats–fluttersong–brass mutes) and transferring to the pitch domain (e.g. beats–vibrato–quartertones) seems to be active throughout, making the orchestral colour and pitch-content of *Anahit* interdependent to an unusual degree (such thinking also anticipates the work of a number of IRCAM researchers into

the possibility of a continuous so-called 'timbre-space'¹⁰). Ex.4 shows the large-scale tonal plan of the work, which falls into two similar but unequal parts, the second an abbreviated 'replay' of the first. The process of pitch-sliding is, as in the Fourth Quartet, highly irregular and I have only shown the principal stages; it is less predictable than the Fourth Quartet and, in addition, each pitch may abruptly transpose by several octaves, turning a root-position triad into a first inversion, or turning a major chord on one bass note into a minor chord on another. The harmony is lush to a degree hitherto unknown in Scelsi's work: around b.21 the added-sixth chord on G is introduced and shortly afterwards the seventh – such blatant references to late-romantic harmony, albeit in a totally new context, occur very frequently throughout *Anahit* and may be explained by the title – *Anahit* is the ancient Egyptian goddess of love. The work is in fact subtitled 'A lyric poem dedicated to Venus' and the work's orchestration as well as its harmony have an overt sensuousness curiously reminiscent, *mutatis mutandis*, of Delius. As in the quartet, dynamics and density of texture move in parallel with the gliding process, reaching two peaks – one just before the violin cadenza, the other in the second part at the arrival of the note B in b.161; thereafter the harmonic rate slows virtually to nil, as though the work is to cadence in this key. This deceptive ending mirrors the harmonic deception of the opening – as the B fades the soloist pushes up just before the end from F sharp to G, cadencing the work in that key by turning B into its third. It is a simple and elegant gesture which concludes the work with just the right mixture of inevitability and surprise.

Scelsi went on to compose three more pieces for chorus and orchestra, as well as a host of smaller pieces using his own brand of 'new tonality' for eleven more years, bringing his catalogue to over 130 works. Then, in 1976, just as he was coming to be known, he suddenly stopped writing, composing during his final 12 years only the elemental Fifth Quartet (1985) in memory of Henri Michaux. Instead he sat back to reap the rewards of over thirty years' intensive labour as his music was gradually discovered, played and recorded, and he became something of a cult figure for younger composers such as Tristan Murail, Gérard Grisey, Alvin Curren, Horatiu Radulescu and many others. His largest orchestral works were premiered, generally more than twenty years after their composition, and distinguished figures such as Cage, Feldman and Ligeti acclaimed his music; indeed in central Europe it has been standard contemporary repertoire for some years now. He professed not to care, but turned up to receive the accolades nevertheless; and, as long as his health permitted, to entertain guests in his large house opposite the Roman forum. He even lived to see as eminent a compatriot as Nono unmistakably influenced by his music,¹¹ although in Italy as a whole he is still unplayed and *persona non grata*. He remains an enigmatic figure: a composer who did not write his most typical music down himself, a fine poet in a language not his own and – not least – a musical innovator whose most radical innovations were taken not out of a desire to shock or even to renew his own music, but simply to keep himself sane. In one of his more confessional poems he seems to allude to this:

This is a handwritten musical score for an orchestra and a solo violin. The score is organized into systems for different instrument groups:

- Flutes (Fl.):** Two staves, with dynamics *ppp* and *pp*, and a marking *fl. ff.*.
- Clarinet (clar.):** One staff, with dynamics *mp* and *p*.
- Cornets (corni):** Two staves, with dynamics *max.* and *mp*, and a marking *SENZA SORD.*.
- Trumpets (tr. m.):** Two staves, with a marking *CUP* and dynamics *mp* and *p*.
- Violins (V. solo):** Two staves, featuring a solo entry with the instruction *calante in funzione dei battimenti*.
- Viola (Vla):** Two staves, with dynamics *mp* and *p*, and a marking *PONT.*.
- Violoncello (Vlc):** Two staves, with dynamics *pp* and *ppp*, and a marking *TAST. b₂*.
- Contrabass (Cb):** Two staves, with dynamics *pp* and *p*, and a marking *NAT.*.

