

Who's Pulling the Strings?. Michael Gorodecki Introduces the Music of Franco Donatoni

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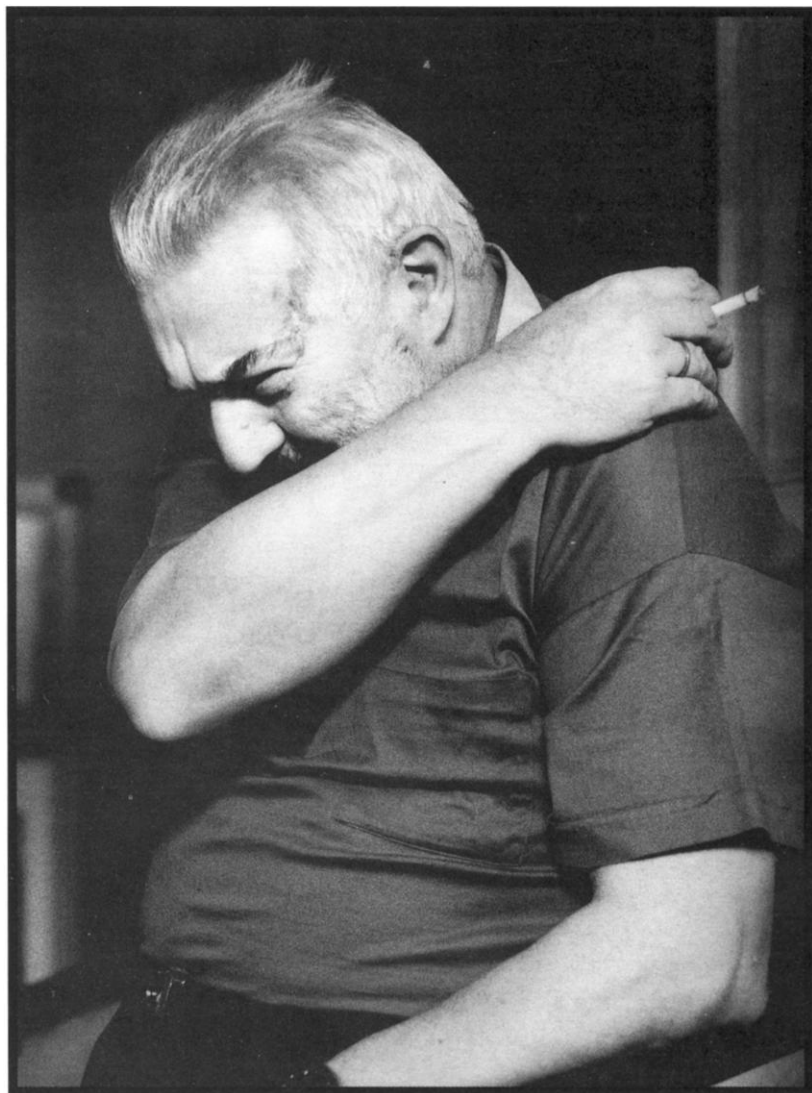
# WHO'S PULLING THE STRINGS?

Michael Gorodecki introduces the work of Franco Donatoni

In 1975 Franco Donatoni was preparing a new edition of Pergolesi's *The secret marriage*. He had taken up employment with his then publisher,

Suvini Zerboni, had given up his work studio, and to all intents and purposes permanently ceased composing. Donatoni's compositional and existential crisis had hit rock-bottom. Yet only two years later, the profound negativity he experienced in the writing of *Duo per Bruno*, his last major work before the caesura, had been replaced, in Donatoni's own words, with 'joy, almost euphoria'<sup>1</sup> in *Spiri*. Since then, the ensuing explosion of compositional activity has brought forth more than seventy works. Donatoni hardly seems to stop for breath. But although it is easy enough to register in the surface brilliance of today a major shift from the dense layered structures of the 60s and early 70s, the degree of dependency of today on what came before is not necessarily as evident.

