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## Writing <--> Technology. Composers 1973-1983

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It has been a long journey since we started discussing about this multiple-issue project of *Nuove Musiche* with Stefano Vallauri Lombardi. It was probably late 2016, and we three agreed that the main topic had to revolve around two pivots: young composers and technology. That said, the journey was just at its beginning. Our early enthusiasm on such a vague topic was immediately challenged by the requirement of more precise theoretical boundaries. That is, it was apparent that we had to clearly define not only what we meant by “young” and by “technology”, but also what relationship we were to investigate between these two categories. Fast-forwarding to 2020 – and skipping some troubles we had while traveling, last but not least COVID-19 – in the following of this introduction our aim will be to provide a reference framework for the reader.

Back to the category issue, the “young age” one is clearly insidious. It exposes itself to criticism in terms of ageism, because it cannot guarantee in itself, by the way it is constructed, any relationship with the interest of the composer’s work. All the more reason, precisely because of the temporal extension that defines it, it necessarily translates into a limited corpus of works that can be taken into consideration. To cope with such issues, we thus decided to take into account some of the most

“prominent” composers born between 1973 and 1983. Thus, young but not so young, that is, within a range from 35 to 45 years of age. Choosing a generational criterion gives us the opportunity to face a unified set of issues: for example, these composers engaged with similar technologies around the same age. This way, we confront technological issues related to a specific period, despite the differences in musical styles and languages between the composers.

Yet, in the previous definition a second question immediately arises: what is “prominence”? The criterion that guided us (a criterion, it must be remembered, that is only one of many) is related to the social relevance of the chosen composers in the context of contemporary music (a small world perhaps, but constraints were exactly what we were in need of). If this translates into the relevance of commissions, concerts, dedicated articles, perceived importance among audience and music practitioners, are we perhaps chasing the contemporary myth of popularity? I.e. as in the “popular on social media” sentence? Our response is that prominence is related to the acknowledgment of a specific interest by the extended community of contemporary music for these composers. One might say that it is like considering a kind of time-compressed *Wirkungsgeschichte*. If such an assumption proves (at least partially) correct, it can be easily seen that there is a relative scarcity of critical and analytical studies on these composers’ work, due indeed to their age. Hence our primary, documentary interest. To sum up, we decided to choose a 10-year birth range, 1973-1983. The chosen time range is not accidental, rather it defines a generation that:

- reached the legal age after the fall of the Berlin Wall;
- experienced growing globalization, cultural transnationalization and the continuous development of new forms of communication;
- grew up in the digital age;
- developed new musical architectures and devised new forms of performance;
- gave a renewed attention to the expression of outer meanings;
- developed new ways of expression through music;

- had enough time to develop a specific style or aesthetic attitude through an already relevant body of works.

If the definition of the age category has proven to be inherently difficult, even more so is that of technology. “Technology” is indeed a very broad term, so much that it can even overlap the concept of culture itself as a memory “embodied outside the body” and socially transmitted through objects, as noted by Gould as a sort of Lamarckian counterpoint to Darwinian genetics. Natural language itself can be read à la McLuhan – more than as a *faculté de langage* or as a cognitive resource – as a tool: not by chance, the late Wittgenstein insisted that language is a box of tools. Even from a superficial ethno-musicological glance it is obvious that all musical practices have to cope with an “instrumental”, that is: tool-based, dimension, ranging from the selection of natural objects to be struck, to the use of software for assisted composition.

Hence, a set of suggestions that have provided us other constraints in selecting the composers to be taken into account. Back to the instrument topic, we have investigated into the so-called “lutherie”, that is the exploitation of new possibilities both in extended performance techniques on traditional and in completely new instruments (where novelty may be referred to their use in the “traditional” composition context). Here, extended techniques are experimented in search of new sounds/practices. In the same context, we have been interested in the use of “extra-musical objects/devices” in composition: in these cases, objects from outside the (traditional) composition space, so to say, are included into composition. Such uses tend to clearly move traditional composition thinking from the organization of a specific set of parameters to a wider domain. Composition turns into a sort of “music design” activity, the terms being inspired both by design practice itself but also by sound design. So, composition as music design centers on the relationship between constraints and materials. But technology is to be intended in a broader sense: as a device – even if not a physical one – that triggers composition and prompts musical construction. Thus,

composition techniques, formalized procedures, organization practices are all integral part of such a design pipeline. We have thus taken into account the structural use of advanced technology in composition, such as computer-assisted and algorithmic composition, in which the computer acts not only as a secondary tool but rather as pivotal component in the composition process. Here the tool properly becomes a co-subject in composition. Such a general, design-inspired, principle typically – even if not necessarily – results in the use of technologically extended instruments, by this meaning electronics, physical computing, virtual and hyper-instruments. Another typical element related to the actual *Zeitgeist* is the involvement of multimedia technologies and of social media, even if they are not directly bound together but simply participate in the same musical and multimedia discourse. Finally, many composers expressly thematize and discuss through their works technology and its relationship to music and humankind.

