

## Riccardo Piacentini, *Museum spaces and “foto-suoni”*

The following pages sketch out a deliberately schematic map of the five creations of “foto-musica con foto-suoni”® [music-photos with sound-photos] for soundtracks for museums which I produced with Tiziana Scandaletti between 1999 and 2004, and in four out of five cases also with Sandro Cappelletto, on commissions from three institutes: The Italian Photography Foundation (twice), The Province of Turin (twice) and the Piedmont Region (once).

Each production of “foto-musica con foto-suoni”® referred to in the map corresponds to a CD, that was requested and adopted as a museum soundtrack. From the first part of the *Musiche dell'aurora* we have drawn a sixth CD, attached to the score of *Shahar* and published by Edizioni Curci in 1999; likewise from the *Arie condizionate*, again with Tiziana, we have drawn one of the sections of another CD, the seventh, published on the Stradivarius label with the title *La voce contemporanea in Italia – vol. I* (2005).

In all the 5 + 2 cases we have highlighted:

- a) the **applicative character** requested by the client and by the *target* of the particular exhibition or individual museum and
- b) the **relationship between space and sound** – the latter understood in its many and varied aspects, including that of the “foto-suono” (a sound photograph of an environmental context which, originally at least, does not necessarily pertain to the universe of music) and projected in the direction of *music* rather than of cinematographic special effects –, from which there follow
- c) a number of questions, or **pre-positions** in interrogative form.

### a) Applicative character

The thesis I intend to maintain concerning its applicative character is that music – especially the type of music that likes to be defined as “cultured and not only the specific instance of museum soundtracks and of “foto-musica con suoni”® – today has the very precise duty of recuperating the link it has lost with the social and cultural life that develops outside the concert hall and that was taken away with the advent of aesthetics (codified officially in 1750/58 with the publication in Frankfurt of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s archetypal text *Aesthetica*, though it is worth taking a look at the perspicacious remarks in the collection of essays by Ananda Coomaraswamy *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, translated with the title *Il grande brivido*, Milan 1987) only to be saved at the last minute in a Pontius Pilate manner, apparently swept aside by the ideals of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* but in reality quite alive and working in the positions of “art for art’s sake” and of “music for music’s sake”.

When we claim, or claimed, that music can be applied to nothing but itself, (and Stravinsky was among those who long pretended that this was so for him too, something which happily did not stop him writing such masterpieces of applied music as the *Sacre du printemps* or the *Histoire du soldat*) we deny music a role of profound, authentic social utility, restricting it to two types of situations: the *gossip* of the foyer before, after and during the rite of the concert and the familiar calm afforded by good record *compilations*. Thus music, reassured by the warmth of the home or of a slightly larger room, is prudently anaesthetised, losing meanings and sense so that it loses any further function, especially the function of being a “true” service which overcomes the *impasse* of aesthetic smugness. Applied music, in contrast, is “organic” music, organically thought out for a setting which is not programmed to be “tepid”. This is why in the map that follows we have highlighted, on the one hand, the clientele and the target and, on the other, the semiotic and, where possible, structural adhesion through analytical indications expressing the procedures of musical collation-parataxis-syntax linked to the specific content of the exhibition.

### b) Space-sound relationship

In many respects the space-sound relationship may be considered a variable of the applicative aspect, and the map, especially in the first page of each “sonorisation”, illustrates a synthetic “identity card” picking out not only the main applicative aspects but also referring to the position of the various spaces, to their architectural features, to their acoustic refraction qualities, to the density of the objects exhibited and to space-objects relationships, the type of acoustic diffusion chosen, etc.

In the 5 CDs that we examine the “foto-suoni” are carefully elaborated using multi-track software (more specifically with a number of channels ranging from 8 to 24 but, where necessary, perfectly extendible) with contrapuntal spirit and technique, and they are set out conventionally in stereo on two channels. Stereophony unquestionably limits the typical impact of technologies like quadraphony (penta-, esa-, hepta-...) or, as the latest cinema trends prefer, *dolby surround 5.1*, but it does also permit use on a larger scale, representing an accessible standard without any expensive set-ups and does, in any case, offer a recognised high listening quality (the 44.1 kHz of today’s CDs may in future become 96, just as the 16 bits of today’s sampling could be confirmed as 24... we will see). At the same time this

focuses attention less on the Hollywood-style special effects and more on the specimen bearing on the music, or if we prefer on the musical composition.

Sound, in the sense of the morpheme that is organisable but in reality not yet syntactically organised (as Varèse liked to define music), can easily be sold off to the “creative” who possess the technological means necessary for fairly complex operations of *cut&paste, mixing, editing, mastering*.

