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Goffredo Petrassi, Nonsense no. IV. Ideational subtlety, sound expression, and solutions for conducting approach

Abstract: The music of the twentieth century is characterised by stylistic diversity, given by “the unprecedented complexity of structural composition, the extremely heterogeneous character of artistic creation and the fast change of writing technique” (Niculescu, 1986, p. 12) of “...ardently searching for the new, based on the development of tradition, sometimes on its denial” (Comes, 1994, pp. 194-195), such as the trend of scientific substantiation of the creation process. One of the features of each European musical culture faced with the pressing trends of modernity was to keep a balance between assuming a “high level of writing technique and the appeal to national and universal traditions.” (Batorška et al., 2020, p. 206) In this context, the secular choral composition of Goffredo Petrassi offers a synthetic picture of the infiltration and adaptation of the composing options of modernity in the Italian interwar and postwar musical space. The conducting approach of the songs dedicated to vocal ensembles is influenced by many factors, including the understanding of the sound language used by the composer, the compositional and writing techniques, or its reference to the poetic background to which it appeals. The present study proposes several solutions for the conducting interpretation of the madrigal *Nonsense IV* by Goffredo Petrassi, starting from the stylistic analysis of the score and the reporting of music to the semantic content of the text.

Keywords: Goffredo Petrassi, nonsense, conducting approach, analysis.

Introduction

Petrassi considered art a spiritual autobiography (“autobiografia spirituale”) (Macaluso, 2017, p. 2). In a creation as vast as his own, there are times when the search for the new and the desire to question everything are felt more acute. The heterogeneity of musical production regarding the choice of genres and styles has often led to comparing Petrassi and Stravinski. The evolutionary path of his aesthetics was influenced by the heritage of the Renaissance and Baroque, by the music of Stravinski, the composers of the Modern Viennese School, the harmonic language of Casella and Hindemith, but especially by the political events witnessed by Italy in the 1930s–1950s (fascism and the constraints of the regime), his creative journey through the interwar and postwar period representing “an equally political and artistic journal.” (Macaluso, 2017, p. 9)

The aesthetic category was considered to belong exclusively to the Victorian era (*Prusaki, 2016, p. 13*), and *nonsense* was later considered a universal gender without time and space (*Malcolm, 1998, p. 4*). In his work “*Nonsense. Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*”, Susan Stewart identifies five types of manifestation of the concept of nonsense (*Stuart, 1979, pp. 57-171*): reversals and inversions, playing with boundaries, playing with infinity, the uses of simultaneity, arrangement, and rearrangement within a closed field.

Temporally placed between “*Noche oscura*” (1951) and “*Mottetti per la Passione*” (1965), the two opuses dedicated to this aesthetic category, *Nonsense* and *Sesto Non-Senso* are also distinguished by their titles unrelated to the mystical and religious world, which emphasises their lack of belonging to the entire choral production (*Prusaki, 2016, p. 61*).

Results

Nonsense IV. Ideas and Style

Nonsense IV is part of the cycle of the five madrigals of the opus with the same name, in which Petrassi demonstrates his ability to juggle the conquests of the serial space and outside it. “The elegant concision of writing, the fine irony, and the spirit and imagination of these five *a cappella* choirs are among the best demonstrations of the expertise with which Petrassi treats the choir.” (*Godoy Tapia, 1965, p. 19*) Considered a revival of the madrigal genre, Petrassi takes over from the Renaissance genre to which symbolic images, onomatopoeia, and sound descriptivism appeal, outlining bookish characters.

As the lyrics also say, the first important segment of the song with number IV is a “it was once,” a malicious introduction, a dialogue between the commentators of history, represented by the four voices of the ensemble. The comic to the grotesque sensation is created by the effect of clusters, which, by imitation, give the impression of distorting the sound. Moreover, the long note within the rhythmic-melodic formula, on a *crescendo* dynamic, followed by the *staccato cluster*, is mainly plastic. The dissonant character causes an ambiguity of the sound centring without a clear outline of a gravitational centre (*Figure 1*).

Next, in section A (m. 10–22), we are told about a young lady from Pozzilo, whose chin was like the tip of the clothespin. This story begins with an isorhythmic construction, which is repetitive in terms of sound material. The immovable aspect of the melodic scheme is aimed at highlighting the dissonance, the sound ambiguity, and the presence of the lowered octave (D/D flat), being particularly effective in creating a slight discordance that the alto voice brings to the light cantilena of the other voices. The elements of the song are made up, by summation, of a pentachord scale with the mobile second stage, which imposes an apparent modal character on the discourse (*Figure 2*).

The economy of melodic means is compensated at an expressive level by the timbral parament (the tenor falsetto of m. 13) and by the vocal effects: *staccato*, obsessively repeated notes, arpeggios followed by long notes, like outbursts. These dialogues between voices lead to a storytelling, good-humour atmosphere (*Figure 3*).