In an article in 1981<sup>2</sup> Donatoni singled out the Fourth Quartet of Bartók as having had an enormous impact on him at the start of his career. On a superficial level many Bartókian gestures, particularly in the clear, linear textures and rhythmic muscular tautness, were immediately absorbed into Donatoni's style, for example in the *Concertino* for strings (1953), *Sinfonia* for string orchestra (1953) and *Cinque pezzi* for two pianos (1954). But it is on the structural level where the most profound effects of Bartók's thinking were felt, and only as Donatoni's mature voice evolved. In the same article Donatoni enumerated four essential aspects of Bartók's music: '(1) cellular exposition and organism growth; (2) growth without development, conservation of the fragment; (3) juxtaposition of organisms; mutation, not evolution; and (4) stasis of pulsations, continuity of tone, "night" atmosphere, noises, murmurings, vibrations like moving timbres in an immobile space.'<sup>3</sup> And, with the exception of 'night music' all these aspects can be traced in Donatoni's music from 1975 on. But in the inter-



Malcolm Crowthers

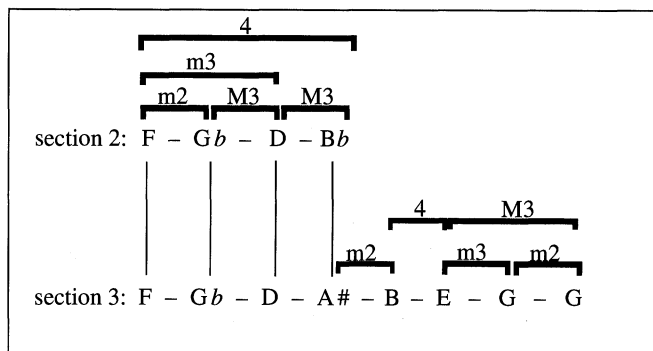
vening years Donatoni's experiencing of the contemporary serial world, together with the infinity of possibilities of Cage, was to lead him down a dark spiralling tunnel where identity, both musical and personal, would become lost.

At first the encounter with the international serial language was full of hope and fierce beauty. The *Tre improvvisazioni* for piano (1959) show in their highly structured forms, grand leaping gestures from one end of the keyboard to the other, and studied exploration of a multitude of timbral possibilities, a distinctive response to Boulez's *Structures* and *Second Piano Sonata*. Other works of the period, such as *Serenata* for female voice and 16 instruments (1959), and *For Grilly, improvvisazione per sette* (1960) are, in their mixture of pointillistic 'statistical' textures and brief bursts of breathless lyricism, very much Darmstadt-influenced creations with an Italian slant. These works all already show a finely-wrought technique and mastery of the craft of composition, particularly in their fastidiousness of structure, both on the small and large scale. And if Donatoni had not tried to reconcile serialism with the ideas of John Cage, perhaps those objective structures would not have gained the oppressive weight over his subjectivity that they did. For Cage's notions, and practice, of freeing the self from intentionality, beyond like and dislike could never be connected by Donatoni with any of the sense of Buddhistic liberation always at the background of Cage's work. And yet they held a compelling fascination. At the same time the resultant 'absence of form' in Cage's work was also an index 'that music was running into great danger, that its survival in art was being put into doubt.'<sup>4</sup> It had to be protected. And so to uphold musical structure within the context of Cage's legacy meant an ever-greater self-effacement, a relinquishing of the subjective involvement of the artist with his objective work.

Distinguishing between himself and Stockhausen on the one hand, and Cage on the other Donatoni wrote: 'My distance from Stockhausen, despite my admiration, is that he is always perfecting his ego and his own music, while I want to destroy both one and the other.'<sup>5</sup> 'The difference between me and Cage is that for him "the work" does not exist *a priori*, while for me it is so present, insidiously, to make one have to dismantle it in its monolithic unity. Perhaps the significance of my work is only the exhaustive way this analysis is conducted'.<sup>6</sup>

Donatoni's self-destructive path took various directions. In the early part of the 60s in *Doubles* for harpsichord (1961), *Puppenspiel* (1961) and *Per orchestra* (1962) it was a submission to highly intricate serial structures that still reigned. *Puppenspiel*, subtitled *Studi per una musica di scena*, is a particularly indicative work. Its title<sup>7</sup> is taken from a short tale by the early 20th-century German writer Heinrich von Kleist, which evokes the eerie world of marionettes, caught between reality and the imagination. The main protagonist in the story, a certain 'Mr. C' (note the Kafkaesque anonymity), pulls the strings of the puppets. And Donatoni might be said to be doing musically-speaking the same thing. The piece is a macabre, internalised theatre full of awkward, taut movements producing unsettled musical shapes which move continuously in unpredictable directions. Each instrument seems to be in one way or another fantastically parodying itself, especially the swoopings of the horn and the chortlings of the bassoon.

