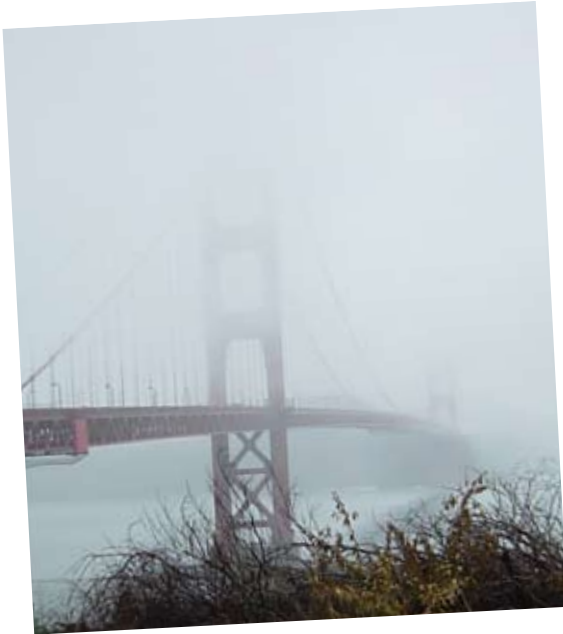


# “Foto-musica” for Berkeley and Stanford (lectures on January 2007)

by Riccardo Piacentini

## 1.



I want to start – telling you about my “foto-musica con foto-suoni”<sup>®</sup> and also the voice of Tiziana – with two pieces of Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian. I am sure I do not have to spend many words on these two leading actors of the Italian voice in last sixty years. Just I would like to remember that in Sixties and Seventies they were very active together, for some year also as wife and husband.

Nevertheless the principal reason of this choice stays in the pieces we will go to perform: *Quattro canzoni popolari* by Berio and *Stripsody* by Berberian. Three of the *Four popular songs* were written in 1947, when Berio was twenty-two; the fourth one, that is number three in the series, was added just for the publication in 1975. What is the matter? These songs are, after the *Four songs on ancient Neapolitan texts* composed in 1925 by Berio’s teacher Giorgio Federico Ghedini, the first example in Italy of a creative elaboration of “similar-popular melodies”. In other terms this melodies are not originally popular, but expressly written by the composer. This means that the voice has: 1) to pronounce on dialectal languages (in this case from Sicily and Liguria), 2) to confront traditional belcanto with popular attitudes in singing, 3) to act according to a not opera standard. For these three reasons, popular attitudes translated in cultured music produced one of the most interesting change in the Italian classical vocal tradition and opening ears and minds in several composers.

In 1966 – between first three *Popular songs* of Berio, their two other versions for voice and ensemble and for voice orchestra (named *Folk Songs*) and the fourth *Popular song* published in 1975 – *Stripsody* represents the wonderful answer of the singer Cathy to all composers, included Berio’s *Sequenza III* written in the same year. Cathy seems to say: «Do you want an actress? Do you want an ‘extended voice’ really skill out of your imagination? Well, I show you».

And now, before the “foto-musica con foto-suoni”<sup>®</sup>, a more recent work by another great composer of

the Italian music: Ennio Morricone's *Epitaffi sparsi* [Epitaphs in scattered order]. Written in 1992/93, this piece shakes popular verve and extreme vocal gestures both from the singer and the pianist. The crazy alea of Berberian and the cultured-popular style of Berio's *Songs* become into an overwhelming clockwork mechanism. Everything is chopped by the composer and the music perfectly follows the lashes of the texts by Sergio Miceli. Morricone wrote a special version of his *Epitaphs* just for Tiziana and me. The complete performance is about 45 minutes, but now we will play just a selection as agreed also with the composer.

## 2.

*Jazz motetus VI (Cricket play)* and the second part by the eleven of *Mina miniera mia*: two pieces to exemplify my "foto-musica con foto-suoni"<sup>®</sup>.

Central idea is that **every sound could work in "foto-musica" if you know how to use it.** Every sound, without prevention.

**First** step, you have to **open your ears** and listened to what is happening around you. You are like a photographer looking for interesting images, but you don't have a camera, you have a recorder and your images are sounds. You are a musician and the microphone is a prothesis of your ears and your memory too. While listening to, you can have an aim or you can build it bit by bit.

**Second** step, with your recorder please **catch a sound** that you like or think useful for next elaborations and combinations. I say «a sound», but actually I mean a large range of possible sounds, from the pure sinusoid to all the infinite colours of not pure sounds. This is the reason because I prefer not to use the word "noise" but just "sound" or, better, "foto-suono". In this last sense, the choice becomes really wide and "democratic" and besides you have an important link to a semantic situation.

