

Julia Freund, Federica Marsico, Matteo Nanni

Perspectives on Sylvano Bussotti

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Introduction

Impulses for Multifaceted Bussotti Research

Julia Freund, Federica Marsico, Matteo Nanni

Born on 1 October 1931 in Florence and having studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and Max Deutsch, Sylvano Bussotti entered the international post-war new music scene that gathered prominently at the Darmstadt Summer Courses in 1958. In fact, with his graphic scores, he was significantly involved in one of the major issues of these years: the critical deconstruction of standardised notation. His *Five Piano Pieces for David Tudor* (1959) served as a paradigmatic reference point in the debates on the theoretical reflection on and desired renewal of musical writing.¹ According to Paul Attinello and David Osmond-Smith, it was Bussotti's open homosexuality, in connection with the vivid sensuality and corporality of his compositions, that set him apart from his peer composers, and led to irritations in the climate of the late 1950s in which homosexuality was still a taboo, and avant-garde music was, at least *prima facie*, strongly focused on structural, and not sensual issues.²

With his 'mystère de chambre' *La Passion selon Sade*, in 1965, Bussotti presented a music-theatre work that was characterised to a previously unknown extent by an erotic physicality. He used the score to not only notate sound events or structures but also fixate movement, gestures and lighting, placing his work in the vicinity of the endeavours of Mauricio Kagel's 'instrumental theatre', and within the context of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* idea. In the decades to come, within the exceptional personal union of composer, director, actor, stage and costume designer, poet and visual artist, Bussotti consistently explored the boundaries between medially differentiated art forms and different genres (music theatre, ballet, instrumental music), even coining a term specifically designed to indicate his stage compositions: 'BussottiOperaBallet'.

In the research discourses on 20th-century music and music theatre, Bussotti's *œuvre* has a very limited presence. A detailed study of the majority of his works is still pending, and the hitherto available archival material has been examined only partially, which poses difficulties for well-founded musicological studies. While there is a small community of researchers who have been laying the groundwork in explicating Bussotti's biography, aesthetics and poetics, so far, there is not a single

1 See e.g. Stockhausen, "Musik und Graphik"; Ligeti, "Neue Notation – Kommunikationsmittel oder Selbstzweck?".

2 Osmond-Smith/Attinello, "Gay Darmstadt".

larger publication in the English language dedicated to the life and work of the composer³ – with severe consequences for the reception of Bussotti in academic and public discourses. These diagnoses are in striking disproportion to the historical importance of the Italian artist and, as a matter of fact, the potential that lies in engaging with his work in view of current discourses. This book responds to this *desideratum*. It aims to bundle recent approaches, break new ground in research on Bussotti and stimulate a broader debate on his *œuvre* and aesthetics.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SYLVANO BUSSOTTI AND HIS WORK

The research idea in this volume is based on the conviction that Bussotti's work cannot be studied from a single methodological perspective, but that a multi-perspective, polyvalent, plural approach is most productive when dealing with an *œuvre* such as his. Methodologically, this book deals with seminal questions concerning his work and its context, as well as notation and aesthetics in a way that attempts to correspond to the subject matter. Bussotti's artistic path was at the cutting edge of the development of multimediality in contemporary art at a very early stage. Adorno diagnosed a blurring of medial differences between the arts in 1966, a phenomenon he described as the "hybridization of the arts",⁴ which consisted of the fact that visual principles of the visual arts influenced music as well as constructive moments of the serial composition technique had an effect on literature. In this context, Adorno referred to Bussotti's graphic notation⁵ to show that graphics and composition are in a dialectical contradiction: they converge in the work and, simultaneously, diverge through the centripetal force of their autonomous power. In this volume, this dialectic is to be taken up productively and will be discussed from different points of view: Starting from the question of identity and its deconstruction, the contributions of this book touch on the biographical questions of queerness and eroticism in the specific way in which these are reflected in his composing alongside the music-historical contextualisation of friendships and networks. Furthermore, Bussotti's work will be discussed, from investigations into interpretation and performance to the core question of the transformation of musical notation. In the sense of a polyvalent approach, this

3 As an exception, the trilingual (Italian-English-French) collected volume *The Theatres of Sylvano Bussotti* edited by Daniela Tortora contains several English essays. Shorter publications include, among others, Attinello, "Signifying Chaos"; Ulman, "The Music of Sylvano Bussotti"; Osmond-Smith/Attinello, "Gay Darmstadt"; Marsico, "Contemporary Music Theater and the Experience of Marginalization".