The following group of works, such as *Zrcadlo* for string quartet, and *Black and white* for 37 instruments toy with different kinds of



highly-controlled aleatorism as another method of holding the expressive self at bay, although it shouldn't be ignored that Donatoni's timbral imagination becomes even more virtuosic, particularly regarding the use of extended string techniques, percussion effects, and the occasional employment of 'glissatori'<sup>8</sup> to create great washes of chromatic sound.

It is with *Puppenspiel* 2 (1966), however, that the last and most important part of what is commonly called Donatoni's negative phase begins. Fifteen years later the composer noted, 'Automatic procedures had already been activated in *Puppenspiel* 2,'<sup>9</sup> and these procedures, called 'codes' by Donatoni, came to be at the very heart of his technique. In principle, they derive from serial and post-serial operations of inversion, retrograde, transposition, diminution, rotation, permutation, etc. But they are taken by Donatoni far beyond an all-governing precompositional matrix through a constant process of mutation and transformation. Furthermore until *Duo per Bruno* (1975), the code, once set off, fixed into a rigid mechanism which lost all contact with the subjective act which initiated it. *Etwas ruhiger im Ausdruck* and *Souvenir*, both from 1967, exemplify the techniques and the automatised world they create...although it may be more correct to say destroy, for both works live almost parasitically off other composers' material, in the former case a fragment from Schoenberg's piano piece op.23 no.2, bar 8; in the latter 363 fragments selected, juggled and reconstituted from Stockhausen's *Gruppen*. In *Etwas ruhiger im Ausdruck* the Schoenberg is initially 'solid' source material, but by the end its 'linguistic value'<sup>10</sup> has disappeared, the intervals so mutated (or mutilated!) that they lose their value as intervals, the musical figures changing so frequently or layered so much as to block each other out. All sense of identity has been eradicated. The loss of recognisability works in another way in *Souvenir*, where every burst of activity, however perfectly conceived in terms of texture and timbral interplay, is always cut short by a pause, as though caught in a trap. At the close, the material finally appears to become more continuous only to stretch out, both temporally and harmonically, and collapse literally exhausted before our ears on a major triad of Eb major.

It is significant how little Donatoni cared for the value of his works at the end of the 60s. *Souvenir* was so called 'because it is simply a piece of waste with the same value as those souvenirs sold to American tourists in Italy'.<sup>11</sup> At the same time each work had become ever-more labyrinthine and obsessive in structure, while the mazes seemed only to feed off themselves increasingly bloated results: *ORTS (Souvenir no.2)* (1970) reworks the musical 'crumbs' of *Souvenir*; *Doubles* (1961) is reincarnated in terrifying fashion in *Doubles II* (1970); *To Earle* (1970) is immediately mul-

tiplied a hundred-fold to produce a 'triumph of chaos' in *To Earle two* (1971-72). Donatoni was progressively suffocating his own creative energies.

The works between 1972 and 1975 seemed gentler in spirit, at least in the titles, *Lied*, *Voci*, *Jeux pour deux*, *Espressivo*, but the last of these, *Duo per Bruno*, hailed critically at the time of its first performance, was for Donatoni so overwhelmingly 'programmed' that after it nothing seemed possible. And yet *Duo per Bruno* did, amidst its rich, multilayered sound-world, suggest a possible, if unbeknown at the time to Donatoni, change of musical thinking.

