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| Scelsi, Giacinto (1905-1988) |
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| Giacinto Scelsiwas an Italian avant-garde composer best known for the single-note style he developed during the 1950s and 1960s, which minimizes harmonic and melodic activity in order to allow microtonal fluctuations and subtle transformations in timbre, intonation, dynamics, and articulation to come to the fore. Although his works were little known and infrequently performed during his lifetime, they gained considerable acclaim in the 1980s. Scelsi’s œuvrehas proven extremely influential, and is generally regarded as a precursor to the spectral movement. |
| Giacinto Scelsiwas an Italian avant-garde composer best known for the single-note style he developed during the 1950s and 1960s, which minimizes harmonic and melodic activity in order to allow microtonal fluctuations and subtle transformations in timbre, intonation, dynamics, and articulation to come to the fore. Although his works were little known and infrequently performed during his lifetime, they gained considerable acclaim in the 1980s. Scelsi’s œuvrehas proven extremely influential, and is generally regarded as a precursor to the spectral movement.  Many of the elements of Scelsi’s biography remain uncertain, due in part to the composer’s penchant for self-mythologization. His family belonged to the southern Italian nobility, and it was in their ancestral chateau in Irpinie that Scelsi’s interest in music first manifested itself. He had little in the way of formal musical training, apart from receiving private piano lessons in his youth. Scelsi spent much of the 1920s and 1930s abroad, principally in France and Switzerland. It was during this period that he composed his first pieces, most notably *Rotativa* for pianos, strings, brass and percussion (1930). His early music was stylistically eclectic, embracing post-impressionist, neo-classical and twelve-tone idioms at various points in his life.  Shortly after completing his cantata *La Nascita del Verbo* (1948), Scelsi suffered a psychological breakdown. Four years of convalescence followed, during which time he fell silent as a composer. He did, however, spend many hours meditating upon the resonance of individual notes played at the piano, a practice he later claimed led to his eventual recovery. The subsequent period of his life (up to the late 1950s) witnessed a gradual rarefaction of his music. In his piano works of the early to mid-1950s, such as the Suite no. 9, ‘Ttai,’ the obsessive repetition of focal pitches became increasingly pronounced. His works for wind and string instruments of the later 1950s continued this tendency, introducing microtonal inflections as a way of intensifying focal pitches. This process of rarefaction culminated in his *Quattro Pezzi (su una nota sola)* of 1959, which, as its title indicates, limited pitch activity to microtonal deviations around a sustained note, with most of the musical drama displaced to the domains of timbre, rhythm, and dynamics. Works composed during the next decade and a half expanded upon this distinctive musical idiom. Some works, like his String Quartet no. 4 (1964), focused not on a single note but on a wider band of sound. Others, like *Kya (1959)* and *Hurqualia* (1960), reintroduced melodic elements, with sustained notes functioning more as accompanimental drones. Still other works, like *Konx-Om-Pax* (1969), broke with the single-note style altogether.  File: scelsi\_quartet.pdf  Figure 1 Scelsi Quartet no. 4, opening  Equally notable was Scelsi’s compositional process. Virtually all of his works from the early 1950s onward originated as improvisations on the piano or Ondiola (a small electronic keyboard). These were recorded, in some cases edited and overdubbed, and the finished tapes were handed over to other composers, who transcribed the improvisations for various instrumental ensembles. Scelsi claimed that psycho-physical infirmities prevented him from transcribing his improvisations, though some of his collaborators contended that he lacked the requisite skill to do so himself.  File: Il pianoforte muto.pdf  2 Photograph of the Ondiola on the website of the Fondazione Isabella Scelsi. <http://www.scelsi.it/biografia/ondiola.htm>  Although Scelsi’s compositional activity tapered off after 1975, by that time his music had already won admirers among younger composers, such as Alvin Curran, Gérard Grisey, and Horatiu Radulescu. By the 1980s, the rediscovery of Scelsi’s œuvre was underway, and by the time he passed away in 1988 he had achieved renown within the European new music scene. A controversy over the authorship of his music was sparked shortly after his death, when one of his long-time collaborators, Vieri Tosatti, claimed in an interview published in 1989 that it was he, not Scelsi, who deserved credit for much of the music bearing the latter’s name. Such disputes over Scelsi’s idiosyncratic approach to composition have done little, however, to hamper interest in his music. Selected List of Works: *Rotativa* for three pianos, strings, brass and percussion (1930)  String Quartet no. 1 (1944)  *La Nascita del Verbo* for Orchestra and Chorus (1948)  Suite no. 9 ‘Ttai’ for piano (1953)  *Quattro pezzi (su una nota sola)* for orchestra (1959)  *Kya* for clarinet and seven instruments (1959)  *Hurqualia (‘Un royaume différent’)* for large orchestra (1960)  String Quartet no. 2 (1961)  String Quartet no. 3 (1963)  *Hymnos* for organ and two orchestras (1963)  String Quartet no. 4 (1964)  *Anahit (‘Poème lyrique dédié à Vénus)* for violin and eighteen instruments (1965)  *Konx-om-pax* for chorus and orchestra (1969)  *Canti del Capricorno* for female voice and instruments (1962-72)  *Aitsi* for amplified piano (1974)  String Quartet no. 5 (1984-85) |
| Further reading:  (Anderson)  (Drott)  (Freeman)  (Jaecker)  (Giacinto Scelsi)  (Reish)  (Scelsi)  (Scelsi, L’Homme du son)  (Scelsi, Il Sogno 101) |