4 Adorno calls this phenomena "Verfransung der Künste" and, thus, means the fraying and fringing of the material and medial specificities of the arts producing polyvalent and hybrid art works. See Adorno, "Die Kunst und die Künste", p. 452 and id., *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 258. See also Bertram/Deines/Feige (Eds), *Die Kunst und die Künste*.

5 See Adorno, "Die Kunst und die Künste", p. 432.

book cannot be exhaustive; many other research perspectives can be addressed. This volume proposes some perspectives that are interconnected and is based on the very firm idea that Bussotti's work can only be understood from a multidimensional approach.

Building on existing research and especially more recent studies on Bussotti, we would like to outline perspectives in the following which, in our opinion, can be made productive for the development of Bussotti studies and the (re)examination of his work in the light of current discourses. These perspectives play an important role throughout the contributions to this volume.

Bussotti's fluid, hybrid writing practices and the resulting ambivalent forms of notation constitute a fascinating subject of research. It is, however, not sufficient to merely describe these hybrid (notational and pictorial) phenomena, point out their gestural character and trace them back to the biographical fact that Bussotti has been a composer *and* a painter. It is also essential and, in fact, conceptually highly productive to define precisely *how* the notational and pictorial dimensions *interact* with each other – beyond labels such as 'graphic notation' or 'musical graphics', that are too vague and general to provide insights into specific works of art. To theoretically pin down the relationship between the iconic element of musical writing, i.e. its 'notational iconicity',⁶ and the score as a visual arts object that establishes its own iconic 'logic' and temporality is pivotal.⁷ Taking into account Bussotti's own (deliberately) contradictory statements on his notational practices and unusual employment of performance instructions, his writing strategies can be productively illuminated within (and beyond) the context of interdisciplinary debates on writing and images,⁸ as well as theoretical accounts of contemporary art.⁹

Bussotti's notational strategies, often suspending a direct sign-reference relation, challenge established definitions of what constitutes musical writing or notation, and – since, in recent research, standardised notation has been described as a diagrammatic form of representation – what constitutes a diagram. The spatial arrangement of note heads, stems and staves in *Autotono* (1977), for example, can be read as musical notation, visual ornaments or performative instructions for the theatrical dimension of the piece.¹⁰ This ambivalent state invites one to rethink stable definitions and sharpen terminological distinctions.

6 See e.g. Krämer, "Notational Iconicity"; Nanni, "Musikalische Diagrammatik".

7 See e.g. Boehm, "Jenseits der Sprache?"; id., "Die Sichtbarkeit der Zeit".

8 See e.g. Freund, "Bild und Zeichen"; Magnus, "Aurale Latenzen".

9 See e.g. Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*; Rebentisch, *Ästhetik des Installation*. For the contextualisation of Bussotti's multidisciplinary artistic output within these discourses, see Freund, "Zwischen bildender Kunst und Musik(notation)".

10 See Freund, "Von japanischen Steingärten und Pariser Geschichten".

As stated above, it has to be considered a major deficit in Bussotti research that the evaluation of a large part of relevant archival material is still pending. Compared to composers whose sketches and correspondences have been subject to extensive investigations, such as Pierre Boulez or Luigi Nono, we know very little about Bussotti's relationships and intellectual exchanges with composers, artists or intellectuals;¹¹ in the same vein, not much is understood about his compositional processes.¹² Unveiling and analysing archival material is long overdue and promises to shed new light on his interactions, aesthetic ideas, creative practices, development as an artist and strategies as an artistic director (e.g. 1976–77 at the *Teatro La Fenice* in Venice,¹³ 1978–83 regarding the *Festival pucciniano* in Torre del Lago,¹⁴ or 1987–91 of the music section of *La Biennale di Venezia*).

The most important collection of archival material related to Bussotti is preserved today in the *Center for Studies and Research on Modern and Contemporary Music "NoMus"* of Milan, where the composer's Fund was donated by Rocco Quaglia after the death of his partner.¹⁵ The forthcoming publication of the catalogue of the Bussotti's correspondence preserved in the NoMus Archive will undoubtedly enable the expansion of the study of his artistic output and professional activity on the basis of unpublished sources.¹⁶ New sources also deserve to be brought to light from other archives, such as Quaglia's private archive, the historical archives of theatres and institutions with whom Bussotti collaborated, the estates of performers of his works (such as the organist Gerd Zacher, who premiered *Julio organum Julii* 1968 in Bremen, or the pianist Aloys Kontarsky, who gave the world premiere of *Tableaux vivants* for two pianos 1964 in Bremen together with his brother Alfons), the archives of Bussotti's closest friends (such as Alain Daniélou), or the National Library of Florence, where some of the composer's letters are stored. These sources allow new insights and contextualisations regarding the composer's artistic biography and network, poetics and aesthetics as well as the performance history and practice of his works.