Written in memory of Bruno Maderna, the starting material for the work is a Venetian drinking song, *La biondina in gondoletta* that Maderna used in his *Venetian journal*. In typical Donatonian fashion the song is 'source material' for automatic transformations, and remains quite unrecognisable. The work is schematic on all levels, everything viewed in terms of binary opposition, from the interval, to tessitura, to instrumental group, to the division of the work into two equal halves, separated by a bar of silence. But above and beyond this, there is an oblique, expressive, ritualistic trajectory that is constant and audible. The material of the second half, written after a sizeable break in which Donatoni had been admitted to a psychiatric clinic, is decidedly more dramatic than the first half. The final sounds of repeated Ebs in the strings against the symbolic funereal sound of bells, in their unchanging, *solid* nature was a sign within the Cage-like construction of something freeing to come.

Until the mid-70s every burst of material had produced a new gesture. But although each may have been locked into a logical network, it was one which could not be recognised aurally. Following *Duo per Bruno* each gesture became related to another by maintaining a similar shape or identity-type. Even while the exact internal make-up of intervals and/or durations continuously changes, a constancy of 'figure' arises. As the Italian musicologist Gianmorio Borio has written, while the former displays 'the dissolution of material', in the latter there is 'a conservation of energy'.<sup>12</sup>

As much as anything this derived from the new importance of 'line' in Donatoni's thinking. Remarking on the automatic techniques of the following work, *Ash* (1976), Donatoni speaks of 'a music more determined by the linearisation than the superimposition of the codes, rich in diverse and variegated articulations'.<sup>13</sup> The linear nature of the work had been in fact a very natural, practical response to the eight-instrument chamber ensemble. And although Donatoni has written subsequently for orchestra,<sup>14</sup> the vast majority of his pieces have been for chamber-like forces and solo instruments.

By concentrating on the flow of the horizontal, a new sense of 'play' began to enter the music, the surface always vibrating, nervously and exuberantly twisting and turning through sprays of arabesque. Donatoni's path upward was tentative at first, however,

and there is still a sense in *Toy* for violin, viola and harpsichord (1977) (note the title), *Algo* for guitar (1977), and *Ala* for viola (1977), each with their small, glistening, jewel-like movements that the spring had not yet totally been released. Only with *Spiri* (1977) was the 'recovery of the game-playing exercise in invention'<sup>15</sup> complete. The automatic procedures, the 'codes', ceased being dry, and dessicating mechanisms. They became connected instead with precise, intuitively derived musical images. Donatoni practised his craft of the code, constantly experimenting to see how the results of a particular set of 'instructions' would differ from one group of notes to another; or, conversely, how the same piece of material would react to different codes. Quickly he accumulated a vast technique of microstructural control which would give rise to an overall freedom – a freedom derived directly from the kind of organic structural sense he had absorbed from Bartók, but which had been for so long submerged.

The opening of *Spiri* immediately provides an example of Donatoni's kind of figures and how their manipulation generates form (ex. 1). The first five notes of the oboe part describe a cross between line and arpeggio that at first rises and then turns in again. This formal outline is the seed which then sprouts downward, is inverted, has its top note (C) cut from the next appearance, but always keeps its singular identity. The violin initially has a kind of heterophonic shadow of the shape, but it is more fragmented and ripe for the addition of grace notes and trills. The continuation of the oboe part in bar 2 extends the fragmented idea into longer notes but also takes up the trills and graces, while the oboe material moves to the violin. At the end of bar 2 there is another material exchange with the oboe parabola now displaced rhythmically by one demisemiquaver, followed this time by both instruments falling into fragments, separated by rests in bar 3. The tossing of material from one to the other creates one intertwining unity, something that remains a constant premise throughout the piece, as the other instruments are added, and an ever-wider variety of accentuation, phrasing and articulations are accumulated.

'I do not believe, I transform,'<sup>16</sup> Donatoni has said, and this flux went hand in hand with a review of his building blocks. The basic pitch element remained, as in the 60s, the interval. But with the post-1975 new figural identity, there was a tendency, as in *Spiri*, for the intervals in combination not only to signal specific shapes, but also make play with references to more tonal materials through the use of triads, or partial triads and deformed chromatics. Donatoni's music did not in any sense become tonal, but it allowed again for a certain euphonous quality to enter into the previously white total chromatic norm. The continued, rigorous use of the serial technique of 'polarisation', the registral fixing of pitches, has also aided greater harmonic clarity, as well as being used to create structurally normative sonorities.

