

The Tree of Forbidden Fruit

Beauty has descended, whimsical and light as a butterfly, upon the music of Fabio Vacchi, restoring perception to its legitimate reign over the physical world of sound. The works on this recording are uncommonly captivating, yet they never allow the sheer pleasure of listening to eclipse their rational, erudite origins in any way. It is not an easy matter to distinguish between poetics and aesthetics in Vacchi's music; indeed, the two are so closely intertwined that their constant metamorphosis might well be considered the most original feature of his compositional style. One is reminded of the words of John Keats: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". Vacchi finds the subjectivity in so much of contemporary art to be anathema, having senselessly torn our collective musical patrimony to shreds and erased all memory of tradition in order to become the center of a new rapport between society and the artist. Yet music, like every other form of human expression, possesses precise, well-defined procedures and structures. Independence and imagination allow the musician to create new avenues to travel from among the infinite possibilities that lie within the magic circle of organized sound. Both composer and audience proceed according to established rules that may not be broken by either one at will. Musical beauty proved to be the most endangered aesthetic consideration of the twentieth century. Gradually confined to the more tiresome areas of taste, the concept of "beauty" never seemed so weak and vulnerable as in the years following the Second World War, when it was made to endure the clever and vehement broadsides of radical rationalism launched by such figures as Boulez and Stockhausen. An aesthetic of perception nonetheless resisted complete annihilation and continued to circulate, like a pesky air bubble, through the metaphysical conduits created by avant-garde composers, seeking an escape, a right to exist in a culture that seemed to have definitively dismissed the idea of art as an experience of the senses. In those years new music in Europe was dominated by a variegated view of the contemporary world as a kind of artistic Inferno, one that dismissed sense-based experience to a vague version of Purgatory for trifling boors and provincial housewives. Vacchi's merit lies in having believed, even in the most trying of circumstances, that there was another road open to modern music, one where transit no longer seemed possible.

There is a delicate, utterly lyrical dynamism in Vacchi's music that attests his steadfast desire to seduce the listener, not for narcissistic gratification but almost as a matter of natural disposition. Such indisputably beautiful sound is a simple manifestation of being, like fragrance is for a flower. Baudrillard wrote that seduction is possible when reality is abandoned for the world of illusion. Like a transmuted Dulcinea, perhaps Vacchi's music also belongs to "imaginary places" where Don Quixote sometimes really does vanquish the windmills and other foes conjured by his chivalrous spirit. Vacchi's point of departure is always a poetic gesture that reveals a refracted view of inner existence, of emotional experience. The essence of his musical expression lies in a wistful yearning for an ever-elusive elsewhere, like the maternal comfort of a childhood memory. Though himself the offspring of an avant-garde largely concerned with

establishing principles and procedures, Vacchi does not seek to trample the convictions of others but rather to share the wonders of musical sound and the spellbinding charm of the human voice with the listener. His imagination deftly filters instrumental timbres into mysterious and original combinations, while the polyphonic vocal texture gains greater transparency and strength from the color of the sound. Music becomes a precious element that he painstakingly frees of all contaminating residue so that it may be restored to its true vocation. He probes every sound for its emotional impulse and pursues the consequent poetic gesture to its extreme formal limit. Time itself is transformed as it passes through his prism of sound. Often the music seems to vanish into silence rather than come to an end. One senses the composer's fervent desire to detain the music with sentient tenderness as it disappears, not to flail against silence and Nothingness in mindless desperation. The pace of time in his musical imagination, unlike the anguished tread of History, is consonant with the very pulse of life itself.

Vacchi has never been content to feast on the forms of the past, nor to navigate the non-Euclidian dimensions of new music technology like a cybernetic Argonaut. One could well call him – with no malice intended – an old-fashioned composer. The training he received at the famous Experimentalstudio in Freiburg, which was recommended to him by Luigi Nono, proved to be more useful for learning traditional orchestration than for becoming familiar with the latest electronic devices, as the composer himself admits. Thence the difference of his approach, born of the desire to express a modern poetics of music in his own language rather than to follow the ephemeral trends of others.

