

The Percussion Explorations of Giorgio Battistelli

Introduction

Although primarily known as a composer of experimental opera, Giorgio Battistelli has contributed greatly to the field of percussion. A student of Georges Aperghis, Battistelli's music often blends artistic styles/genres within a single composition often with a theatric element intertwined. Furthermore, Battistelli's works are often minimalistic with the composer providing minimal instruction on how each work is to be performed, specifically in regards to visual/theatrical aspects of each piece. This allows each performer to craft their own interpretations of each piece within the basic guidelines set forth by the composer.

Battistelli also worked with other European composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and was further influenced by the American experimental tradition, specifically through the artist Marcel Duchamp and the prolific composer John Cage. Their influence can be seen through such compositions as Battistelli's *Il Libro Celibe* (or "The Celibate Book," a book-like sound sculpture inspired by Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*) and his *Terminus I, II, and III* which have all been scored for prepared piano. Below, I will discuss three of Battistelli's works for percussion and his contributions to our field.

Uno e trino (1975)

Composed in 1975, *Uno e trino* (or "One and Three") is one of Battistelli's earliest compositions and the first for percussion instruments alone by the composer. In truth, the work appears almost as though it were a minimalistic version of Stockhausen's *Zyklus*, in that the performer is surrounded by the instruments which are to be performed: a marimba, vibraphone, and glockenspiel. What I find most interesting about this work, is the way in which the performer must move between these instruments, a process which becomes more and more complex as the piece progresses.

For example, the first main section of the work is calm and even paced, which allows the performer to flow seamlessly from one instrument to another. In fact, the most challenging issue within this section of the piece pertains to the need to switch mallets within moving, musical phrases. Not long after this section, the performer is then asked to use only their hands in order to execute rhythmically notated glissandi which visually emphasizes to twisting and turning required by Battistelli upon the performer.

Finally, in the last remaining portion of the work, Battistelli has written fast-paced, sixteenth-note passages between all three instruments. This is challenging for two reasons: (1)

the performer must twist and turn at a rapid pace causing muscle memory to become an important factor in regards to note accuracy and (2) the performer must use a mixed set of mallets for use on either the vibraphone/marimba or the glockenspiel. For my performance, I used two vibraphone mallets and two glockenspiel mallets which were then covered with moleskin.

Orazi e Curiazi (1996)

Of the works which I have performed by Battistelli, *Orazi e Curiazi* (or “Orazi and Curiazi”) is easily the most structured and the only piece which uses any predetermined bar lines. The work is scored for two percussionists with identical multi-percussion set-ups consisting of one bass drum, four tom-toms, two bongos, one wood block, one gong, and one suspended cymbal. In addition to these traditional percussion sounds, the performers are also asked to march upon gravel for the majority of the work, as well as perform vocalizations such as coughs, growls, and taunting laughs.

It should not go unmentioned that *Orazi e Curiazi* functions as a battle between the two performers. The crunching gravel beneath the performers’ feet, the haunting vocalizations, and thunderous percussion sounds all contribute to the overall chaos of *Orazi e Curiazi* and are ultimately resolved by the theatric death of one of the performers. Battistelli articulates this in the score; however, the overall demeanor and attitude of the performers is left at their own discretion for a majority of the work.

Experimentum Mundi (1981)

Experimentum Mundi, or “Experiment World,” is one of Battistelli’s earliest large scale compositions as well as one his most well known explorations in sound and theater. The piece is scored for a wide assortment of craftsmen (stone masons, bakers, cobblers, etc.), vocalists (which read text throughout the performance), one narrator, and one percussionist. In addition to *Experimentum Mundi*’s original score from 1981, Battistelli also reimagined the work to be used in conjunction with live electronics

For me, this is one of Battistelli’s most fascinating creations because the work uses only one traditional instrumentalist: a percussionist. Every other performer helps to create a vast cacophony of sounds which are carefully prescribed by Battistelli in the score. *Experimentum Mundi* also has a specific message in regards to the diminishing occupations which are highlighted in the work: Battistelli did not wish for these tradesmen to be forgotten. This sort of

social awareness by Battistelli seems to be somewhat of a recurring theme from the composer. In addition to *Experimentum Mundi*, Battistelli's most recent opera *CO2* centers on the ever-looming threat of global warming and was inspired by Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Closing Thoughts

In total, Battistelli composed around twenty works that utilize percussion in some way. His explorations for percussion as a means for solo expression have included *Uno a trino*, *Comme un opera fabuleux* (1979), *Anima* (1988), and *Trama* (2001). Several pieces have also been composed for more than two percussionists including *Ostinato* (1986), *Psychopompos* (1988), and *Heliopolis I* for percussion quartet (1992). Ultimately, his contributions to the percussion field have centered on percussion as both an aural and visual experience, a reflection of his willingness to blend artistic styles and mediums.

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