The cluttering of the voices in the free imitative discourse of the planes is finally resolved in the spirit of the Renaissance polyphony on a unique sound, *D* (without predictive harmonic cadence). The process is transferred to the macrostructure level, the first articulation being

achieved similarly, in unison on the same sound *D*, which is also the incipient of the successive section. Choosing the unison represents, on the one hand, the antipode of the uncertain centricity that dominates the entire section and, on the other hand, the way to obtain the density/rarefaction contrast at the level of writing and implicitly of the general dramaturgy.

The second section (B, measures 23–41) differs from the previous one in several respects. At the structural level, the articulation can be defined in three phases: b (ms. 23–27), b1 (ms. 28–33), and b2 (ms. 34–41).

The composer Mosso's indication of *disinvolto* is reflected in the construction of each of the four disjoint sound planes in the first segment. Despite intonational differentiation, the melodic and primarily rhythmic cores are similar, thus connecting the four overlapping melodic lines.

Moreover, each layer has its gravitational centre and implicitly its modal structure, the overlapping of voices generating a divergent polymodalism: Soprano—*B*, Alto—*E*, Tenor—*F#*, Bass—*B*. The extreme planes functionally cover the middle layers, representing the two dominant poles of the *B* centre: upper (*F#*) and lower (*E*). The modal superposition generates a succession of unresolved dissonances, achieving the first stage of the paternal construction in the median section ([Figure 4](#)).

The second phrase of section B (b1) introduces the strict variant of polyphonic writing, the imitative one, made by the successive entry of the idea with the role of theme in Alto and Bass, each exposure being continued with a free counterpoint deployment. In the second stage, the other two voices, Tenor/Soprano, expose in unison a melodic line used in the previous phrase of this section, the composer thus aiming for continuity at the sound level in this multivocal and multiplane ensemble.

At the level of literary semantics, the main female character runs arpeggios with the harp that she bought, the game of syllables: “blan, blan, blan,” suggesting the pinching of the strings. Over this, the onomatopoeic plane overlaps a cantilena with modal sonority. At the level of the paternal evolution, the end of the segment follows a descending path, marked by the dynamics that gradually decrease, ending on a *falsetto* at Tenor. This vocal effect highlights the word *spillo*, a descriptive illustration of the character's sharp chin.

The last phrase (b2) is a polyphonic play of *piano pizzicatos*, a dialogue between the discourse voices, each with its individuality: the discant uses fragments of the bass theme, the alto voice focuses on a repeating ostinato cell (*D#*, *F#*, *G#*), and the Tenor and Bass use deadbeat arpeggios to communicate. Imitative writing effectively shapes the harp's resonance, a process typical of the Renaissance madrigal.

Towards the end, all the voices focus on the same sound landmarks in a close dialogue lost in a double-hypostasis chord of the third (*C#*, *E*, *E#*, *G#*, *B*) ([Figure 5](#)). The presence of the octave lowered in the chord.

The alternate measures throughout the second section generate a dynamism of pulsation, a kaleidoscope of images, which contributes to the paternal accumulation of articulation.

If initially the lines corresponding to the soprano and alto voices, by relatively small intervals (up to the fourth) contrasted with the tenor and bass, whose main characteristic is represented by octave, seventh, or fifth leaps, towards the end, the construction of voices evolves towards

homogeneity, reaching a unit of intervallic organisation. It is also worth mentioning the idea of unity of the whole by resuming the discourse of the first section and the idea of polymodalism.

The Conducting Approach of Nonsense IV Madrigal

In the first eight measures, a segment in which successive voice inputs prepare the atmosphere of the general picture of the madrigal, the tapping must be very precise and rhythmic, aiming that the inputs are on time and on the time side can be observed. The hand next to the part that opens the discourse, namely the right hand for alto and bass and the left hand for soprano and tenor, will be used to achieve this objective. The *staccato* gesture will accompany the entry on the side of time in a slight nuance, and the entry on time will be preceded by the impetus in the nuance suggested by the composer.

For the situations where the female voices are grouped (such as measure 5), we can use both hands at the lower conducting level, with the narrow gesture of the tuning fork, also given the slight nuance. The same phenomenon is found in measure 6 in male voices, which are grouped simultaneously with the dynamics change. In this situation, we will also change the level of the plane and the diapason. After the attack, the gesture must simulate a slight pressure by pressing to suggest the *crescendo* with emphasis on the end of the intervention of each voice.

In the second system, in addition to the change in nuance, we notice the indication *poco affrettando*, concentrated only throughout two measures, preparing the next section by diminishing the nuance and the tempo.

The words used in the dialogue of the voices of the first measures are extremely few, not focusing on the literary sense but on how these interventions, which are placed more on the vowel *e*, can create emotions or images. It creates a sound effect rather than a clear message. That *c'era*, which means *was* or *was once*, prolongs the story's beginning, creating even higher tension, primarily through that rise completed with the accent. Starting from the significance of the text, the image of the lady who pointed her chin is outlined, the exact text later alluding to the fact that she pointed it for a long time—*lo fece limare per ore*.

