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Notes for a reappraisal of the role of a cappella choir composition

The International “Guido d’Arezzo” Composition Competition reaches its 47th edition this year. Instituted some twenty years after the International Polyphonic Competition «as an enhancing, interactive corollary to it»,¹ for nearly half a century it has played a key role as a catalyzer of creative energies in choir composition:

Its importance stems from its function as a stimulus to today’s composers for the enrichment and qualitative enhancement of choral repertoires in contemporary music. Thus, as of today, the Foundation has received more than two thousand works by composers from all over the world.²

The jury of the competition has included composers of international renown, whose different backgrounds, approaches, and aesthetic choices have always ensured great diversity in the works selected, which however have all been characterized by excellent compositional craftsmanship and performability. The presence on the Italian territory of a project of international excellence like this has effectively provided a countertendency to abstractly avant-garde as much as simplistically traditionalist drifts. Nearly fifty years after the launch of the Competition, as research music struggles to get its bearings and the figure of the composer is going through a crisis, perhaps the time has come to reflect more carefully on the last decades in the history of choral composition, on successful experiences (where even failed ones have much to teach us), on their sustainability and future goals.

The purpose of this contribution is not to go over the stages in the

¹ See the website of Fondazione Guido d’Arezzo, *Breve storia del Concorso Polifonico di Claudio Santori* (English version: <<https://www.polifonico.org/en/international-polyphonic-competition-guido-darezzo>> [accessed May 21, 2020]). The Concorso Polifonico Internazionale Guido d’Arezzo was instituted in 1953, the Concorso Internazionale di Composizione in 1974.

² These are the intentions declared on the website of Fondazione Guido d’Arezzo (*ibidem*).

history of the Competition, nor to analyze and classify the types of approaches of the composers who have been awarded the prize or mention, much less to compare this initiative to other similar projects in Europe and in the world. My intention here is to simply spark off a debate on the problem of contemporary choral composition by suggesting a series of reflections with no claim to absolute validity but, on the contrary, with a deliberately “provocative” function that can encourage a musical, more than musicological, experiential more than theoretical, systematic more than historiography-based comparison. The reflections that follow set themselves the ambitious goal of getting out there, on the pages of this review, those who have always addressed the issue of composing for choir. They are addressed to them, to be shared, perhaps disproved, but possibly not ignored, or politely placed in the catalogue of personal opinions.

If we accepted the premise – as popular as it is false – that the free use of the chromatic total is against nature,³ then we would necessarily have to conclude that the essentially diatonic / tonal / modal approach of most a cappella choral music composed and performed daily in the last seventy years is an irrefutable proof of this: total-chromatic systems would not stand the test of the most natural of instruments, the human non-operatic voice. At the same time, following Schönberg’s example in invoking a natural legitimation for the chromatic total⁴ would lead to an obvious contradiction at the very moment of its application to choral composition: most of the choir production of Schönberg, of his pupils, and of the “pupils of his pupils” (and in general of all composers who, until today, have declined in the most varied ways the twelve-tone-serial horizon and the countless, rigorous systems for organizing the chromatic total deriving from it) presupposes a fundamentally instrumental, hence artificial, use of the voice.

Regardless of the disputability of a natural foundation of the choir, whose immense repertoire bears traces of social, ritual, organizational, even political practices (throughout the centuries, the complex techniques of polyphony have also been an instrument in the establishment of a cultured,

³ This is the thesis that underlies the highly controversial book by ANDREA FROVA, *Armonia celeste e dodecafonìa. Musica e scienza attraverso i secoli*, Milan, BUR, 2006.

⁴ See the famous passage from Schönberg’s *Harmonielehre* on the erroneous antithesis between consonance and dissonance: «[...] the expressions “consonance” and “dissonance”, which signify an antithesis, are false. It all simply depends on the growing ability of the analyzing ear to familiarize itself with what is euphonious, suitable for art, so that it embraces the whole natural phenomenon». (ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG, *Harmonielehre*, Leipzig-Vienna, Universal Edition, 1911; I am quoting the English translation by Roy Carter, *Theory of Harmony*, Los Angeles, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 21).

socially accepted elite, as opposed to the category of the popular), as well as adaptations to technical solutions that have nothing natural about them (just think of equal temperament), the unshakable faith of Johann Sebastian Bach in music, understood as artifice on the one hand, and as a technical and devotional exercise on the other, would be enough to convince oneself not to call upon nature in such disquisitions.

