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Bruno Maderna
Complete Works for Orchestra. Vol. 1

ORCHESTRAL WORKS. VOL. 1

Bruno Maderna finished his first large-scale orchestral works in the 1950s. They were preceded by a series of chamber pieces he had written in the aftermath of World War II. The very plain titles – “Composition”, “Exercise”, “Improvisation” – bear witness to the creative purlieus within which the music is situated.

Composizione n. 1 was completed in 1948–49, in circumstances which still remain obscure. He was not quite 30 years old when he essayed his first symphonic work, confronting tradition in a dialectical and innovative manner. In this work rigour and freedom co-exist in exemplary balance. Its four sections, outlining the traditional framework of a symphony, are united in a single arch of sound and subdivided into contrasting pathways, constantly alternating between gradations of dynamic chiaroscuro and a highly original interplay of timbres. The interior workings of the ostensibly rhapsodic form reveal a rigorously constructed theme and its progressive disintegration in the variations that follow. The stages in this sonic journey are clearly marked in the score. Maderna informs the conductor precisely, indeed almost warily, where the theme is formed or varied, where it is dissected or dissolved, and finally where “the theme becomes the series” (section 3) or where the series “are manipulated in a canonic stretto” (section 4, *Allegro moderato e vigoroso*). At the end, all that remains of this game is the gradually inaudible rhythm of the percussion. The vibraphone and piano parts manage to state the dedication to the conductor Nino Sanzogno (in letter notation) before vanishing into thin air.

If the vicissitudes and genesis of *Composizione n. 1* are deeply rooted in Italy’s art scene, the story behind *Composizione n. 2* leads us into an international nexus of contemporary music and the heart of an artistic community that would become one of the most important factors in Maderna’s life: the community surrounding Hermann Scherchen, who conducted the work’s première in Darmstadt in August 1950. From the very outset it was rousinglly hailed as the beginning of “a new era in the history of music”. Indeed, the limitation of the orchestral tissue and the noticeably shorter length compared to the first *Composizione* are clear indications of the progress Maderna had made in his quest to break with convention and to surmount the standard formal canon and traditional modes of expression.

This piece revealed, with all imaginable force, Maderna’s ability to unite the rigour of the written score, which increasingly points in the direction of total structuralism, and a vocal ethos that is by turns radiant and discreet, explosive and tender. The magic of this balance already unfolds at the very opening, when the gentle but urgent sound of the English horn quotes one of the rare musical documents from ancient Greece, the

Epitaffio di Sicilo. From this spare musical material Maderna derives the compositional fabric and structural coherence of the entire piece. He combines the “past” of the ancient theme with the “present” of an experimental treatment of form, in which sharply contrasting styles, techniques and idioms commingle within a rhythmic skeleton consisting of *English Waltz*, *Wiener Walzer* and *Rumba*.

This same characteristic feature of building complex sonic edifices from a limited amount of starting material also informs *Studi per “Il Processo” di Franz Kafka*, a cantata-oratorio of 1950 for speaker, soprano and orchestra. As late as the 1980s this piece, which probably arose in response to an unfinished work for the theatre, was referred to by Luigi Nono as a model of “compositional economy”. Nono recalled how Maderna used “minimal material, a minimum of intervals” and “scoured it for so many possible relations and combinations”. The entire composition appears as a prismatic construct in which discursive layers alternate and mingle with sections of lyricism and song. Features of this sort characterise the twin poles which lay behind Maderna’s choice of text. From Kafka’s novel he liberally selected passages about lawyers and judicial proceedings (assigning them to the speaker) and others associated with Leni (sensually fleshed out by the soprano). Only at the end is the figure of Joseph K. absent, having been summoned by a loud voice. Equally shadowy is the narrative plot. Both are entrusted to the music, which aims at a new form of sonic dramaturgy to sustain the hallucinatory moods of Kafka’s original.

That titles can function as detectors for the way form and content interrelate becomes evident in the final hand-written version of *Improvvisazione n. 1*, completed in 1952. The form is obviously provisional and evidently much more impromptu than the *Improvvisazione n. 2* which followed in 1953, dedicated to Maderna’s life-companion Christine. The two pieces are laid out in a single overarching gesture whose interior is subdivided into episodes of contrasting metre, agogics and rhythm. The references to existing dances and rhythms in *Improvvisazione n. 1*, where the opening *Andante* is followed by a *Tempo di Walzer*, a *Polka*, a *Can-Can* and a tripartite *Finale*, give way in *Improvvisazione n. 2* to more common, yet no less experimental agogic marks: *ungestüm* (impetuous), *andante*, *adagio*, *erregt* (excited), *allegro*, *ruhig* (placid), *feierlich* (solemn), *still*. Both the hovering conclusion of *Improvvisazione n. 1* and the whispered ending of *Improvvisazione n. 2* (assigned to a barely perceptible bass drum) seem to upend the logic of classical compositional architecture. Here, as in the two *Composizioni* and practically every page from Maderna’s pen, the final sounds evaporate into nothingness, into a vibration beneath the threshold of perception, no longer music, but not yet silence.

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