The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings, all written in black ink on a white background.

EX. 3: THE FIRST ENTRY OF THE SOLO VIOLIN IN *ANAHT* © EDITIONS SALABERT AND REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION

PART I

Bars: 1 5 11 (P) 21 gl. 27 35 gl.

43 gl. 64 gl. 69 gl. 71 gl. 73 gl. 91 gl. 92 gl. 108 (cluster) Violin cadenza gl.

127 gl. 129 gl. 134 gl. 138 gl. 141 gl. 156 gl. 161 gl. 176 diatonic cluster 181 (P) gl.

EX.4: HARMONIC GRAPH OF ANAHIT. ONLY THE BACKGROUND HAS BEEN SHOWN; FOREGROUND DETAIL (QUARTERTONE BLURRING, ETC.) HAS BEEN OMITTED

Je vais dans un pays
 sans noms sans chiffres
 et sans mots
 sans phares et sans pièges
 ou regne le fou rire
 rêver la mort des rêves¹²

Notes

1. Scelsi published four volumes of French poetry: *Le poids net* (Paris, 1949), *Archipel nocturne* (Paris, 1954), *La conscience aiguë* (Paris, 1962) and *Cercles* (Rome, 1986). 2. There is dispute as to exactly who this was. See Robin Freeman's article in *Tempo*, March 1991 for a discussion of the identity of Scelsi's teacher in Vienna. 3. Harry Halbreich: programme note for the complete recording of Scelsi's string quartets by the Arditti Quartet on Salabert Actuels SCD-8904-5. 4. Robin Freeman's

assertion that the work 'has a wordless phonetic text' (Freeman, op. cit.) is incorrect. The first part uses only vowels, the second and third the three words 'Deus, Amor, Lux' and the fourth a traditional Latin prayer. Felix Aprahamian, who attended the premiere, described to me in conversation the effect of the work in performance as 'irresistible, absolutely thrilling'. Aprahamian believes that a subsequent Brussels performance was of a far lower quality and, on that account, not a success, whereas Freeman (op. cit.) asserts that no other performance took place after the Paris premiere. Freeman also makes the strange assertion that a projected performance of *La naissance* in London a week after the Paris premiere by BBC forces 'was cancelled when Desormière unexpectedly died'. In fact Desormière had a stroke, but this was not until 1952, and I have been unable to find any other evidence that a London performance was ever planned. 5. Adrian Jack: presentation for BBC Radio 3's 'Music in Our Time', 12 October 1981. 6. For extensive details on the question of Scelsi's later working practice, see Freeman, op.cit. pp.16-17. 7. See Freeman op. cit. and the Scelsi volume in *Musik-Konzepte*

no.31. 8. I do not agree with Halbreich (liner notes to CD Accord 200612) in his assertion of multiple golden section properties in these pieces; these seem to me to depend too much on the actual notation employed for music which was essentially improvised. 9. This harmonic analysis was made in 1988. I could not therefore have read Halbreich's programme notes to *Anahit* as these were published in 1989; the similarities between my analysis and his (both as regards identifying the tonic G and in other respects) are coincidental but do, I believe, confirm the validity of these assertions. 10. *Le timbre, métaphore pour la composition*, IRCAM, Paris, 1991. 11. Nono's late orchestral works *A Carlo Scarpa architetto* (1984) and *No hay caminos, he que caminar* (1987), exclusively based upon narrowly oscillating single pitches, are generally thought to have been written under the influence of Scelsi's music, to which they bear a strong resemblance. 12. 'I go to a land/nameless numberless/and wordless/without beacons or traps/where mad laughter reigns/dreaming the death of dreams (from *Le poids net*, my translation).