This flourishing musicality must not, however, be misunderstood. Vacchi does not pretend to be a naive artist, a musician who focuses on talent alone without requiring any cultural arbitration from the listener, much less does he pander to the masses with a facilitated harmonic vocabulary. Rather, he aspires to technical perfection in his writing, employing refined compositional strategies; and he expects his audience to possess intelligence and good taste, disposed to gather the forbidden fruit of the tree of musical knowledge and to savor the seduction that beckons to them in his music. The forthright effect of his work is not a shield for artistic and social indifference, but rather a concordant aesthetic objective achieved with great effort and study.

Luoghi immaginari is a cycle of instrumental chamber music written between 1987 and 1992. The ensembles vary from piece to piece, ranging in order from Quintetto to Ottetto, Trio, Settimino, and Quartetto. These five fragments together form a kind of geography of the soul, each one inspired by ethnic elements and influences. Whether the Oriental pentatonic modality of the Ottetto, the frenetic Balcanic rhythms of the Quartet, or the melancholy blues of the splendid Trio, all seem as many memories of voyages perhaps taken, perhaps only imagined. The folk component naturally dissolves into the music, which hardly contrives to be perceived as a travelogue. Rather, it is an original way for a sensitive contemporary artist to interpret the global nature of the world in which we live, more accessible in the horizontal and open dimension of Geography than in the vertical and closed one of History. This imaginary map is veined

with unpredictable paths of sound, where crystalline cello harmonics intersect with silver flute glissandos, or the nasal bassoon, like a Mississippi cotton farmer playing the Bo Weevil Blues on a harmonica, converses with the delicate percussion of the piano. Each piece seems to awaken gradually as if from an ancient slumber. Occasionally some bold image will emerge abruptly: in the Quintetto, for example, where the violin, its upper strings lowered a major sixth, suddenly appears like a shaman amidst the metrically refined, subtle rhythmic progression of the flute, clarinet, cello, and harp; or in the Quartetto, where the dionysian zest of the strident-sounding clarinet in E-flat seems to urge the listener dancing to his feet. These are motionless images, shards of memory that appear and disappear in the mist; their re-collection is a reunion of fragments scattered through time. *Luoghi immaginari* also served as the testing ground for other works, particularly Vacchi's second opera *Il viaggio* (libretto by Tonino Guerro), which was performed at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna in 1990.

This same idea of an interior quest animates the *Wanderer-Oktett*, composed in 1997 and dedicated to Hans Werner Henze. Both the title and the instrumentation (clarinet, bassoon, French horn, and string quintet) are an explicit reference to Schubert, the bicentennial of whose birth the European Soloists Chamber Orchestra proposed to celebrate with this commission. But naturally there is a much stronger nexus between Vacchi's music and the vibrant colors of Schubert's spiritual landscapes, perhaps the first to so completely capture the sense of human angst for an irrevocably distant Other. The *Wanderer's* ardent beginning ("da nulla", "from nothingness", as the instruction in the music reads) arises from an impalpable substance in an all but immobile world. The fundamental harmonic field used to generate the entire organism consists of two open fifths (E-flat - B-flat/G - D) in the cello and double bass, with the addition of an F-sharp in the viola and an A in the French horn. Such rarefied material nonetheless sets the trajectory for a perfectly logical formal procedure that develops over the span of a single arch. The flux of the music pulses onward slowly at first but its current gradually grows stronger as the expression becomes more intense, until it culminates in a densely contrapuntal episode during which the strings finally remove their mutes and play at full volume. The arch then seems to fold back upon itself, returning to the material of the beginning in a brief coda. This conclusion, however, has actually transformed the original material into something different, something that may allow for a new beginning, now brighter and more receptive to hope.

Oreste Bossini

(english translation by *Anna Herklotz*)