Bussotti's work was created at a time when the concept of modern subjectivity got into a crisis. Since his very first works, his artistic personality was characterised by a polyvalence and openness towards every kind of aesthetic experience that questioned the subject: even the coincidental change of name from Silvano

11 On the Adorno-Bussotti correspondence in the *Theodor W. Adorno Archiv* see Freund, "Bild und Zeichen"; on Bussotti's correspondence in *NoMus* see Marsico, "Scoprire la corrispondenza di Sylvano Bussotti nel Centro Studi NoMus".

12 In the preface to the score of *Due voci*, Bussotti states that from that moment on, he would directly write a composition down without working with sketches – a statement that still awaits verification or falsification. Bussotti, *Due voci*, n.p.

13 Marsico, "La prospettiva di Sylvano Bussotti"; ead., "Scoprire la corrispondenza di Sylvano Bussotti nel Centro Studi NoMus".

14 Marsico, "Una sorta di padre putativo".

15 On the Bussotti Fund in *NoMus*, see Novati/Vaccarini (Eds), *Sylvano Bussotti. Respirando ap-pagato*.

16 Marsico, *La corrispondenza di Sylvano Bussotti. Il Fondo del Centro Studi NoMus*.

to Sylvano seems paradigmatic of this. His composing can hardly be reconciled with the determining subjectivity of musical structuralism. Not only one individual subjectivity seems to speak from his music, but many. Bussotti's work and his composing can, therefore, be placed within the cultural development of postmodern thought. As the writings of Jean-François Lyotard and Roland Barthes show, the idea of a strong subject crumbled in the course of the postmodern condition. At a time when the relationship between reality and virtuality was being renegotiated, the traditional subject proved to be just a mask. For Bussotti, composing, thus, inscribes itself in the tension between subject and mask, to paraphrase the famous essay by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo from 1974, *Il soggetto e la maschera*. The early use by the young Bussotti of the twelve-tone technique was just a possibility among others and, thus, found its application beyond the omnipotence of a determining subject. Similarly, his Darmstadt works reveal a critical examination of the totalising determinism of the musical material, while the decision to implement graphic notation was not only due to the fact that he himself worked as a graphic artist, but also to opening up the musical text to the creative participation of the musicians by, thus, breaking up artistic subjectivity. The fact that notational graphism goes hand in hand with the expansion of musical subjectivity in the sense of the dissolution of a *strong* authorship can be seen particularly in his music theatre. There, he continued the play between subject and mask in a new way. The experience of the deconstruction of modern subjectivity then opened Bussotti's creativity to the idea of collective artistic production. If, on the one hand, his activity as an artistic director in Venice and Torre del Lago was featured by a multidisciplinary artistic approach, on the other hand, the *laboratory* of the Genazzano Festival, the invention of the Bussottioperaballet with its inter-medial nature, and, finally, the fusion of life and art are central moments in the exploration of a new conception of postmodern musical subjectivity.

Several of Bussotti's works strongly suggest addressing and including aspects of gender and sexuality in the scholarly discussion. The study of the operas *Lorenzaccio* (1972),¹⁷ *Syro Sadun Settimino* (1974),¹⁸ *Le Racine. Pianobar pour Phèdre* (1980)¹⁹ and *Fedra* (1988)²⁰ shows that his works can be regarded as media for negotiating gender identity and making visible body images and forms of desires beyond heteronormativity.²¹ (In the light of this, it seems hardly plausible why not a single work

17 Freund, "Geschlechterperformanz in der Partitur".

18 Marsico, "Un'opera dimenticata di un 'contestataire contesté'".

19 Marsico, "Da *Le Racine* a *Fedra* di Sylvano Bussotti"; ead., "Il libretto di *Le Racine. Pianobar pour Phèdre* (1980) di Sylvano Bussotti"; ead., *La seduzione queer di Fedra*; ead., "Le provocazioni di *Le Racine*".

20 Marsico, "Da *Le Racine* a *Fedra* di Sylvano Bussotti"; ead., *La seduzione queer di Fedra*; ead., "Le provocazioni di *Le Racine*".

