

# Press Release and Review of the 2016 Giacinto Scelsi Festival

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Le Temps | 3. Festival Giacinto Scelsi Basel (by Uwe Bräutigam at NRWJAZZ.NET), translated by Maja Palser

9 and 10 January 2016 saw the 3<sup>rd</sup> instalment of Basel's annual Giacinto Scelsi Festival. Scelsi, an important composer of contemporary music who nevertheless always remained an outsider, never assigned himself to any existing theories or their proponents. His work methods - most of his output developed from his own improvisations which he recorded on tape and which were then transferred to manuscript by his employees – remain a matter of contention. He was a mystic who viewed himself as the implement of a higher force rather than the creator of his own music. It is only in recent years that there has been an increased interest in Scelsi's compositions.

Founder and director of the festival Marianne Schroeder is one of the most renowned performers of new music in Switzerland, with few other musicians being as familiar with Scelsi's work and philosophy as she is. Over the course of three years she worked with Scelsi in Rome, familiarising herself with his compositions. Scelsi ultimately handed over his entire piano repertoire to her for performance and recording purposes. Moreover, Schroeder has been, for decades, engaged in the study of far Eastern philosophy, one of Scelsi's most important sources of inspiration.

The general theme of this year's festival was "Scelsi, the mystic. Poetry and Music"

It opened with Marianne Schroeder's performance of the solo piano piece *Proporzioni Sonore* by one of Scelsi's companions, Franco Evangelisti (1926 – 1980). The piece begins with seeking, groping notes followed by vigorous, emphatic chords that are interspersed with delicate, quiet tones and make a deep impression on the listener - A very successful lead –in to the festival.

## **Improvisations and re-workings of Scelsi's works**

This year's festival focused specifically on re-workings of Scelsi's compositions, both by himself and other musicians. In the opening concert, Dagobert Koitka played a bass clarinet version of *Maknongan* (1976), and Marianne Schroeder gave the premiere of a re-working for solo piano of *Rotativa – The keen unpassioned beauty of a great machine* (1930).

Later there was a further, larger-scale setting of *Rotativa* (1929) – of which there are five in total - for two pianists (Saori Tomidokoro and Marianne Schroeder) and 13 percussionists. In this particular version, the power and rhythm of a great machine was particularly palpable – although Scelsi himself once commented that the intention had been to convey more of a human rhythm, and that he had originally wanted to call the piece *Coitus mechanicus*, which however was deemed improper at the time.

*Maknongan* was given a second performance at the festival, this time in an adaptation for solo double bass, performed by Polish bass player Alexander Gabrys.

Cellist Rohan de Saran performed his new adaptation of the solo cello work *Coelocanth* (1955) as well as two improvisations on Ragas featuring his son Suren on Kandyan drums. De Saran's performances were a particular highlight amongst the many great moments of the festival.

*KO-THA* (1960), described by Scelsi as a dance of the Indian god Shiva, was presented as a re-working for solo guitar by Italian guitarist and composer Arturo Tallini, which implemented the guitar primarily as a percussion instrument.

### **Scelsi's vocal compositions**

A particularly striking contrast to the instrumental pieces appeared in the form of Scelsi's works for solo voice. Japanese soprano Maki Ota, who specialises in contemporary avant-garde vocal music and studied Scelsi's vocal works in Rome, presented a world premiere for solo soprano dedicated to Michiko Hirayama, as well as the 1960 work *Ho*. Ota's performances marked a further highlight in the festival, with her vocal range and her modulations making it easy to forget that what we were hearing was 'only' a voice.

To round off the festival, Robert Koller performed the vocal work *Wo-ma* (1960) for solo bass voice.

### **Works by other composers**

One of the aims of the festival is to present Scelsi's work in relation to other composers of contemporary music. Alongside Evangelisti's previously mentioned piano work there were also works by Barbara Feldmann (\*1953) and Morton Feldman (1926 – 1987) for two pianos, performed by Soari Tomidokoro and Marianne Schroeder. Scelsi was in contact and engaged in exchanges with both Morton Feldman and John Cage.

Violinist Dominik Stark also performed a work by Feldman, as well as giving a brilliant performance of J S Bach's *Chaconne*. On Sunday evening Dagobert Koitka and Camille Emaile premiered a piece for bass clarinet and percussion by the long forgotten Swiss composer Benno Amman entitled *Panda* (1974). Works by Edu Haubensack, James Dillon and Isang Yun also featured.

Indian Dhrupad singer Amit Sharma (\*1977) presented his piece *Evening Melody* as an example of microtonal improvisation in Indian classical music. He also led a workshop on this topic.