That is not the point: the only real instrument for verifying the internalisation of sound is singing. If, therefore, the success of modal / tonal systems can be measured with the shared ability to vocally reproduce strongly dissonant configurations within those reference patterns, the failure of total-chromatic systems would be their resistance to moving away from the original instrumental matrix, and permeating and determining a collective harmonic sensibility.

The instrumental medium always constitutes, to a greater (keyboard instruments) or lesser (brasses et al.) extent, an external support that reduces the awareness of the sound phenomenon in its totality, enabling a sort of tactile and/or visual measurability of it: motor schemes and visual maps partly replace auditory control. Where this support is assigned a pre-eminent role (as in the music that freely exploits the chromatic total), the inner ear tends, as a reaction to complexity, to surrender its powers of discernment, as it can better apply them to generic (register, dynamics, density, etc.) than specific (pitch, intervals, harmony) qualities. Conversely, where sound production cannot make use of this support (as in polyphonic a cappella singing), it will be necessary to resort to other aids in order to solve the problems posed by the total chromatic horizon, be they external (diapason, earpieces), internal (absolute ear), or acquired through learning and targeted practice (intensive, specific training of the relative ear and its analytical functions). The only really conscious support is the relative ear coupled with an effective system of guides, although the latter should be for the most part inherent in the structure of the composition itself; a well-equipped choir conductor will be able to make its network transparent. For this reason it is essential that the choir conductor, even more than the orchestra conductor, has an impeccable technical-compositional background. If the guide system is not inherent in the structure of the composition, all efforts will be in vain: each choralist will have to be a professional singer – and possibly have the absolute ear (or a “prosthetic replacement” of it) –, capable of singing pitches outside any frame of reference, just like a musical instrument that will fulfil its task the more it will be able not to be ‘distracted’ by the others. Yet to sing without listening to one another is the denial of the very notion of choir.

After this premise, it would seem possible to conclude that a compositional practice that is permeable to the most advanced technical developments of the last seventy years is not applicable to the choir in the traditional sense; in fact, it is not so. If by “traditional choir” we mean a vocal ensemble organized in several polyvocal sections, then historically we can find that in the second half of the 20th century this had some incompatibility with the most advanced musical languages. Indeed, starting from the 1960s, there is a prevalence of two different, perhaps even diametrically opposed, tendencies: on the one hand the solo vocal ensemble (sometimes amplified), on the other the choir with polyvocal sections supported by instruments, with all possible intermediate solutions. The first solution relies on professional singers and oscillates between a neo-madrigalistic conception (Stockhausen, *Stimmung*, 1968; Berio, *Cries of London*, 2nd version 1976; Ligeti, *Nonsense Madrigals*, 1988-1993) and the idea of an “instrument-voices” ensemble (Kagel, *Ensemble*, 1971),⁵ with possible mixed solutions (Nono, “*Ha venido*”. *Canciones para Silvia*, 1960, for solo soprano and choir of six sopranos). The second solution basically retains the features of a traditional choir, enhancing it with external supports (instruments) that clarify the system of guides, while at the same time contributing to the overall texture (a list of examples would be so long as to appear unnecessary); most of the times this allows to dilute the chromatic coefficient of the choir, concentrating it in the instrumental parts.

Without detracting from many choral masterpieces of the second half of the 20th century, ranging from Stockhausen’s astonishing interactions between choir and electronics to Pärt’s neo-modalism, from the use of the phonetic, rhythmic, timbric qualities of speech and of “vocal gestures” (as in Berio’s *A-Ronne*, 1974)⁶ to the emphasis placed on consonantal and bodily sounds that can be obtained through the phonatory organs (for instance in *Psalm* by Heinz Holliger, 1971), some emblematic cases can be identified in which the idiomatic features of the choir have been developed but not distorted (here I will only consider works consecrated by history, whose legacy has largely crossed the threshold of the third millennium, and still today constitute an essential reference point). In the category of the interactions between choir and orchestra, Berio’s *Coro* (1976) is undoubtedly a unicum. This is not the place to investigate the

⁵ The ensemble includes sixteen differentiated operatic vocal types.

