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ARTIGO

FAUSTO ROMITELLI'S ELECTRIC SOUND, BETWEEN MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNISM¹

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Abstract: Like other composers of his generation, Fausto Romitelli was interested in the discussions between "modernist" and "post-modernist" musical poetics. He felt solidarity with the former, and openly refused to adhere to the strategies of the latter. Unsurprisingly, this opposition was reflected in a hierarchy of values in his discourse: to him, classifying a musical work as "post-modern" meant singling it out as disengaged and superficial. However, Romitelli's work manifests some aspects which could be considered to be in line with post-modernist perspectives: think of his tendency to integrate musical quotations; of his explicit import of the electric sound of rock (as well as of its instrumental gestures); of his use of samples taken from electronic music; of his taste for trash. I intend to reflect on these aspects in order to grasp their function and thus better understand how Romitelli's music brings together present and past in an original technological dystopia.

Keywords: Fausto Romitelli; Music and Post-modernism; Electric Sound; Music Quotation.

Résumé: Comme d'autres compositeurs de sa génération, Fausto Romitelli s'est intéressé aux discussions entre les poétiques musicales « modernistes » et « post-modernistes ». Il s'est senti solidaire des premières, en refusant ouvertement d'adhérer aux secondes. Sans surprise, cette opposition véhicule dans son discours une hiérarchie de valeurs : pour lui, qualifier une œuvre musicale de « post-moderne » signifiait la considérer comme désengagée et superficielle. Cependant, certains aspects de l'œuvre de Romitelli suggèrent une proximité avec les perspectives post-modernistes : de sa tendance à intégrer des citations musicales, à son importation explicite du son électrique du rock (ainsi que de sa gestuelle instrumentale), à son utilisation d'échantillons tirés de la musique électronique, jusqu'à son goût pour le trash. L'article réfléchit sur ces aspects pour tenter d'en saisir la fonction et ainsi mieux comprendre comment la musique de Romitelli réunit présent et passé dans une dystopie technologique originale.

Mots-clés: Fausto Romitelli, musique et post-modernisme, son électrique, citation musicale.

¹ Le son électrique de Fausto Romitelli, entre modernité et post-modernisme.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Fausto Romitelli's music, electric sound doesn't need to be uncovered: it is an unabashedly salient feature. Think for instance of the distorted cello solos in Professor Bad Trip. Lesson II (1998-99), or of the powerfully saturated soundscape of Trash TV Trance (2002). Hendrix, Lou Reed, David Bowie, Pan Sonic, Aphex Twin make sudden appearances, sometimes discreetly, being simply evoked, and sometimes in the form of an explicit quotation or import. In the context of a work that is nevertheless still being defined as "contemporary", such imports might appear as knowing winks to post-modern compositional strategies, which are notoriously prone to citation, and eager to establish a form of communication with the listener, to second their perceptive abilities (which had already been put to the test by the avant-gardes). Romitelli was entirely aware of this and rejected this idea, claiming loud and clear that his poetics had nothing to do with post-modernism. Still, to these ears, his works bear the stamp of a composer with a genuine attention to the diversity of the early-twenty-first century musical world, who no longer allowed himself to be guided by the imperatives of the "modernist" approach, centered on the idea of an inexorable progress of a musical language considered as artistically more advanced or essential. In the following I will examine this singularity and attempt to gain a better understanding of the positioning of Romitelli's work among the musical poetics of his time, and more broadly of the multiple aesthetic and symbolic meanings it carries.

2. ELECTRIC SOUND

Before we embark on this journey, it is worth clarifying what I mean by "electric sound". Indeed the phrase has several meanings, arguably the most common of which refers to the rock genre (and all its sub-genres, such as hard-rock, metal, grunge, etc.). It is also used to refer to the aural morphology produced by an electric guitar or bass (often found in many other genres including jazz, soul and funk). It is worth noting that in the first update to the Hornbostel-Sachs classification (1940), these instruments were listed among the "chordophones" rather than the "electrophones", on the grounds that they do not use electricity to *produce* vibration but to *amplify* it, having captured it with a pickup and by performing a direct action on a string. Additionally, in music, a distinction is sometimes made between *electric* and *electronic* sound. The latter is more explicitly associated with electrophones: sound generators, synthesizers, electronic keyboards (not all of them, however – the Rhodes piano belongs to the former category), and obviously all digital devices, from the sampler to the computer.

