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Largo teso: The Seven Studies for guitar by Maurizio Pisati

Abstract

In this contribution, composer and interpreter talk about the Seven Studies from their respective points of view. Maurizio Pisati explains how he developed a new guitar, departing from a single study and arriving at the overall formal conception through timbres, techniques and articulations; and how the soloistic studies led him to a guitarled ensemble piece. Elena Càsoli deals with issues such as the score's indications and the instrumental techniques.

Keywords

guitar, composition, contemporary, extended techniques, sonoristic approach

Cover Page Footnote

Keynote given at The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2021 under the title: Largo Teso: The 7Studi by Maurizio Pisati.

Largo teso: The *Seven Studies* for guitar by Maurizio Pisati¹

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In this contribution, composer and interpreter talk about the *Seven Studies* from their respective points of view. Maurizio Pisati explains how he developed a *new guitar*, departing from a single study and arriving at the overall formal conception through timbres, techniques and articulations; and how the soloistic studies led him to a guitar-led ensemble piece. Elena Càsoli deals with issues such as the score's indications and the instrumental techniques.

The Seven Studies

Study no. 1

Maurizio Pisati (MP): In the *Seven Studies*, apart from introducing innovative guitar sounds and articulations, I wanted to develop a *new guitar*. It partly was *my guitar*, the way I used to improvise on it. But I also took into consideration both ordinary and internal (inner) sonorities of the instrument. I did not *touch* it with other objects as I did later on, nor used *scordatura*. I just thought of the guitar and fingers, looking for what this instrument is usually hiding inside. So, when a conventional sound appears among muted sounds, glissandos, striking, harmonics “on false positions” (this is how I called multiphonics), etc, it seems as coming from another acoustic world, as a sound apart, rare, as the exception.

Elena Càsoli (EC): *Largo teso* – the indication at the beginning of Study no. 1 – means large and brightly tensed. The study is a combination of long bow phrases and inner fast articulations. It introduces two of the main techniques employed in the *Seven Studies*: *circular tremolo* and glissando. The former is a tremolo produced through a particular kind of articulation of the right-hand fingers: a sequence of *i-m-a-m-i-m-a* played with a light *apoyando* attack on two strings that are damped by the left hand while it glides along them. In this study, there are also sequences of (conventional) glissandos that are to be done in one single left-hand movement, as requested on the score.

A true beginning

Study no. 2

MP: What is written on a score, sometimes is *true*, some others not: it still needs a translation, and because of this we have the difference between a *player of music*, and an interpreter. I mean, no one is ever able to say exactly when you start composing a music. In the same way it would be naïve to read the first pitch on a score as a *true* beginning of that music: it is rather an incipit of one of its possible

¹ Keynote given at The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2021 under the title: *Largo Teso: The 7Studi* by Maurizio Pisati.

representations, and the main idea maybe blossoms in the middle of the piece. When I composed the Seven Studies, my sheet of paper was like a theater: a certain movement or fingering is just what I needed to reach a musical result, and then it became a technique, and then it needed its particular drafting and writing. The fingering is here a fundamental component of the compositional thought. Not only a suggestion, but an essential need to the faithful interpretation of the Seven Studies.

EC: Harmonics sounds play here an important role. They are mostly natural, but sometimes they are played at unconventional locations, which means you play multiphonics. In Study no. 2 we have a particular combination of tremolo and harmonics, in which the former is preceded and followed by the latter, giving rise to multiple resonances, thus resembling a baroque technique with brilliant sonorities.

Lightness and fluency

Study no. 3

EC: These are performance studies for concerts, which demand an advanced technique. At the same time, they are *studies*. By working on them I improved fast thinking and to rapidly connect musical objects. I refined the sensibility for ordinary sounds, as well as for what is *concealed* in each vibrating string. Lightness and fluency are important topics of Study no. 3. Since the beginning you have a particular kind of glissando produced through a continuous longitudinal short movement of the left hand (thus continuously moving the pitches up and down), organized in fast quintuplets, while the right hand plucks a kind of melody, coordinated with the restless left hand.

MP: Sounds exist by themselves regardless of what we call them. As we know, the terms *conventional* and *unconventional* are just classifications, and a muted sound is not just a pitch produced *differently*. Particular sounds and articulations recur continuously within Seven Studies; each piece is based on various techniques. I believe that I have managed to avoid the risks involved in repetition on a macro level (i.e., from the entire set's point of view), in as much as the elements are so frenzied and tiny that the work tends towards a *prismatic* and polychrome vision. Interpreters usually find a sort of subjective circularity within the seven pieces. They find out different learning paths, and I believe that they also offer a good pedagogical variety of approach to the music generally.

Silence

Study no. 4

MP: Up to now the matter was sounds and pauses, but another concept also creeps in: silence. Pauses and silence produce similar acoustic effects, but I try to move them towards an active way of listening. Silence still contains a tension, but it is also the warning that another silence always flows below our daily life.

EC: In fact, Study no. 4 starts with a long pause. There are pulses for the sounds and different ones for the silences/pauses, which are full of tension, not just empty spaces. There is always an *inner breath* counting the pulse, awaiting the next event.

MP: Here also begins a further polyphonic conception: no longer just between pitches but also between techniques. Two fingers of the left hand play a continuous and regular up and down glissando **while** on another string a finger slides independently **and** the right hand plays the circular tremolo. This total

polyphony led to a wider conception of the pieces: each one of them has become a Duo, and the *Seven Duos* became part of the opera *Theater of Dawn*. Geoffrey Morris was the first interpreter of the guitar-leading part.² The duos were recorded by guitarist Ruben Mattia Santorsa,³ and have been the focus of a research of Jessica Kaiser at KUG Kunstuniversität Graz.