⁶ The first version of *A-Ronne* (1974) was a radio documentary for five actors; in 1975 Berio developed it into a second version for vocal octet.

complex aesthetic and anthropological implications of this extraordinary composition; it will be enough to recall the stratagem of associating each individual instrument to a single chorister, thus obtaining one enormous choir of voices and instruments – inseparable from a timbric point of view, also thanks to a particular layout of sound sources – and at the same time an effective network of intonation guides. In the field of vocal ensemble music, *Drei Phantasien* for mixed sixteen-voice a cappella choir by György Ligeti (1983) deserve special attention. In them the writings for soloist ensembles and for choirs reach an admirable balance, constantly dissolving into each other or experimenting with ingenious heterophonic solutions: every single combination and transition is systematically explored between the extreme possibilities of sixteen real parts (hence with all the voices separate) and four real parts (SATB with four voices in unison for each section) – a few years later, similar features will also be developed in Castiglioni's *Hymne*, from 1989, albeit with a more marked lyrical connotation. As was already the case in *Lux aeterna*, in *Drei Phantasien*, too, the branching technique is used, although with a noticeable purpose of going beyond the cluster dimension – exerting on it all possible mastery of timbre – in order to obtain, again through canons and micro-polyphonies, a wider and more structured harmonic space. This intention is even more systematically pursued in the three *Magyar Etüdök* (for sixteen voices divided into two mixed choirs), also through the pseudo-modal / folkloric, at times Bartókian, quality evoked by the Hungarian texts: here the cluster-based approach is one of many possible textures – a suggestion that is still valid today for those who do not want to academically reiterate solutions that were already obsolete in the 1980s.

A whole chapter of contemporary music for choir should be devoted to rhythmic-metric difficulties, not so much to polymetries – which were already widely explored in the first half of the 20th century – nor to the random timbral-material textures obtained through the rhythmic autonomy of the parts, but rather to forms of extreme discontinuity: like the discontinuity in pitches and register, rhythmic discontinuity is among the most disadvantageous features for the “choir instrument”. In other words, we could say that, for a choir, the languages of discontinuity, primarily those derived from serial thinking, are absolutely the most anti-idiomatic.

In short, the whole issue could perhaps be addressed in terms of a dialectical relationship between two different, but complementary, compositional attitudes: one interprets the available sound means in

an idiomatic way, the other in an atypical way.⁷ The former views the instrument (in this case the choir) as the result of a historical process, as a set of characterizations determined by its repertoire; conversely, the latter investigates its potential by completely annihilating its history. While it is virtually possible, albeit with enormous efforts, to compose instrumental music that is almost completely atypical (see, for example, certain integral serial works), this is impossible for a choir, because it would be tantamount to denying the very history of humanity, not only in its physiological, but also in its social dimension. A predominantly atypical approach (one that is oblivious to idioms and historical behaviours) is the chief enemy of the choir. Yet the same is true of an exclusively idiomatic approach: one could go so far as to say that idiomaticity is a sort of “false friend” of contemporary choral composition.

The 20th-century repertoire for certain instruments is particularly affected by a preponderance of the idiomatic factor: take the guitar or organ, for instance. In the 20th century (especially in the second half) the composer-guitarist / organist unintentionally slowed down the development of the repertoire for their own instrument. The pursuit of a “well-written” composition (or rather “obsequious to the history of the instrument, its morphology and repertoire”) led to a form of inhibition of those levels of sound imagination that only an atypical approach can attain. In fact, all the gestures that have determined the current form of instruments originated as atypical gestures (as acts of phenomenological reduction). Supine respect of the instrument is a self-denying, regressive form of composition, which shelters behind what was legitimized as technically and aesthetically admissible first by Neoclassicism, then by Postmodernism, without however grasping its deeper implications in terms of its dialectical relationship with history and the avant-garde. The reactionary trends of the 2000s resulted in a further, blatant error of perspective: on the one hand, the unconditional and spasmodic search for consensus, characteristic of the last twenty years and conveyed by social media, has legitimized an indiscriminate plundering of the catalogue of gestures that have already been experimented with, in the