In either case, on a physico-acoustic level, what we are hearing is the result of a double conversion: from the mechanical vibration to the electrical or electromagnetic flux, and in turn from that flux to the vibration of a loudspeaker's

membrane. To enter the realm of electronics, one only needs to place a pedal between the two (a loop, distortion or chorus effect, for instance). However, this alteration does not seem to have a significant impact on a perceptual level – or, to use a term borrowed from philosophical (and psychological) language by Pierre Schaeffer, on a 'phenomenological' level.⁴ Take an electric guitar and a sampler, both amplified: even if the sounds we are hearing both come from the same source (the speakers), they appear to call for two different listening stances. The sound of an analog or digital electronic device calls for acousmatic listening: we are focused on a morphology and on a dynamic. Adopting a "reduced listening" stance seems relatively simple.⁵ Electric sound, on the other hand, calls for an instrumental listening: in a particular aural morphology, and then through it, we look for a cause, a *producing gesture* usually. Crucially, this isn't just a metaphorical quest, but a *real* one: we expect that this gesture comes from a human subject's act.

Note that I prefer to say "calls for" to suggest the idea of a tendency rather than of a necessary determination (even an electronic sound can be heard as the result of a gesture; additionally, a traditional instrument can sometimes produce a sound from which any form of gesture or trace of action have been erased, to the point that it may seem electronic). This is a perceptually important fact, even though it does not apply to all cases: an electric sound (meaning, more precisely, an electrified sound) emanates from the act of eliciting something from a body. Something, or better yet someone, has made it vibrate, and has obviously done that in a particular manner — by hitting it, pinching it, attacking it quietly, quickly, with virtuosity, energy, tension, violence, etc.

3. ANAMNESIS

Let us now come back to Romitelli. From the first listen, his music appears to be characterized by the appropriation of a certain "aesthetic" associated with electric sound: most of all, perhaps, that of psychedelic rock, which was increasingly foregrounded from the mid 1990s on, but also trash. What were the reasons for this choice?

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⁴ SCHAEFFER, Pierre **Traité des objets musicaux. Essai interdisciplines**. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1977 (1st ed. 1966).

⁵ This kind of listening is "removed from references to the cause of sound (sound as indication) or its meaning (sound as sign)"; SCHAEFFER Pierre, **La Musique concrète**. Paris, Presses universitaires de France, Coll. « Que sais-je? », 1976, p. 36.

⁶ This is the case of some passages of *Acrylic Mixtures* (2006), a work for accordion by Italian composer Luigi Manfrin, (MAFRIN, *Acrylic Mixtures*, 2006. Available in: https://soundcloud.com/ghenadie-rotari/acrylic-mixtures-ii-2006-by-luigi-manfrin.

The composer explicitly stated his intention: what he was after was not a melting pot of genres,⁷ but the exploration of the potentialities of an aural matter whose roughness made it, in his view, feel closer to our lived experience. This belief was a cornerstone of his poetics, and a key reason for his taste for underground cultural expressions:⁸ not a facile hedonism, not the simple joys of collage, but a thirst for knowledge, for total feeling and creative affirmation⁹.

Indeed, if we identify post-modernism with such a brand of hedonism, and more broadly with the advent of a stylistic eclecticism that defeats historical perspectivism, we find that it is very much at odds with Romitelli's poetics, ¹⁰ which remained faithful to the idea that a composer must never content himself with a formulaic language. 11 There can however be other ways to envision postmodernism, starting with the approach that emphasizes principles that were central in a modernist or avant-garde perspective. In fact, as Marco Mazzolini has noted, Romitelli's very way of raising the question of musical language - through the introduction of deviations or gray areas that call into question its own linear development – may suggest the modern turning on itself, a reversal ultimately fairly similar to that described critically by Jean-François Lyotard. To Romitelli, "history cannot be merely a storehouse for the lovers of collage, for the devotees of inconsistency and the instantaneous: it becomes the visual field of the gaze, its horizon and its flesh itself." His music presents itself as a study in anamnesis, creating soundscapes in which the debris of the tonal and modal world mix with repetitive bass notes that sound like "monstrously slowed down extended phonemes". 13 Audiodrome, for instance, explicitly distorts orchestral sound to usher us into a technological dystopia of sorts, a world in which interference, electric

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⁷ In an interview with Véronique Brindeau, on the occasion of a performance of the *Professor Bad Trip* trilogy (by the Ensemble Intercontemporain), when asked about his efforts to bring the worlds of highbrow and lowbrow music closer, he retorted: "My music is not a melting pot, nor is it post-modern music" (reproduced in ARBO, Alessandro (ed.), **Le corps électrique:** voyage dans le son de Fausto Romitelli, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005, p. 157).