In the second section, by changing the measure, the nuance and slightly the tempo, the elegant lady is brought to the stage: *C'era una signorina di Pozillo il cui mento era a punta di spillo*. Short notes, breaks, and the cumulation of voices in small nuances offer a hint of elegance. The interventions of bass, alto, soprano, and tenor suggest a wonder of those present at the main character's appearance.

Apart from the input of voices and the dialogue they created, this section does not address other technical conducting problems in a slight nuance. Instead, we will follow both the clarity of the text rendering, pronouncing the consonants accurately, simultaneously, and with simplicity, and the control of dynamics. There are measures in which no voice should stand out, creating a compact sound effect. Also, all the voices will sing the eights briefly so as not to tarnish the elegance of the sound specific to the madrigal.

Without further preparation, we are witnessing a sudden change of nuance, returning to the measure of 2/4 (only for a measure), followed by a large segment (13 measures) in which the organisation is in 4/4. The balance of pulsation is temporarily interrupted by introducing a single measure of 5/4, and the discourse will also be completed in 4/4.

Suppose that, until this moment, it is recommended that small and very accurate gestures be used. In that case, the legato's significant nuance and presence involve more tension in the arm, more significant, detached gestures, and amplitude in movements.

The diversity of dialogues between voices is noted, both in *staccato* on the lyrics imitating the harp and in the *legato* version on the text: *ed arpeggio colmento / colmento per Pozzillo*—“and arpeggiated with the chin” (refers to the fact of using the chin to produce sounds on the harp).

As is the indication in the score, *staccato (ma facendo risuonare la n)*, special importance should be given to the pronunciation of the word *blan*, which appears both on an arpeggio drawing, as well as on the simultaneous intonation of several voices. The sound effect to be obtained will suggest the young lady's interpretation of a melody on the harp.

Towards the end, the dynamic plane evolves along the decreasing intensity line without a tempo thinning. The final chord is placed precisely, in the slight nuance, and with the left hand, according to the secondary entrances, will indicate the last intervention of the bass. We will let the final harmony bring the state of tranquillity, preparing the closing of the sound of all voices by impetus, just like at the beginning of the musical performance, in the nuance and character of the play or moment.

Conclusion

Stupidity and faith (however strange the association may seem) are the two supreme symbolic statements of truth that revealing the essence of things with a syllogism is as impossible as catching Leviathan with a hook.” (*Cuddon, 1999, p. 557*)

The reintegration of Petrassi's choral creation into concert programs involves a deep understanding of all the subtleties that determined the options on the genre and language, such as the stylistic intentions of the composer. The penetration of the intrinsic message of the score is a mandatory primordial stage in the conducting study, the entire process of “reconstruction” of the work in front of the choir and public having as a basis the understanding of the significance of music from the perspective of the creator (*Restagno, 1986, p. 9*).

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Appendix

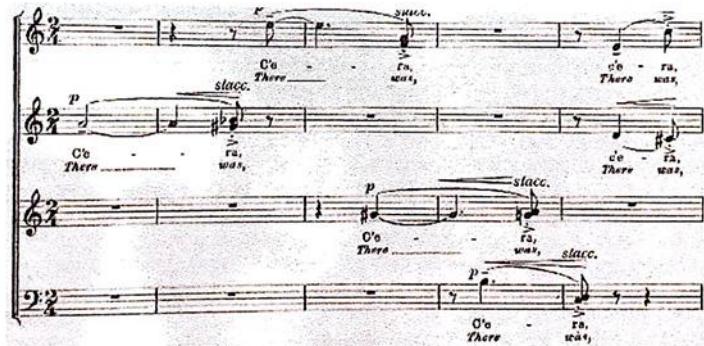


Figure 1. Goffredo Petrassi, Nonsense IV, mm. 1–5



Figure 2. Goffredo Petrassi, *Nonsense IV*, mm. 10–13

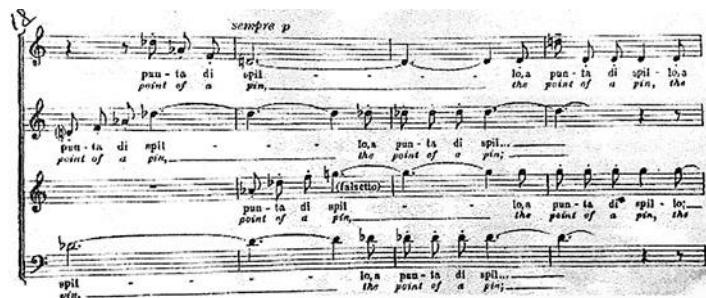


Figure 3. Goffredo Petrassi, Nonsense IV, mm. 18–21



Figure 4. Goffredo Petrassi, Nonsense IV, mm. 23–25



Figure 5. Goffredo Petrassi, Nonsense IV, mm. 38–41