A fluid mind

Study no. 5

MP: The guitar's lack of audibility is often discussed. The actual question should not be volume but the quality of sounds, their combinations and differentiation. In my guitar music, variety is highlighted by exploiting the perceptive limits of each sound. Two hands are crossing and playing, controlled by a fast, smooth, fluid mind. Consequently, the potential use of amplification should be considered towards underlining and enhancing differences, rather than bring everything up to a uniform audibility.

EC: Study no. 5 develops two guitar techniques: fast tapping on the nut side of a stopped string with the right-hand fingers (thus producing bitones); and *legato* combined with plucking the string on both sides of the stopped string alternatively. Regarding the latter, Maurizio wrote in the performance instructions:

The left hand holds down the E string and produces, with the so-called "guitaristic legato", the two notes that follow. The right hand plucks, therefore, only the first sound of each triplet, alternating as indicated: at times to the left of the right hand (that is with the hand crossed), and at times conventionally and as near as possible to the left hand. (Pisati, 1991, n.p.)

There is therefore a constant crossing of the hands. The result is a kind of kaleidoscopic sound, obtained by a great variety of fast movements across the entire instrument.

MP: Here the movement itself is part of the score, it is *on stage*. The guitar is *the* theater stage: the hands' dance generates the music. I composed another guitar piece about this for the 2020 MITO international festival, in which it was premiered by Elena Cásoli.⁴ In this piece, titled *Spiriti sospesi, teatro spiritoso su sei corde*, the two hands cross and chase each other throughout the soundboard and fingerboard, until one catches and stops the other.

Collisions

Study no. 6

MP: Study no. 6 is probably the one with the most dynamic contrasts, or *contradictions*, or *collisions*, here linked to the *density* parameter. It is a harpsichord concept, where the dynamic envelope is created by superimposing frequencies, octaves, iterations and articulations. Here we also attempt to listen to what reverberates and arises *inside* the guitar's body. Those tiny sounds are not played loudly: they are *isolated*, left *alone* (in Italian *solo, isola, isolato*) towards a raw contrast with the rest of the piece. When composing the Seven Studies, the aura of the pieces felt like the ZONE in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*,

2 The premiere was on June 2, 2007 at the Judith Wright Centre for Contemporary Art in Brisbane. Geoffrey Morris was accompanied by the Elision Ensemble. The piece was published by Ricordi-Universal in 2006.

3 The recording can be found in the CD Maurizio Pisati: Set7, published by Kairos (0015052KAI). The other interpreters of the duos are: Marie Del Prat, Paetzold Recorder; João Carlos Pacheco, Percussion, Hugo Queirós, Bass Clarinet; Kevin Juillerat, Tenor Sax; Céline Wasmer, Voice; Lino Mendoza, Double Bass; Anne-Laure Dottrens, Alto.

4 MITO SettembreMusica – In 2020, the festival took place between September 4 and 18 at the Torino Conservatorio G. Verdi and Milan's Teatro Dal Verme.

where there is no way back: water drops resound in the void, each reached point only brings forward, or, if you want to turn back, nothing is the same as before. The interpreter should play these little drops of notes just figuring himself being inside the soundboard.

EC: Dynamics are here very detailed, strictly connected with musical gestures, with tremolos, glissandos and harmonics. The nature of the Sound itself depends on their connections. By respecting the written *vertigo dynamics* – I use this expression for rapid dynamic shifts that create a sense of dizziness –, you arrive at the energy, the poetry and the surprise of this music.

Sprezzatura

Study no. 7

MP: The first performance of this study took place at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in 1988. At the time, Elena Càsoli played just two studies. That night, I felt that the idea of a *new guitar* reached the audience. Perhaps because the music had nothing to do with the historical atmosphere of the place.⁵ Elena gave the first complete performance of the Studies on July 29, 1990, again in Darmstadt. It is to her that this music has always been dedicated.

EC: Study no. 7 includes all the sounds, gestures and techniques that can be found in the other six studies. They should be here even more condensed and energetic, as islands in between pulsing silences. We have a clear idea that these are Studies of Virtuosity. So, finally, what is *virtuosity* here? I would say that it is mainly lightness, fast connections and clarity. Above all, there is the energy expressed through the gestures as well as the fluency, which in an ancient Italian word is called *sprezzatura*. It means the ability to do something arduous with a certain elegance and *grazia*. Last but not least, it is the surprise, because there is always something appearing unexpectedly. And it can surprise you.

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Maurizio Pisati's output includes works with video and live electronics, as well as music for the theatre company PACTAdeiTeatri as artistic director of pactaSOUNDzone. Published by Casa-Ricordi. CD by Kairos, BMG, EMA, Stradivarius, Victor Japan. Prizes at Darmstadt Ferienkursen, BINZ39 Zürich, JapanFoundation Uchida Fellowship. He is professor of Composition for Applied Music, Visual communication, Invention&Interpretation at Conservatorio G. B. Martini, Bologna, where also leads CSR-centro studi e ricerche and INCROCI-lab.

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Elena Càsoli is active on the international concert scene, presenting a multi-faceted image of her instrument from classical authors to the guitaristic experimentalism of the New Music, including theatrical and multimedia events. She performed with K. Nagano, Z. Pesko, M. Stenz, D. Harding. CD&DVD by Dabringhaus&Grimm, BMG Ricordi, Victor Japan, Col Legno, Stradivarius, Scandicus, Vortice/Spi, Gog/DIST, LimenMusic, Musik Syd Channel, Nomus, Al Gran Sole. Since 1994 she collaborates as a journalist with the Italian musicological review Il Fronimo. Since 2002 she is professor of Guitar and Contemporary Music Interpretation at the Bern University of Arts.

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⁵ The Orangerie, a building from 1720.