⁸ In my recollection, Fausto spoke frequently and openly about this, with a sense of irony that suggested a slightly aristocratic brand of intellectualism. As Jean-Luc Plouvier perceptively remarked, his love of rock and of the underground may also have been an expression of the teenager in him: PLOUVIER, Jean-Luc, « Chute libre: souvenirs et remarques sur mon travail avec Fausto Romitelli », **Circuits**, 24/3 (2014), p. 23.

⁹ As he often remarked, he did not care for music as an embellishment of everyday life, and was only interested as music as a metaphor of the world, be it a Beethoven sonata, Brian Eno's ambient music or Abwärts's industrial punk.

¹⁰ CHEVASSUS, Béatrice Ramaut **Musique et postmodernité**, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1998.

¹¹ "It is not possible to express something new with hackneyed words (...) an aesthetic message expressed with linguistic clichés has no value in music (beyond that of a mere pastime)"; *In*: ARBO, **Le corps électrique**, 2005, p. 131.

¹² MAZZOLINI, Marco "Lesson IV. Bad Trip autour du style", *In*: ARBO, **Le corps** électrique, 2005, p. 80.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 85.

sound and feedback have become more "natural" than the sound of acoustic instruments.

Indeed, in his work, Romitelli shows that he was well aware of belonging to an era that has seen the demise of the great historical narratives – including that of a history of music explained in the light of an overarching pathway of evolution of musical language. When his works revisit the past and the underground, they do so with a genuine interest in modes of expression perceived to be closer to our lived experience. The keen sense of belonging to a present that is populated with an inextricable multiplicity of traces is complemented by a both critical and retrospective stance, as part of which immersion in the atmospheres of psychedelic rock or techno provides the lifeblood for a new utopia of sound.

The beginning of L'azur des déserts (1992-93), for mezzo-soprano and ensemble, with a text by Paul Valéry (part 2 of the Mediterraneo cycle), or of Lost (1997) for voice and 15 instruments, with a text by Jim Morrison, are striking examples of Romitelli's visionary sound absorption – paying little heed to the ban on introducing recognizable harmonies, but also feeling free to assail and corrupt them, as in the case of the Pink Floyd chord that starts his video-opera. There is an openly polemical dimension to such a move, signifying the introduction of an energy and a sense of movement highlighted by the power of amplifiers and the use of obsessive loops generated by the bass into a "contemporary" music perceived as anemic, as in Cupio dissolvi, for ensemble, a piece commissioned by Radio France in 1996.

3. ZERO TOLERANCE FOR SILENCE

It was in fact by the mid 1990s that Romitelli, encouraged by the example of Hugues Dufourt, ¹⁴ turned to amplified sound and did not look back. He did this to convey his own sensibility more effectively – certainly in many ways a risky move, as Giovanni Verrando, a composer and friend who witnessed his journey through Italian and French musical institutions, observed. ¹⁵ But in the process, it is worth pointing out that he did not betray a key principle inherited from his master as well as from Grisey, Murail and Lévinas – that of "composing sound" rather than "composing with sounds". This means that picking up sounds inherited from a musical tradition, whatever it is, is not enough. What must be done is to get through to their nature, to turn a magnifying glass (or microphone) on their attack and release transients, to process them, to bend them out of shape until new sound

¹⁴ To confirm yet again a remark made by Jean-Luc Plouvier ("Chute libre", cit., p. 26), I recall Dufourt being a true mentor to Romitelli for some time.

¹⁵VERRANDO Giovanni, "Au-delà de l'imaginaire de la musique écrite", *In:* ARBO, A. (dir.), **Anamorphoses. Études sur l'œuvre de Fausto Romitelli**, Paris, Hermann, 2014, p. 24.

sculptures are born. To him, this principle was non-negotiable, and he heeded this call in his way, drawing on the full energy of his worried, iconoclastic soul, transfixed by excess, outrageousness, and the outpouring of altered sounds.