⁷ With an effective expression, Thomas Gartmann described the instrumental research that characterizes Berio’s *Sequenze* – specifically, number *XIII* for accordion – as «both idiomatic and atypical». Here I am referring to this particular meaning of the terms (see THOMAS GARTMANN, *...and so a chord consoles us: Berio’s “Sequenza XIII (Chanson)” for Accordion*, in *Berio’s “Sequenzas”. Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis*, edited by Janet K. Halfyard, introduction by David Osmond-Smith, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, pp. 275-290: 275).

naive (or opportunistic) belief that their proven effectiveness is a guarantee of success regardless of context (avant-garde academicism); on the other hand, a belief in “good craftsmanship”, combined with a rampant taste for revival, also characteristic of our times, has given rise to the belief that, if you stand firmly on your own position, sooner or later you will become fashionable again. In short, these days you can be so behind your time as to seem ahead of it. Or you want to make people think that you are so ahead of your time as to seem behind it. In fact, these are two sides of the same coin.

In choral music, avant-garde academicism – i.e. the reproduction and reduction to stereotypes of once avant-garde compositional styles – has lost its appeal due to the substantial impracticability of certain technical solutions, except by ensembles of solo and/or professional voices. As a result, concerts with a prevalence of repertoire music and the inclusion of one or more pieces of contemporary music only rarely make their way into a cappella choir programs. It follows that, in the current choral practice, what is the main chance of survival of the music of our time for this kind of ensemble is missing. An exception to this are compositions that have a predominantly idiomatic character, which therefore employ the choir as one might use a fortepiano or harpsichord, a baroque flute, a lute, etc. but without exploring their possibilities in light of what is possible today, limiting themselves to the past history of the instruments. Thus the choir, in its traditional meaning, also brings with it – as a parasite apparatus – the harmonic and melodic languages of the past, as in an eternal present, in the reassuring certainty that even a broken clock is right twice a day. If once the Neoclassical or Postmodern identity was a brave choice, today the road is paved: the green light for the suspension of history is also given to those who have never “dirtied their hands” with research music.

If they make no claim to universality and naturalness, the neo-modal / tonal languages can be one possibility among others; if, instead, they are understood as a claimed restoration of a state of nature or musical legality, they fulfil the sole function of adapting to a musical regime of “low environmental impact”, which has become established outside the high composition circles, in daily musical practice: few rehearsals, little expense, little discomfort for the audience. If the primary goal of new music today is to go unnoticed, then an idiomatic, “ecological”, uncritically tonal composition is what comes closest to a subdued “sorry for existing”.

The unquestionable preponderance in Italy of amateur choral practice, compared to countries where choral professionalism is practiced almost as much as in the orchestral field, is not reason enough to entrench oneself behind an absolutely uncritical tonalist attitude; even in the amateur sphere,

the good practice of a sort of composer in residence, with all necessary adaptations (voluntary, non-exclusive, informal collaboration, etc.) could facilitate dialogue between the overly atypical attitudes of experimental compositional practice and the excessively idiomatic tendencies of current performance practice, so that they would benefit each other in moving towards a 'third place' centered on our present time.⁸ On the contrary, what is detrimental to this process is the "competition score", which displays all those (mostly graphic) connotations that make it recognizable as "contemporary" – hence the minimum margin of error in attributing it to a specific school – and therefore, in order to have a chance of survival, even outside stereotyped specialism, requires at least a simplified version (sometimes even this is not enough). In particular, the systematic division of sections, which in the orchestral sphere – especially in the string section – was radically exasperated, provided an important constructive resource for the composers of the first three Post-War decades. Today this pulverization of the texture, having exhausted its structural and expressive benefits, has been replaced by its own debris in the contemporary koinè; it is a sign of creative impotence in the field of harmony, the hallmark of an academic avant-garde that has given up on the selective and expressive power of the vertical parameter, neutralizing it into some indistinct magma.