Microtonal intervals also feature in Scelsi's work *Xnoybis* (1964) for violin solo, which consists of three sections, all based on a single note. One of Scelsi's most important works, it requires a high level of concentration on the part of the listener as well as the performer- Egidius Streiff rose to the challenge with a congenial rendition of the piece.

The festival also presented a platform for younger, up and coming musicians; Anmarie Wili from Basel, alongside Anthony Robinson, performed her piece *Choises #3* which combines voice, piano, electronics, video installations and expressive dance.

A further highlight of the festival was Norwegian Rolf-Erik Nystrom's (\*1975) premiere of his own piece *Concept of sorrows and dangers xiv*. One of the leading saxophonists in contemporary and improvised music today, he managed to re-focus the concentration of an audience who by this point was beginning to tire. Making use of the entire range of playing techniques available to the alto saxophone - with and without a mouthpiece - as well as playing a soprano saxophone into a bowl of water, the piece ended with both instruments being played simultaneously, a technique made familiar to us by Jazz players such as Rahsaan Roland Kirk.

## Special guest Dieter Schnebel

This year's special guest at the festival was Dieter Schnebel (\*1930), one of the defining figures of contemporary music who had close connections with Adorno, Varese, Stockhausen and Cage. Schnebel began as a composer of serial music, subsequently broadening his understanding of composition towards experimental process-based composition. Throughout his works, Schnebel expanded the use of the human voice, making use of anything from groans to screams.

Sunday morning's events were entirely dedicated to Schnebel's compositions.

Christian Dierstein, professor of percussion at the Basel Music Academy, along with his students, gave a performance of *Zeichen-Sprache: Springer, Rümpfe, 4 Köpfe*, a piece based around the use of the voice in conjunction with jumps, sit-ups and head movements. The use of vocal effects ranging from almost inaudible hissing to expressive screaming in connection with various body movements made for extremely interesting listening.

The highlight of the morning came in the form of Arianne Jessulat's Swiss premiere of Schnebel's work *Liebe-Lied* (2013-2015) for singing pianist. Jessulat exhausted all expressive possibilities of her vocal range whilst at the same time playing the piano, at times standing and playing with only her left hand whilst the right provided a gestural accompaniment to her voice.

Schnebel himself gave a lecture entitled "Beauty / Music – Reflections on an iridescent term", for which he was congratulated by Christian Dierstein who complimented him on having provided an overview of the entirety of music history in a single talk.

## Critical tones

A further lecture, entitled 'Composer in the dark: Borrowed material in the works of Giacinto Scelsi' was given on Saturday by Prof. Friedrich Jaecker. A researcher of Scelsi's work for many years, Jaecker revealed that, contrary to his own representation of himself, the composer not only created his works spontaneously and intuitively, but often extensively overhauled them. Several examples presented by Jaecker showed how Scelsi adapted and integrated existing musical materials from Asia, Africa and Latin America as well as contemporary music by composers such as Edgar Varese and Matsudaira Yoritsune into his own works without crediting the original sources. Scelsi played these tracks on reel tapes and then had them copied down by his employees. Although resulting pieces such as *Uaxuctum*, which utilises music by Varese at four times the original speed, are expertly executed, the compositional methods behind them could be described as dishonest.

Jaecker's critical comments also appeared in the programme notes: „With so many piano and other compositions for solo instruments from the 1950s, how is it possible to separate the wheat from the chaff?“ “And regarding performance: Is it more appropriate to let the sound flow continuously, or to highlight the disparate elements? In order to deal with these and many other questions, it is necessary to play Scelsi's music – and to listen to it.”

This year's Scelsi festival has again made a valuable contribution towards this cause.

In order to provide a deeper understanding for the spirituality inherent in Scelsi's music, the beginnings of the concerts also featured readings of some of his poems in French (with German translation) as well as Italian.

### **Summary**

All in all, this year's Festival featured a total of 32 works, half of which were compositions by Scelsi. Two lectures and a workshop were also held.

At the end of the festival, director Marianne Schroeder stated that "this festival contained enough material for three festivals." Spaced over only two days, it was a truly gargantuan programme, and at the end of the final concert the audience was approaching to its limit. To miss any part of the festival however, would have been unthinkable.

Marianne Schroeder's varied selection of works was very audience friendly, and her choice of excellent musicians of all ages played a significant part in the festival's success.

With the Giacinto Scelsi Festival Marianne Schroeder has established a small but high-quality celebration of contemporary music focusing on Scelsi's works and we are already eagerly anticipating next year's event.