Therein lies the originality of his style. Where the composers of *l'Itinéraire* had explored temporal dilation strategies, Romitelli seemed primarily eager to show how processes can converge and fall into the present moment. Looping and saturation became ways for him to construct fascinating soundscapes, overflowing with energy. Think of the initial title for what later become *Professor Bad Trip*'s series of "lessons": *Zero Tolerance for Silence* (incidentally, note than in both cases, a knowing wink comes from a quotation – from Pat Metheny's electric world to Gianluca Lerici's underground graphics). The intention was to refocus the listener's attention, to immerse them in the drift of an "incandescent" material to steer them away from the apparent linearity of processes, by letting what he referred to as "the emergence of a hidden violence" occur.¹⁶

Interestingly – with the exception of the *Natura morta con fiamme* (1991-92) experiment, a hybrid work in which the gestural energy of a quartet of musicians was confronted to real-time electronic treatments¹⁷ — Romitelli had very little to do with electronics. With hindsight, the reason for this is I believe increasingly clear: in his view, electric sound likely remained *more easily legible in terms of experience*. It was also often a "dirty" sound, denatured, altered by distortion and saturation, and one that was at the same time deeply embodied.

Hence the central role of the electric guitar in his works from the mid 1990s and onwards. As Jacopo Conti observed, ¹⁸ the instrument served as a model, aimed at strongly conditioning writing for the ensemble (and the orchestra) – an external agent liable to shake up the system, to upend it completely (arguably a similar role to that played by electronics in instrumental creations from the 1950s).

Take, for instance, the section corresponding to no. 31 on the score for *Professor Bad Trip. Lesson II*, ¹⁹ in which idiomatic glissandos on the guitar fretboard trigger an extraordinary looping effect: the energy of an actual gesture is grafted on to the instrumental ensemble. In *Lesson II*, again, note no. 56 on the score (p. 25-26), where the almighty distortion of the guitar and bass is absorbed and somehow dilated by the instrumental fabric. As a way out of this climax, Romitelli introduces something

¹⁶ The phrase is used in the program note for *Amok Koma*, for nine instruments and electronics (2001), which can be consulted in the IRCAM database http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/14245/

¹⁷ La sabbia del tempo and even Kû, his first work, dating back to 1989, already included the – probably more modest – use of a synthesizer (see LANZILOTTA, Pierluigi "L" elettronica" dans l'œuvre de Romitelli. *Professor Bad Trip, Audiodrome* et *An Index of Metals*", *In:* ARBO, A. (ed.), **Anamorphoses**, 2014, p. 192).

¹⁸ CONTI, Jacopo « Un bruit assourdissant de musique métallique. La guitare électrique comme modèle », in ARBO, A. (ed.), **Anamorphoses**, cit., p. 44.

¹⁹ ROMITELLI, Fausto, *Professor Bad Trip: Lesson II*, pour ensemble (1998-99), partition Ricordi 2892, p. 20.

akin to the shadow of an electric sound, a "residual" sound, more harmonic and transparent in the piano's crystalline notes, descending curves that gradually let themselves become corrupted and undone by the acoustic-electric mix (n. 81, p. 30).

The finale of An Index includes moments where acoustic and electric sounds merge almost completely into a single, fluid magma. While the electric guitar is ubiquitous and dominates these soundscapes, I believe it is crucial to understand its relationship to how the ensemble operates. Even though this is music that does the heavy lifting to transport us, as Giovanni Verrando has argued, beyond the confines of written music, the fact remains that it is skillfully written. While the movements of what has been called the world of "audiotactile" music²⁰ are recognizable, they do not compromise the role played by spectral techniques. In other words, although the music is generously infused with the electric idiom, it continues to use all the technical resources at the disposal of a skilled composer. These soundscapes are devoid of the harmonic or melodic clichés that have marred many rock music, of riffs and percussive pulses, or, as has been noted, of the decibels of noise;²¹ they are, however, characterized by their refined exploration of harmonic and inharmonic spectrums, a subtle variation of melodic cells, a remarkable instrumental inventiveness in accordance with timbral color, an equally remarkable handling of polyphony and masterful control of passages of drift or obsessive repetition. It also displays a superb sense of form in the alternation of processes of accumulation, dilation and densification of the aural matter.

4. Denaturalization

It has often be said that there would be no such thing as a "Romitelli style" without paroxysm: a paroxysm of sound, certainly, but also of the imaginary world it conveys: "depraved" perspectives, anamorphoses, altered perceptions, falls, hypnosis, trance... a full-fledged arsenal for deviation, deformation or more broadly denaturalization, a process that symbolizes our mediatized and globalized world.