21 Marsico, "Contemporary Music Theater".

of Bussotti's has been included in the 2019 'first gay opera guide' *Casta Diva*.²²) Since many of Bussotti's works invest the hedonistic component of sexuality, it is made clear that erotic desire constitutes one of the key themes of his production. In his works, art and life are merged into one. When homosexual emancipation movements were still far from coming into being, Bussotti did not choose to conceal his sexual orientation or live it as an open secret. Instead, he exhibited it casually, both in life and in art. Musical theatre undoubtedly constituted the privileged place to give expression to such a relevant aspect of his existence. The author gives voice to the multiple forms of erotic desire through subjects, dramaturgy, costumes, sets, choreographic movements and any other element capable of exalting the seductive power of physical beauty and body.

In this respect, a theoretical perspective informed by concepts from gender and queer studies can be made productive for Bussotti research in order to fully understand his aesthetics and additionally highlight the societal relevance of his output. Important socio-cultural issues of contemporaneity in his music can be highlighted by an inquiry into how he destabilises the exclusionary machinery of dominant homophobic thought and uses music to explore non-normative genders and sexualities. Moreover, the investigation of his left-aligned political stance and his relationship with the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI: Italian Communist Party), which until the 1970s never committed itself to gay rights, can further enrich knowledge of the author's biography and thought.

The performance history and practice of Bussotti's works is a further topic worthy of investigation. It reveals a problem that holds true for many 20th- and 21st-century compositions: How can pieces be performed that have been written for specific interpreters or voices, in Bussotti's case, for Cathy Berberian or William Pearson? The absence of the 'original' performers poses a related problem that affects graphically notated music to a great extent: How can these scores be interpreted if there is no continuous tradition of performance practice that provides the necessary contextual information, assuming, with Adorno, that the 'idiomatic' element of musical writing is a vital part of 'reproducing' a score?²³

These questions can be approached from different angles: firstly, by reconstructing through archival documents how interpreters such as Berberian, David Tudor or the Kontarsky brothers realised the scores, for example, by making transcriptions, annotating or modifying them. Secondly, by entering into a dialogue with musicians who have worked intensely with Bussotti and reflecting on how to mediate the discrepancy between the fundamental openness of the pieces for

22 Falk/Limbeck (Eds), *Casta Diva. Der schwule Opernführer*.

23 Adorno, *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion*, pp. 88f.

co-creativity and the author's intention.²⁴ Or, thirdly, by exploring new readings through detailed musical analysis of single works, taking into account Bussotti's autobiographical references, his self-borrowings that acquire a new meaning in the score, his autopoietic and aesthetic statements, and the formal disposition of the pieces.

ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book consists of an introduction, five thematic chapters and an outlook, that sketches possible lines for future research. The central thematic sections focus on different perspectives that range from cultural-theoretical questions on identity and authoriality, gender issues, historiographical and performance-practical questions to the subject of notational changes.

(De-)Constructing Identities opens with Matteo Nanni's paper, which explores the phenomenon of authorial self-staging as a practice of transformation and masking of subjectivity. This practice is outlined against the background of the theoretical discussion of the "death of the author", as was articulated by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and focused on the analysis of *La Passion selon Sade* and *Lorenzaccio*, discussing the presence of the author on stage after its 'removal'. Paolo Somigli's paper, which follows, investigates the development of the composer's career from his being the young student 'Silvano' to his establishment as a composer on the international stage under the name of 'Sylvano' in the late 1950s. The study is conducted through the examination of the epistolary exchange with his friend Arrigo Benvenuti.

The next section, *Queerness and Eroticism*, consists of Federica Marsico's and Alessandra Origani's papers. The former explores the erotic charge of the opera *Nottetempo*, focusing on the dramaturgical development of the plot and some elements of the scenography designed by Bussotti. An investigation of the intertextual references in the libretto also enriches the study, together with some reflections on the score. Origani's paper addresses the attention to the unpublished and unperformed opera *Izumi Shikibu. Diario di tre Stagioni* by studying the musical manuscript and its peculiarities, the textual structure in the context of the absence of dramaturgy and, finally, the differences between the opera and the Japanese literary sources.

