

The Footprint Left

by Sergio Lanza

I thought it would have been easier to talk about my relation with Giovanni Piana (whom I called only “Piana”, as Giovanni are too many); instead I am realising that’s not the case. I find it hard to recollect in order the plethora of fragments in memory through which I experienced our 35 years together. I came to understand that thinking back to him, to what he gave me, to what the meeting with his way of seeing the world has represented for me means somehow to bring to the light something very deep in my existence. And this is not something I am actually used to do.

Decisive for my education, the years from 1984 to 1993 embrace from my first University exam with him up to his invitation to participate to the Permanent Seminar of Philosophy of Music¹, a thoroughly engaging human and conceptual adventure, whose first year of activity included the execution of my trio for strings *Lament for a friend*.

I am pretty sure that all the participants to the Seminar will concur with me that the best years were between 1993 and 1999, during which Piana himself was the promoter in first person – without underestimating that his imprinting on this collective experience, so vital for the young scholars, aimed at a welcoming openness and intellectual curiosity was still echoing in the next decade of activity². (I still remember the deep impression that exerted on me a sentence he told to all of us at the end of the Nineties: “Go out and buy a modem!” - a sentence pronounced by an older man to a younger generation paradoxically late in understanding the great cultural potential of Internet.)

Being a student in Philosophy at University and in Composition at the Conservatory, I felt that attending to his lectures was generating in me the special type of enthusiasm that put something of you into motion and compels you to go beyond. I was feeling that his ideas – expressed with a clarity and linearity that I soon understood as a strength, in stark contrast with the complacent obscurity of some of his colleagues – were opening my young mind – which had maybe the day before followed a seminar of composition techniques by Brian Farneyhough and which would have the subsequent hours being bound to the pentagram, pushing her to a rare shortcircuit of ideas.

It was in those years that a sort of “*regard oblique*” was going to distract my thought from what I was reading (the notes taken at his courses about sounds and colours, the *Elements for a Theory of Experience*, then *The Philosophy of Music*, *Flickers for a Philosophy of Music* and so many other texts by him and others) to lead it into the work of music composition that I was carrying out at the same time.

Something was springing: an idea, an argument over a certain *shape*, a *shaping process* or the analysis of a structure were morphing, in myself, through a process of abstraction that only much later I tried to

¹ □ Archived testimonies of the conversations at the Permanent Seminar can be found in De Musica (<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/demusica/>) as well as in the Giovanni Piana’s Archive (<http://www.filosofia.unimi.it/piana/>).

² □ During the decades of activities, a large number of meetings took places, with many providing the rare occasion of listening to original contemporary music composition in the presence of the composer, followed by his or her remarks and a second hearing, which is almost never possible in a concert setting.

put in conscious focus, into a matter. This matter was feeding both my personal reflections on music and my composing research – a research that began to find its own identity from those reflections and turned out to remain intertwined with them inextricably.

Slowly, I got to realise that Piana was not only offering me a possible entry point to a multiplicity of perspectives – from philosophy in narrow meaning to anthropology and ethnology, from the psychology of perception to mathematics and aesthetics (just to mention the fields touched by Piana that were most impacting on me personally): Piana was offering me *an approach to the things themselves* – a lens, a way to look that turned out to be, for my eyes, for my ears, extremely powerful.

His ability to self enquiring that kept him in the doorway of ideas before entering and use them, as well as the enquiry aimed at “the recognition of a texture of structural relations directly perceivable on the surface of phenomena” (The Philosophy of Music, p. 246, it. version), all this was becoming a precious model for thinking, something that I afterwards tried to apply in the realm of music theory and analysis, and – when possible - also of teaching at Conservatory.

Needless to say, Piana has left on me a deep imprinting not only in the method. His widest legacy is the extraordinary harvest of ideas surrounding music, the wealth of perspective openings, pooled into a critical constellation of ongoing movement, kept together by a unitary and highly consistent vision.

In an extemporaneous and very partial list of his ideas I remember

- the fascinating survey of the imaginative valorization and the role of the latter, functional to appropriate questions on sense and on sense directions;
- the relation – very ambiguous thus very rich – between sound and matter, in which matter appears to be so far, for some aspects, and so close, for others, to the sound;
- the attention paid to aspects of the musical facts which appear to be peripheral, such as chromatism, or superficial, such as dynamics and timbre, of which Piana was proposing to explore the implication for expression and the potential sense directions;
- his innovative re-thinking of the concept of rhythm and, within it, of the dual relationship between beat and off-beat nested into the gesture dynamism sound/silence (thus: presence/absence);
- the focus on music temporality within a reflection on the process of the sound itself, far before music;
- his reformulation of the opposition between consonance and dissonance in a context of tension and proceeding within the sound space in which a fundamental role is played by the difference between discreteness and continuity;
- the research of a pre-linguistic and pre-categorical field as starting point and privileged viewpoint;
- the rise of the musical sense even before its stratification into a linguistic and stylistic dimension.

These extraordinary insights – together with so many others that I cannot quickly recall in this brief text – are all penetrative missions that Piana, through his lectures and a vast series of books, undertook into territories that, at least in Italy, are customarily and historically reserved to narrow specialists (who for sure do not indulge into such foundational issues).

These penetrative missions were compelling me to challenge the entire building of codified knowledge that had been transmitted to me by the institutions such as the Conservatory, at least in a first phase. I had somehow to walk back to the origins, through a pathway of critical rethinking of foundational concepts of music knowledge. This action so courageous and radical, while applying the phenomenological method in an exemplary clarity, was launching me on a terrain that was paradoxically *new* to the musician. At a point, his vision seemed to me as an absolutely necessary road

to establish a research of my own musical language. Over time, some of his ideas, of his *lightnings* came to sediment and take shape into music ideas. Still today, my way of laying down the thoughts that are aimed to become a concrete music form echoes his language, his dialectical oppositions, his vision.

Over the years, our intellectual relationship outgrew into a strong personal relation. As soon as I could make him hear my works or I could invite him to my concerts, his comments abounded and gave me precious indications. Conversely, in the opposite direction Piana was eager to send me his new essays on music and, lately, his own music compositions, always looking for a comment, however critical. Our email exchanges, thick some months, thinner other times, were complemented by several personal visits to his hermitage on the seaside and consolidated a friendship feeling for me absolutely precious.

In 2017, the death of my mother, Maria Teresa Lanza, a literature scholar, indeed the only other person in my life with such a culture and passion for the debate of the ideas as Piana, paralleled with his rising interest for poetry, and for Pascoli in particular. I wrote him about her and sent him the two of her essays on Pascoli. Immediately he reacted by reading and commenting positively, by underlying an affinity that I had anticipated. A year later, he sent me his text on “Reading the poets. Notes in margin to Giovanni Pascoli” by adding: “In this essay, I quote your mother – and as you shall see it's not a formality! I found myself in front of a thinker with a line of reasoning and a general attitude, that I hadn't encountered before, that are strictly proximate to the entire field that I touch in my text. After a scholarly production not seldom self-centred and full of foolishness, her essay on Pascoli's “fanciullino” is for me as refreshing as a breath of fresh air in the high mountains”.

I still feel the regret not to have let them meet, but this last writing seemed to me finally set things right.

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Milan, 8th December 2019

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