²⁰ A key term in jazz studies, it was introduced by Vincenzo Caporaletti (see for instance, CAPORALETTI, Vicenzo « Une musicologie audiotactile », trad. de Laurent Cugny, RJMA – **Revue d'études du Jazz et des Musiques Audiotactiles, Cahier en français**, n° 1, CRIJMA – IReMus – Sorbonne Université, Avril 2018, p. 1-17 – Available in: https://www.nakala.fr/nakala/data/11280/06b0a325).

²¹ As Eric Denut puts it in "Fausto Romitelli: A Short Index", in ARBO, Alessandro (ed.), **Le corps électrique**, 2005, p. 123: "Unlike some of the artists of the Japanese noise movement, who seek to cut through the listener using dreadfully high decibel levels while ultimately comforting them by relying on expected formats, Romitelli's music strives to get through to us and through us by hijacking the subversive power of sound for the purpose of manipulating the time of our expectations and formal desires – a more refined, more radical, more operational questioning, which befits a creation that fascinates by its ambition to 'actualize the metaphor' (Michaux) where others simply aspire to it or, at best, name it".

Electric or electrified sound constitutes the most decisive strategy to make a visible mark: just think, again, of the distorted cello cadences in *Professor Bad Trip*, or of the final cadence in An Index of Metals, which are genuine icons of a form of pantheistic experience of life. Other strategies are also implemented to serve the music's psychedelic world: think for instance of the corruption of natural sound achieved through the use of "poor" instruments (like the kazoo and the harmonica), or the specific treatment applied to some acoustic instruments (the whistling or the kazoo superimposed on the piano line in Lost and Professor Bad Trip Lesson 2 and Lesson 3, the bells steeped in water in Golfi d'ombra, and many other techniques reflecting a painstaking sense of detail), and of course electronics as such. As I have pointed out, in Romitelli's work as a whole, the use of electronics is modest - however, there are moments when they stand out. Examples include the introduction of Pan Sonic's aural inventions in An Index: brief samples that Paolo Pachini described as trance-inducing.²² The choice of having recourse not to "highbrow" electronics but to experimental electronics from the techno scene is a reflection of Romitelli's effort to convey an underground universe. Denaturalization is violent, excessive, but it is also, it should be noted again, strictly related to corporeality. It involves gestures, like the glitch at the beginning of An Index. It is a "deranged", "dirty", "low-fi" electronics, in which mistakes and imperfections cut through the abstraction of algorithms to unveil a more concrete scene, one that is closer to our bodily sensibility, which is now affected, whether we want it or not, by digital interfaces, those powerful "phenomenotechnical intermediaries" interfaces.²³

Conclusion

Romitelli's work shows that he was well aware of belonging to an era that saw the demise of the great historical narratives – including the idea that the history of music could be explained by an overarching evolution of musical language. When he revisits the past and the underground, he does so with a genuine interest in modes of expression perceived to be closer to our lived experience. The keen sense of being part of a present that is populated with an inextricable multiplicity of traces is complemented by a both critical and retrospective stance, as part of which immersion in the atmospheres of psychedelic rock or techno provides the lifeblood for a new sonic world. His electric sound seems to me to be conceived as an attempt to cater to modes of listening that are shared by the global society, in a visionary and realist spirit. The electric guitar, with its incandescent materials, plays the role of a fertilizing, dynamizing agent of the composition based on spectral technics. Beyond the intention of staging disorder, what is surprising is this music's ability to

²² PACHINI, Paolo « Nel cantiere di *An Index of Metals* », *In:* ARBO Alessandro (ed.), **Oltre le perfierie dell'impero. Omaggio a Fausto Romitelli**, Turin, Trauben, 2014, p. 42. ²³ VIAL, Stéphane, **L'être et l'écran. Comment le numérique change la perception**, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2013, p. 206.

harness it, to turn it into the gateway to an unexplored world of sound. Drawing on a wide variety of symbolic and musical references, Romitelli's work deploys a form of temporality that is concentrated in the present moment. Engaged in the fascinating anamorphoses of an electrified sound, it continues to present itself as tied to actual gestures. Its ability to speak to the body – the musician's and the listener's bodies – gives it the power to convey intense emotions and to make it one of the most successful expressions of contemporary musical culture. Certainly not post-modern music, then, but music which leads us to reflect intensely on (musical) modernity, with a clear awareness of our post-modern condition.

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