**Third**, you can **repeat point 2** every time you want. Of course if you catch a lot of "foto-suoni", you will trouble more in managing them. If you work instead with few "foto-suoni", it will be more easy and probably efficacious too with less trouble.

**Fourth**, you have now to **confront together** the different "foto-suoni" which you have caught and, even if you decided to choose just one "foto-suono", you can watch it by various perspectives asking what it becomes or could become in the future. In this step you are like a scientific observer that studies his objects starting to make hypothesis of using them.

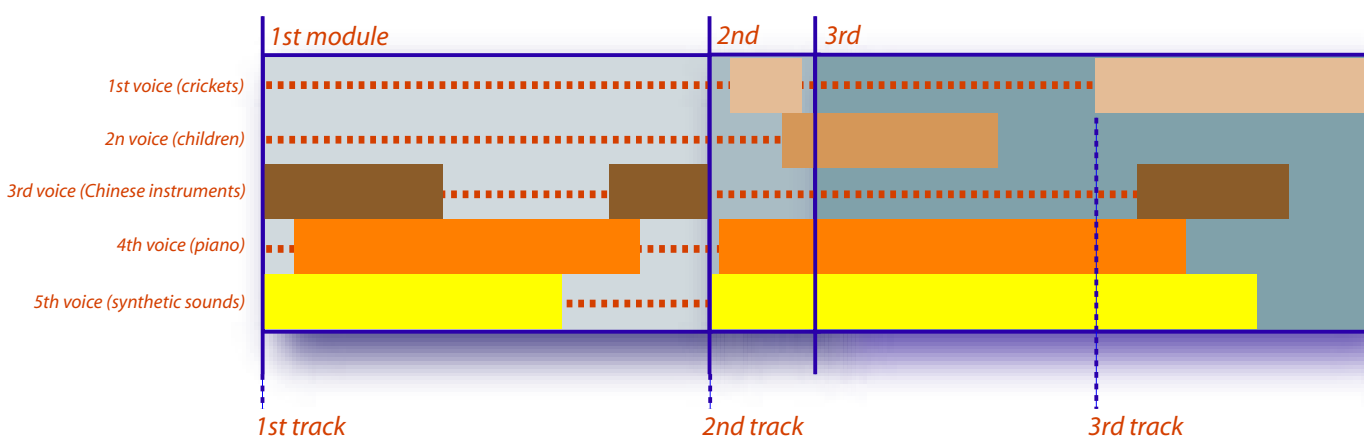
**Fifth**, try to **elaborate each "foto-suono"** discovering a clear target in your elaboration. The target

is double: 1) inside the sound and 2) outside it. It could be the result of a process that you decide and also it could be an external situation to which you address the goal of your elaborations. What is essential is that you think always to a goal and work hard to obtain it. At the same time you have to be flexible to discover new possible goals.

**Sixth** step, **combine together** your caught sounds. This is the last step, the *organization of the final sound* (the music!) which is the most sensible moment which requests – I believe – a very good study in “counterpoint”. Of course you can think to the counterpoint in several manners and not only in an old traditional scholastic manner. However it could be really useful for today’s sound designers to deep traditional questions on the historic counterpoint and vice versa it is indispensable for the “pure” musician to deep technics in recording and electronically elaborating sounds. At the beginning and for some time this last step is the most complex: the difficulty increases from step one to step six. But when you are streetwise with “foto-musica” you find that the progression becomes inverse. “Foto-musica” appears as a process from life to music, but finally it is a true walking from music to life. It is an invitation not to disconnect music and musicians, ears and human beings from the everyday life.

So the steps are: *open your ears* (1), *catch everyday sounds* (2 and 3), *confront them in your lab* (4), *elaborate each one* (5) and then *organize your “foto-musica”* for a final artistic and useful application (6).

### 3.



In *Jazz motetus VI (Cricket play)* – completed in 2003 for the pianist Paul Hoffmann – I opened my ears in Baltimore–Maryland where in a starry night I caught voices and songs of big American crickets: these are the basic texts of my piece, this is the fundamental idea. Then, when some time after I opened my ears in China too, I caught other sounds in Beijing, at the beginning without thinking to any combination with American crickets. But you know the life is strange... So the year after I discovered that American crickets sound perfectly with the voices of something like 1000 of Chinese children speaking together and also with the sounds

of some ancient Chinese instruments. Of course this is my opinion as well as these are my ears, hoping they have similar attitude to the ears of someone else. Anyway I started to elaborate each “foto-suono” putting it on my multitracking software (I use *Cakewalk Sonar* with a lot of plug-ins) and I proceeded to organize my counterpoint of three different types of “foto-suoni”: crickets, Chinese children and ancient opera instruments.