Nothing necessarily easy and taken for granted, of course, especially if the hand and the ear belong to a professional, but music, unlike sound, can never be sold off, and the most sophisticated of technologies (including the ability to master them) can never be enough to guarantee a good musical result. Technology should always be grafted organically onto a musical thought which, in turn, will derive very important input from the technology, thus forming a biunique correspondence in which, in the last analysis, the helm and the final decision belong to the music and not to the technology as such, however decisive and necessary it may be.

While the “creative” figure – be it the recordist who has risen to the status of sound designer, or the architect, the painter, the sculptor, the photographer, the multimedia and/or information-technology and/or lighting-technology expert, the performer himself (professional or amateur), the lawyer or accountant or refuse collector whose hobby is reproducing or even assembling sounds on his own computer at home – may in all cases and with differing results manipulate the universe of sound and feel that he is legitimately authorised to do so, music and composition in its syntactic sense (cum-positio apart from positioning “by ear”), whatever type and style they belong to, are not available to those who lack the cultural background and studies that only a musician, and particularly a composer, can have. It is not enough to have a “good ear”, just as to be a painter it is not enough to have a “good eye” nor, in technical terms, to have good brushes or simply a “good hand”. There is an illuminating study on the relationship between the terms “art” and “creativity” in the study carried out by Cor Blok in *Art and Creativity* (in *Kunst und Wissenschaft* [by Paul Feyerabend and Christian Thomas], Verlag der Fachvereine an den Schweizerischen Hochschulen und Techniken, Zurich, 1984 (tr. it. *Arte e Scienza*, Armando Editore, Roma, 1989) *Art and Creativity* (by Paul Feyerabend and Christian Thomas, Milan 1987), from which it emerges that this is a fairly recent partnership, proof of which has been found only in the second decade of the twentieth century.

The fact that the composer should ideally also have an “acoustic” and (in the opinion of many) a psycho-acoustic training, together with a solid background in technical-musical studies sustained by a thorough historical knowledge of how the various techniques were born and took root in their various social and cultural contexts, is a fact that should be taken as an integral part of the cultural DNA of all those who are engaged today in composition and not just in acoustic assembly. This much was stated over thirty years ago by Murray Schafer and demonstrated even before then by Pierre Schaefer and by the *musique concrète* of the Fifties or by leading composers working alongside the engineers of the first electro-acoustic musical works of the Fifties and Sixties (Stockhausen, Maderna, Berio, Boulez...).

### c) Pre-positions

I will conclude this introductory section with two groups of questions, which I will call (interrogative) pre-positions that are a consequence of the considerations expressed above.

First group: is **the model of cinematographic sound** (where any music becomes a “soundtrack”) really the one to follow wherever we seek to reproduce an acoustic *humus* deemed meaningful and interesting? Or again: is the acoustic virtuality of three-dimensional sound – *dolby surround* etc. – with its specific standards of equalisation really the only one deserving to emerge on a “global” scale without our taking into consideration the cultural and environmental peculiarities of each particular society? Should the technological race be run on the lines of a single, exclusive type of standardization and music necessarily go along with this?

Second group of pre-positions, connected to the first: will the dominant *fiction* of virtual sound not annihilate, sooner or later, other “sound landscapes” which still do belong to the “wealth” of our living experience and are seen to be no less important if not indeed vital? (cf. Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance*, The University of Chicago Press, 1999 [tr. it. *Conquista dell'abbondanza*, Milano, 2002]). More explicitly, in the age of the reproducibility of sound, but also of its declared falsification, where the copy can be both a clone and the emphasising *ad infinitum* of features of the original such that it may become a caricature that is in many ways more effective, will we still be able to distinguish a sound that is “true” from one that is not? And if this distinction is still not only sensible but also possible, what difference will there be between **original, clone and caricature**? Will the latter two be perceived as something different from the original or will our ears be destined to the most *global* of levellings? Will the acoustic universe have a boundary between the real and the virtual, or will one become the equivalent of the other? And who will determine this boundary? (cf. Douglas Hoffstadter and Daniel Dennet, *L'io della mente* [*The ego of the mind*], Milan 1991). Will confusing **art, artifice and manipulation**, playing at *fiction* without even having the spark of irony, swapping what is deformed for what is beautiful and true simply because someone with enough influence has done it and liked it, not serve to generate “dead caricatures” without contributing to a better plan of sound in space, *our* space, the space we live in daily and which, to some extent, lives in us?