For a recovery of the expressive value of harmony, the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s were a major watershed (also significant was the turn in Ligeti's production marked by his Trio for violin, horn and piano and his Piano studies). It is no coincidence that those very years saw the creation of some choral masterpieces that are both a paradigm and a testing ground of this new trend, quite distinct from neo-tonalism / modalism: besides the already mentioned *Drei Phantasien* and *Magyar Etüdök* by Ligeti, two compositions by György Kurtág embody in an even clearer, more explicit way this new idea of modernity: *Omaggio a Luigi Nono* op. 16 (1979) and especially *Eight Choruses to poems of Dezső Tandori* op. 23 (1981-82; revision 1984), which were significantly conceived for a «mixed choir». In these compositions, the relationship of continuity with the classical-romantic repertoire, no longer

⁸ The creation of this 'third place' was also helped in recent years by the Concorso Nazionale di Composizione "Canta Petrarca", instituted by Fondazione Guido d'Arezzo, which reached its fifth edition this year. The Competition promotes the composition of pieces for a cappella choir on texts drawn from Petrarch's "Canzoniere", with the aim of encouraging the creation of «a new repertoire for international amateur choral practice». The fact, however, that the Competition is «addressed to authors of Italian nationality, or Italian residents» apparently contrasts with the international mission it sets itself.

intended as a postmodern recovery of the past, but as the permanence of poetic and expressive values that are also valid for contemporary musical creation, allows for a perfect balance between idiomatic and atypical factors. While in the past forty years the principle of layering, understood as an elusive strategy, has been one of the specific connotations of a certain “academic mannerist avant-garde” attitude, the skilful mastery of polyphony in these compositions marks a vast distance both from harmony as the vertical result of abstract systems of organization of pitches, and from the building of clusters as a timbric-material field of research. At the same time, this recovery of the expressive values of harmony never indulges in allusive stereotypes of the past, but rather dilutes the chromatic density to the point of opening “quasi-diatonic” fields without a tonal/modal functionality.

There is no doubt that in the last twenty years the composition of research music for a cappella choir has been marginalized, perhaps also due to excessive confidence in the saving effects of technology on the fate of musical creation. This might be the reason why the current proliferation of fake choirs (overdubbed or in playback), where the choristers are neatly arranged on a squared computer screen (i.e. tens, hundreds or maybe thousands of kilometres apart) almost never arouses any sense of alienation; this was already happening well before the health emergency we are experiencing now. Precisely for this reason, today it is essential to rethink choral practices – in the age of their impossibility – as a potential opposition to musical trends that are increasingly enslaved to the machine. In particular, composing for choir today is an ethical commitment against musical technocracy, and a claim to purely human values: putting the human being back at the center of the process of musical communication is probably the task of the music of our time, in the perspective – utopian, perhaps – of a forthcoming Neo-Humanism.

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Abstract

This contribution is an invitation to discuss the theme of contemporary choral composition. In recent decades the author has noticed a remarkable loss of interest in applying the languages of complexity to the choir, in particular the a cappella choir. Simplified languages have developed instead, which take the idiomatic aspects of the choir as insurmountable limits. Against this background, neo-tonal and neo-modal solutions have found fertile ground and, instead of offering themselves as a palette of possible solutions, have claimed to represent the “new” thing that would replace the avant-garde. Therefore, the territory between these two options has remained largely unfathomed: in short, what has been lacking is a process of assimilation of complexity that would make innovations mainly intended for instruments available to voices as well. In the last three decades this has led to a divergence between an atypical-instrumental treatment of voices (with a prevalence of solo ensembles) and an idiomatic-choral attitude (dominated by the history, repertoire and writings for choir of the past). The author hopes for a new experimental phase, a search for possible solutions to develop models that can adequately balance the two approaches.

Keywords

Choir, voices, composition, contemporary, complexity

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