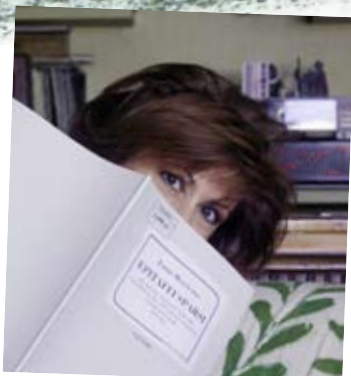
Simultaneously, as the piece had to be written for Paul, I was working on the piano part. I often think to my music through modules and stratified situations. We can say modules are vertical blocks with a particular duration (in this case the piece is divided in three principal sections), while the stratified situations are horizontal layers combined together, each one with a relative autonomy. The piano part is one of these layers, merged in three kinds of “foto-suoni” plus some synthetic sounds organized on the pitches of the piano part. So you have a five voices counterpoint with “foto-suoni” (first three voices), piano (fourth voice) and synthetic sounds (fifth).

Finally, why the title *Jazz motetus*? This is because of the original piano material, that works on the harmonies of Blues and decodes them remembering some processes of a cryptic medieval motetus. I like to call this my decoding “cripto-blues”. I worked in this sense since 1995 till 2005 for other six pieces titled *Jazz motetus*. They are for different organics and the sixth is the only one with “foto-suoni”.

#### 4.



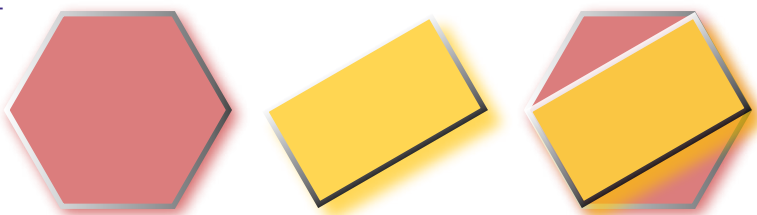
The idea of the “foto-musica con foto-suoni”<sup>®</sup> becomes even more extended in *Mina miniera mia* than in *Jazz motetus VI*. Translated in English the title could be *Mine my mine*, that is the music I wrote for the “sonorizzazione” (“environmental music”) of the Traversella Mines near Turin. Year of composition: 2004. While *Jazz motetus* combines elements which are originally heterogeneous also by the semantic point of view (crickets, children, ancient Chinese instruments, jazz harmonies and so on), in *Mina miniera mia* there are homogeneous semantic and acoustic materials.



The chief voice of Tiziana and the other ones of five ex-minors plus the local Bajolese Choir singing traditional songs (globally a counterpoint of eleven parts, same number of the sections of the whole piece) are here highly conditioning and require by the composer a new semantic attitude that “foto-musica” makes absolutely possible. In effect in *Mina miniera mia* I

had to open my ears, and especially my mind, to try to understand the life and the extraordinary humanity of the minors living in Traversella. This is an essential and not removable part of the music.

So, opened ears and mind, I went to catch several “foto-suoni” directly inside tunnels of humid mines in Traversella, inside workshops of miners, inside pasture lands where summertime minors used to change their life to shepherds. Confronting a big number of sounds, adding also some traditional songs and the wonderful recounts of eighty-year-old ex-minors, was really a long work. The Italian writer and musicologist Sandro Cappelletto collaborated with me and Tiziana in finding a text plot using same words and tales of the ex-minors that I interviewed plus two suggestive texts from local popular songs performed by the lyrical voice of Tiziana together with the Bajolese Choir. Singular experience, where belcanto and popular voices are mixed together with a composition technique which implicates two different levels of reading original melodies. The first technique is for the choir and its soloist; it reproduces quite faithfully the original melodic curves. The second technique is for the generous voice of Tiziana who touches just few notes of the original melody, realizing with it a “pseudo-counterpoint” where you have the acoustic illusion that the lyrical voice makes a completely new figure. But this is only partially true thanks to: 1) the different colour of the lyrical voice (like in *Klangfarbenmelodie*), 2) the limited points of hook that Tiziana’s voice has with the basic melody. It is analogous to a drawing where you delete some points to trace new lines of connection and so you obtain a new figure. The final drawing changes but something remains, that is what usually happens in our life and in our memory too.



## 5.

*Betty Boop's daytime* by the woman composer Ada Gentile from Rome, again with texts by Sandro Cappelletto, is the final touch to explicate you what the Italian vocal music can do today. The piece is dedicated to the Duo Alterno and was composed in 2006. The “foto-musica” tells about life and memories; this acting piece tells about a day of the life. It is on a famous cartoon, Betty Boop, along the teaching by Cathy’s strips. The result cannot be explained if you don’t listened to and view what happens in this funny daytime...

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