

Religious Sentiments of a Non-Believer

I was born into a family of socialists and non-believers. My mother was Jewish. As for myself, from the time I acquired the faculty of reasoning, I

always considered myself as fundamentally a-religious. But at the German School, which I attended in Rome, I chose to take part in Catholic instruction (while my sister chose Protestant instruction) and I remember how I tried to prove to our Father Wolf that, despite my not having been baptized (and was thus a “pagan”), I was nonetheless “good.”

My name is Luca, my sister's name is Giovanna, another brother's name is Marco—and they are, by a curious coincidence, the names of three of the four Evangelists. A last child was born, who was however named Andrea, while the name Matteo went to one of our beloved dogs.

My a-religiosity was corroborated by early literary, ideological and political choices: I read the Communist Manifesto, I was smitten with Bertolt Brecht, and as a fourteen-year old I took part in the 1960 demonstrations against the Tambroni government. Later, as a student in Germany, I enrolled in the Cologne section of the German Communist Party, graduated with a thesis on the communist composer Hanns Eisler and I tried to write politically engaged music in the socialist sense.

In the meantime, however—and let's go back to the mid-1960s—I had followed a beloved teacher of mine, Armando Renzi, from the Saint Cecilia Conservatory to the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, where, in order to be accepted I would have to produce a certificate of baptism. Pagans like me could not be admitted. Here my mother's Jewish background became useful: We were by now in the ecumenical period, and so, having declared myself Jewish, I was magnanimously welcomed into an assemblage made up of only Catholics, where furthermore most of the students were either priests or aspirants to the priesthood. I remember Joaquim Santos, a Portuguese priest, who, when an audience in the Auditorium of the Via della Conciliazione greeted with whistles and boos a composition of Luigi Nono and then provokingly burst into clamorous applause at the beginning of Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony got up and left the hall in protest, urging me to do the same.

In the year I spent at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, I wrote two compositions, a Madrigale on a text of Tommaso Campanella and Invocazione e ditirambo for two pianos, eight hands. As regards the Madrigale, it certainly was not by chance that, probably influenced by the locality, I chose not simply the poetry of a holy man, but that of an uneasy holy man, as he had been the author of the Apologia pro Galileo. As regards the piece for four pianists, it too had—I can't say how consciously—something to do with the place in which and for which it was written: The title is “religious,” even if not connected to the Christian religion, since the dithyramb was originally a poetic form dedicated to the god Dionysus. This

orgiastic dance was performed with great success in the presence of a Cardinal, whose hand I shook vigorously instead of kissing it, probably causing a bit of a surprise.

Years went by, I lived through experiences and as much as possible “metabolized” them, and, while not a believer, I realized that I believed in another church, in some way an opposite one, a mirror image, which still promised Paradise, but, more recklessly, promised it here and almost now. And after all, the eschatological perspective is intrinsic to our Judeo-Christian civilization, with which even Marx not could help (whether or not he wanted it or was aware of it) being imbued. So in 1986, having become once more “a lay person” with respect to the same lay positions by which I had theretofore identified myself, I wrote that “he who does not have a grasp on the crutches that beliefs of all kinds provide him—be they religious or secular—cannot help but experience some dizziness.”¹⁸⁸

And yet, if, on the one hand, I tried to live with this feeling of dizziness while surrounded with universal absurdity, on the other hand, there were growing within me joy and gratitude—if not continuous, at least intermittent, like alternating current, so to speak—for the meaningless beauties of nature—of plants, of animals, and even humans, who are so terrible, but also wonderful; and there grew in me the consciousness that everything, on this earth and in the entire universe, is intimately connected. We are all—living or not, animate or inanimate—made from the same substance. What might be the dream-substance of that God whom men contemplate (alas, in their own image)?

This awareness of universal interconnection became very strong for me. I like to think that the term religion comes from “re-ligare,” to link together, and that this union has to do not only with the ties of mankind under the same laws and under the same creed, but indeed with the intrinsic connection among things originating from the same substance. Not only a few oriental philosophies and religions (like Buddhism, for example), or mystical experience (that is, the direct experience, not intellectual, of reality), but modern physics itself confirms the fundamental oneness of the universe. “It becomes obvious at the atomic level and manifests itself all the more clearly the more one penetrates into the depth of matter, into the world of subatomic particles.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ L. Lombardi, „Tra preistoria e postmoderno,” in *Molteplicità di poetiche e linguaggi nella musica d'oggi*, ed. Daniela Tortora (Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 1988), 27.

¹⁸⁹ Fritjof Capra, *Il Tao della Fisica* (Milano: Adelphi, 1987), 149.

In 1998 I wrote a composition,¹⁹⁰ that sets to music a few fragments from Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (in a new Italian translation prepared for me by Edoardo Sanguinetti) expressing this, if I might say so, divine materialism.

But it is a composition written the year after that I wish to discuss: *Vanitas?*, for soprano, contralto, tenor, bass and orchestra. At first its title had no question mark and I didn't intend to use any text other than a fragment from Ecclesiastes.

1. (*Ecclesiastes I, 2-7, 9*)

Vanitas vanitatum, dixit Ecclesiastes;
Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas.

Quid habet amplius homo
De universo labore suo quo laborat sub sole?

Generatio praeterit, et generatio advenit;
Terra autem in aeternum stat.

Oritur sol et occidit,
et ad locum suum revertitur;
ibique renascens.

Gyrat per meridiem, et flectitur ad aquilonem.
Lustrans universa in circuitu pergit spiritus,
et in circulos suos revertitur.

Omnia flumina intrant in mare,
et mare non redundat;
ad locum unde exeunt flumina
revertuntur ut iterum fluant.

Quid est quod fuit? Ipsum quod futurum est.
Nihil sub sole novum.

(Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. – What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? – A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. – The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. – The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind

¹⁹⁰ *Lucrezio. Un oratorio materialistico, per voce recitante, soprano, flauto e orchestra* (Milano: BMG Ricordi, 1998).

returns. – All streams run into the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. – What has been is what will be, there is nothing new under the sun. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger [New York: Oxford University Press, 1977], 805.)

However, as I progressed with the composition, I became less and less convinced that I should trust in the radical pessimism of that text, which, in the Bible—but not for me—is redeemed by the hope in religious transcendence. Nothingness is a fact we must consider stripped of illusions. We can, however, counter—even if only partially—nothingness and absurdity with the substance and significance of our short individual lives and with the short history of the human species. The moment (and life and human history are nothing more than that) is not in itself devoid of meaning. Nothingness, suffering, the uselessness (“vanitas”) of human activity, the relentless and blind violence of nature (of which we are a part)—all of this constitutes an ethical challenge to Man: if he is capable of looking fearlessly and with philosophical calm into the depths of things (or into the abyss hidden behind things), he can from this bring about a new justification for that which—in spite of everything—makes life worthy of being lived. Thus, besides the question mark added to the title, I included with the fragment from Ecclesiastes (which is sung and spoken for the most part in Latin, but also in Hebrew, German and Italian), three more short texts: the little joke about a rabbi, two fragments from two different poems of Horace, and a brief text of my own.

2. (Anonymous)

Said a rabbi old and wise: We come from dust and to dust we return. But in the meantime we can drink a few good glasses of wine.

3. (Horace: *Carminum Lib. IV, VII, 16* and *Carminum Lib. XI, 8*)

Said the poet Horace, he too, intelligent and wise:

Pulvis sumus et umbra — carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

(We are dust and shadow—use the day and do not be concerned what might come.)

4. (Lombardi)

Terrible and wonderful is Mankind. Terrible and wonderful is Life. Terrible it is if we do not appreciate and increase this wonder—as long as we live.

Of course, with the little joke of the rabbi and then with Horace, the musical atmosphere changes—in a sort of earthly way—being given over to a sort of waltz, which since my tenth birthday when I devised my first composition (in fact a Waltz) has become a kind of archetype accompanying me through my entire life. Something similar transpires with a scale (minor second - major second – minor second – minor third, then again: minor second – major second – minor third) which constitutes the principal musical material of the whole composition. Likewise this scale is a kind of archetype for me: Among the very first tunes that I thrummed out by ear at the piano were some Neapolitan songs, which use this oriental-sounding intonation typical of this part of the Mediterranean. My parents both came from Naples, and my father, who was not a musician, but a philosopher, was very proud of a few of his Neapolitan songs that he had composed on verses of Salvatore Di Giacomo. For me it was evidently a point of departure that, even if I progressively moved away from it as I became more professionally involved with music, with the passage of time reemerged, as so often happens with one's earliest impressions, often the most long-lasting. I like to think that the Oriental flavor of this scale, which I have often used, at least since 1986¹⁹¹, recalls my mother's origins, whose ancestors moved, about two thousand years ago, from what is present-day Israel to Rome, something that is fitting for a composition in which I use texts from the Old Testament.

But a more interesting question—and its answer would be interesting, too, if I had one—might be: In what way does my undertaking of the fragment from Ecclesiastes (in a broad sense “religious,” and anyhow “spiritual”) influence the music that I composed for this text?

The only thing I can say is that I tried to carry out a step (read: some other step would perhaps be presumptuous) in the direction of a music that wishes to give up all that is exterior—superficial, vacuous, pure ornament or frippery—to be, insofar as possible, all the more “essential.” It is a music that I like to think of as new and ancient at the same time.

[Source: “Il sentimento religioso di un non credente,” *Il Cristianesimo fonte perenne di ispirazione per le arti*, ed. Franco Carlo Ricci (Naples/Rome: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2004), 73-79; Becheri 04,1.]

¹⁹¹ In *Ai piedi del faro* for double bass and 8 instruments (Milano: Ricordi, 1986), which is, for various reasons, my first „Jewish” composition. [See program notes in Part II of this volume.]

4 mosso

Primo

295

Fl. 1+2

Ob. 1+2

Cl. 1, 2

Arpa 1

Perc. 1

2

3

A

B

V. I & II

V. Ia

V. c.

V. c.

Cb.

mf

p

fuf. dim.

div. a 3

mf

p

Dis - se	ein	zu	ver -	Rei -
Dis - se	un	ver -	Rei -	

Example III, 10: Vanitas? (mm. 292-315)

3 $\text{♩} \sim 50$ Poco più mosso

305

Ob. 1
2

Cl. 1
2

Cor. 1
2

3
4

Tr. 2

Rec. 1
Triangolo

B
mf *deci in der Zwei - schen zeit* *tra* *kan - nen wir*
na Bru - na co - age *ist* *tra* *pos - sen mo*

Vcl. I
mf *metà al pa - tri, metà ordinario*

Vcl. II
pp *più* *mf*

3no

Fl. 1

2

Ob.

2

Cl. 1

2

Perc. 1

Sonagli (Jokeller)

B

V. n. I

II

Vc.

arco

f

315

man - uet, gu - te Glnj, Weis - e, re - ken
be - re, re, qual - che bis - che - re di Vi - ro

The musical score for page 46 includes woodwind parts for Flute 1 (with 3rd flute), Oboe, and Clarinet 1 (with 2nd clarinet). The percussion part features Sonagli (Jokeller) with a forte (f) dynamic. The Bassoon part includes the vocal line with lyrics in German. The string section consists of Violins I and II, and Violoncello (Vc.), with the Vc. part marked arco and forte (f). The score is numbered 315 at the top right.