Contexts and Networks is the third element and includes Vera Grund's paper, which investigates Bussotti's position with respect to PCI politics and the Italian

24 At the conference "Perspectives on Sylvano Bussotti" (Gießen, 2021, see below) that preceded that volume, there was a panel discussion with musicians sharing their experience in rehearsing and performing Bussotti's works or, respectively, working with the composer, including Monica Benvenuti (soprano), Evelin Degen (flute), Matthias Geuting (organ), Francesco Giomi (electronics) and Renatus Mészár (bass-baritone).

political context in the 1970s by examining the composition *I semi di Gramsci*. Costantino Vecchi's paper enriches this section with the exploration of the friendship and intellectual relationship between Bussotti, Alain Daniélou and Jacques Cloarec through archival materials of the *Alain Daniélou Foundation*.

The next part of the book, *Interpretation and Performance*, opens with an essay by Matthias Geuting which gives a detailed account of the *première* of Bussotti's organ composition *Julio organum Julii* by Gerd Zacher, providing a rich contextualisation of the performance in Bremen and considering hitherto unknown documents, such as Zacher's playing score and the correspondence between Bussotti and Zacher. Anne-May Krüger's paper compares two performance practice traditions of the 1960s connected to Bussotti's compositions, dissecting the underlying ideal of interpretation in the performance practices of David Tudor and the Kontarsky brothers.

In *Notational Transformations*, Julia Freund investigates the graphic element of the line as an intermediary between Bussotti's notational and scenographic practices, using examples from *Oggetto amato* (1975). Her paper proposes a reading in which the dynamic, oscillating lines in Bussotti's musical writing come into view as a negation of the straight, rationalised line prevalent in musical notation.

The book closes with Paul Attinello's outlook which offers some forward-looking reflections on Bussotti's work. Attinello ponders, from a subjective perspective, on the suggestions about music and notation, the radical vision and the suggestive lacunae in symbolism and materiality, rhizomes, graphics, and the ways of making music Bussotti's work shows. This concluding text opens up a range of potential lines of development for future musicological work on this distinct avant-garde composer.

* * *

This volume brings together the contributions of the international conference "Perspectives on Sylvano Bussotti", which took place from 29 September to 1 October 2021, on the occasion of the composer's 90th birthday. It was hosted by the Institut für Musikwissenschaft und Musikpädagogik of the University of Gießen, with the patronage of Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Dipartimento di Filosofia e Beni Culturali. Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the talks and discussions were held online. After receiving the news that Bussotti passed away on 19 September 2021, we dedicated the conference to his memory.

The event was accompanied by a 'Bussotti portrait concert', given at the Johanneskirche Gießen on 30 September 2021.²⁵ The E-MEX Ensemble, which is based in Essen and specialises in contemporary music, was joined by the guest so-

25 It was recorded by students of the Institut für Musikwissenschaft und Musikpädagogik, University of Gießen.

loists Monica Benvenuti (soprano) and Renatus Mészár (bass-baritone).²⁶ The programme included *Foglio grigio* for baritone and violin from *Silvano Sylvano* (2004), *Attacca subito* (2013) for electronics, *Julio organum Julii* (1958) for organ, *Rondò di scena* (1978) for flute and dance, *Lachrimae* (1978) for soprano and electronics and *Quando il flutto s'incurva* (Seneca's aria from *Tieste la tragedia*, 1993) for baritone.

Directly following the events in Gießen, on 2 October 2021, the E-MEX Ensemble and their guests performed Bussotti's famous but rarely heard cycle *Pièces de chair II* in Cologne.²⁷ The rehearsal process of this elusive chamber musical song collection was supported by an English translation of Bussotti's 12-page-long performance instructions, which were still unpublished and widely unknown at that time.²⁸ The concert was recorded and broadcast on 19 March 2022 on Deutschlandfunk in the series "Atelier neuer Musik".

We hope that this book's output will not only provide impulses for future research on Bussotti and his *œuvre*, but also foster an increased practical engagement with his rarely performed pieces, suggesting new interpretative paths of 20th- and 21st-century music.

Finally, we would like to thank the Open-Access-Fonds of the University of Hamburg and Peter Mischung from Wolke Verlag for making this publication possible. We also wish to thank all the authors of this volume, Philip Saunders, Rocco Quaglia and all those involved in the preceding conference as well as the musicians of the concerts for the wonderful collaboration and productive discussions during the conference and the preparation of this book.

Basel, Frankfurt, Teramo, 2024

26 For further information and the full list of the musicians involved, see the website of the E-MEX Ensemble: <https://e-mex.de/konzerte/attacca/> (1.3.2024).

27 See <https://e-mex.de/konzerte/attacca-2/> (1.3.2024).

28 See Freund/Marsico, "Bussotti's Notes on *Pièces de Chair II*. Facsimile and English Translation".