It can be seen that our focus on technology has not been limited to the physicality of objects. On the contrary, we have emphasized the relevance of design, that is, organization principles. This is the reason at the origin of the third term that enters the title of this issue: writing.

Back to natural language, from a materialistic perspective on culture, rooted into anthropology, the technological dimension of writing clearly emerges if we consider writing as a fundamental communicative mediation device that, while maintaining a relationship with language, at the same time shifts towards different uses. Once available, some 5000 years ago, soon writing systems have been used to archive information on loans and debts, to compose poems, to communicate with the gods and the dead, to make spells, to deliver diplomatic messages, to wish good luck, to compute mathematical operations, and so on. And, of course, writing systems have been also devised and used to “write music”. It is well known how music notation affects music practice, so much that it has been said, indeed with an excess of technological determinism, that notation has been at the origin of Western polyphonic music, and, one could say, of composition practice as we know it since

Renaissance, or late Middle Age. Given such a theoretical framework, by taking into account writing we are not strictly focusing on notation issues, even if these ones are indeed very relevant. As we said before, we are interested into a design-like attitude in music composition. Hence, choosing “writing” as a keyword seemed an opportune generalization from music notation into a project-based attitude, while at the same time the term still retains the relation with the technology at its origin. It could also be argued that such a notion might share some aspects with the one of *écriture*, as discussed in the post-Derrida aesthetic and philosophical debate. Thus, we assume the relation between technology and writing here in the widest sense, both as technology for writing and as writing for technology. To be more specific, writing in this context:

- allows the coordination/integration of technology with human performers;
- as a form of design refers to the structural organization/planning of the live interaction between musicians and other elements;
- refers to the planning of the audience’s relationship with the performer and the work;
- implies an attention shift towards the formal/symbolic side, as it requires an abstraction effort in relation to objects that are typically not conceptualized in musical terms;
- is a way to extract/abstract technology, so as to insert it into a symbolic organization, defining specific features or modes of usage.

This set of features also clearly specifies that our interest is still in “composition” as an “out-of-time” (to speak with Xenakis) activity rather than in improvisation practices, a domain where instead performing gains a major role. These remarks on writing provided us some final constraints for our selection process, as we looked for composers that experimented with new relationships between performers, instruments and technology, and approached writing for multimedia in innovative ways, being able to imagine new ways of combining sound and other media. Among the still too many candidates, we have also tried to take into consideration

gender, geographical, and stylistic/linguistic diversity. Needless to say, this selection process has been a fascinating but very difficult task. Clearly, we have no intention of denying the subjectivity of our selection. On the contrary, we take full responsibility of it.

At the end, the list of selected composers is the following (in birth order): Francesco Filidei (1973), Malin Bång, Panayotis Kokoras, Jennifer Walshe (1974), Andrea Agostini, Raphaël Cendo, Mauro Lanza (1975), Dmitri Kourliandskij, Simon Steen-Andersen (1976), Rama Gottfried (1977), Ondřej Adámek, Stefan Prins, Alexander Schubert, Francesca Verunelli, Vito Žuraj (1979), Johannes Kreidler, Sarah Nemtsov (1980), Ryan Carter, Marina Khorkova (1981), Ashley Fure, Tristan Perich (1982).

In short, the aim of the issue is to provide a phenomenology of music practices in relation to the two main themes indicated by the title, and to provide some analytical details in relation to specific works of the selected composers. As if this were not a sufficiently complex work, we also asked the composers and musicologists involved in the project for an extra effort. Apart from writing the essay here included, each author has thus collaborated with the chosen composer in writing a joint contribution, contextualizing the topic of the call, referring also to other works of the composer, and including/deepening aspects that were not discussed in the musicological essay. This extra-material will be freely available on the journal's website.