

Salvatore Sciarrino

Text about "Due Melodie", 1978

by Sarah Maria Sun

Salvatore Sciarrino wrote his "Due Melodie" in 1978, at the same time as he was working on his second piece of music-theatre, "Aspern". His compositional output contains an extraordinary amount of music for the voice. His music-theatre works are particularly groundbreaking as they force the voice into creating sounds in ways and means outside of the clichés of singing in Opera and Lieder; the voice is not used to outwardly project something but rather used as a magnet, drawing out the inner life of a character or text. He achieves this by using the singing voice, with sometimes furious and difficult (because of their atonality and the large jumps between notes) coloratura-ornaments; the speaking voice; breathing sounds; and various mouth-noises. To this list I would add thinking, feeling and listening.

Interestingly, hundreds of composers have tried to copy Sciarrino's 'Style', the majority of which imitate the sounds as they can be outwardly heard – i.e., certain ornaments, phrasings, sounds, or the use of a large number of pauses in the score.

The essence of his works cannot be copied, however. His sound-phenomena were in my opinion created to establish a suitable framework to bring us into the inner-life of the abyss or the beauty of the character. The souls of the listeners become absorbed by that which lies beneath the projected sound. This will be to a greater or lesser extent according to the emotional strength of the listener, who therefore will hear more or less substance within the music. I have always been forced to make this conclusion when faced with the different reactions from an audience.

The "Due Melodie" are in reality a virtuoso piece for piano with vocal accompaniment. As Salvatore is a collector of autographs and first-editions, he found the poem by Gianbattista Marino in two different versions by chance: in one it was called "Occhi stellanti" (starry eyes), in the other "Occhi stillanti" (sparkling eyes). This subtle difference moved him to create two different settings of the poem. Some ideas in the piano part, in particular the starry or sparkling cascading runs, can also be found in his Sonata for Piano No. 1 from 1976. At any rate, the material fits this musical illustration of the text in the Due Melodie perfectly. Conversely, I recognize some vocal phrases from Due Melodie in other vocal works, for instance in the "Dodici Madrigali" from 2008 or in "Carnaval" from 2014. So he re-used some material until recently – but the forms and the content always changed.

Translation by John Roskilly