Rhythmically speaking, Donatoni has continued to think principally in terms of duration and non-repeating groups, but whereas before the music was littered with irrationals, the page is now substantially cleaned up, using for the most part only groupings of grace-notes to alter the pacing of the energetic thrust of the irregular groupings of rational values. Additionally Donatoni often deliberately notates durations ignoring the beat, and within an unchanging metre to emphasise the sense of *relative* values and the insignificance of agogic accent (ex. 2).



The precision of pitch and motion is also reflected in the new degree of timbral stratification – the opposition of low brass and double bass with high woodwind and violin in *Spiri* is typical. At the same time, the kind of dry, staccatissimo articulations that have so often sounded in recent Donatoni have led the composer to draw a link with his Italian ancestry, notably Rossini<sup>17</sup> and the world he found while editing Pergolesi<sup>18</sup> (ex. 3).



Donatoni's solo instrumental pieces exemplify particularly well the relationship between materials and techniques, and especially how they involve the sense of line. *Nidi* for piccolo (1979) is in two movements, like so many of Donatoni's solo works. The start of each of the first five sections of the first movement is presented in a layered format in ex.4, which reveals certain procedures: (1)



the general principle of *rilettura* whereby the previous section of music is reread and varied either through new articulation, a new element added, an existing element taken away, or multiplied; (2) manipulation of duration through a mixture of symmetry and asymmetry (e.g. in the opening section the main notes are always in groupings of quavers, thus, 2-1-1-2-1-1 etc., while the intervening rests are irregular, in semiquavers, 6-2-5-2-4-7-2-8-3-1-3-6-5-1-7-2-8-3-1-1; (3) the progressive 'filling in' of space with sound; (4) the specific extension of interval groups to new pitches e.g.: (5) the grace-notes which deflect sense of pulse, regularity and accent; (6) the progressive replacement of one pitch polarisation with another; and (7) the new characters created by pitch rearticulation, e.g. the grace notes of section 4 transformed into the 'real' notes of section 5.

Although initially one may aurally follow manipulations of pitch and rhythm in an explicit way, it becomes increasingly difficult as the piece progresses. But this is an essential part of Donatoni's thinking – the number of codes *should* stay secret and unknowable outside the composition process itself. Indeed Donatoni may often treat a passage with more than one code before reaching a result; in particular there is the common use of 'filtering' whereby one set of pitches or durations sieves another, leaving the 'difference' between the two. As Donatoni shows through the most extreme negative example, the code is always a private affair: 'Suppose one applies the principle of filter...to a sequence of pitches with the intention of obtaining an F#. But in this case the sequence has no F#: in this case we're dealing with an automatic code which speaks with a magic formula but has no function.'<sup>19</sup>

Aurally, it is the ebb and flow of shapes, always the same, always different, that matters. For Donatoni, the musical complexity lies entirely within himself: 'Complexity of code, simplicity of result...difficulty [for others] to know the nature of the code'.<sup>20</sup> And that kind of thinking became a kind of life-breath, as much as anything because the relationship between the act of composition and the finished product had *not* fundamentally changed: '[The composer] does not work to produce a work, but to exercise himself in work he is constrained to submit to the work he produces.'<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Donatoni insists that the elements he manipulates do not constitute a 'language' but merely 'material'. And why is this? Because 'language "expresses" while "material takes form"'.<sup>22</sup> Donatoni, and his school<sup>22</sup>, are late 20th-century compositional artisans, concerned with the technique of writing, the 'codici', the 'scrittura'. The only thing necessary is 'to make', whilst the subjective world of the artist is still not essentially expressed outside: '[Composing is] the place of a ritual in which the sacrifice of the artist redeems man.'<sup>23</sup>

Donatoni had, nevertheless, as he puts it, begun to sing internally again. And this was marked in 1978 by *Arie* for soprano and orchestra, his first piece for voice since the *Serenata* of 1959. The poems from Italian and Middle-Eastern sources speak of many kinds of love and the vocal line is full of sweeping, coloratura flourishes and turns. The music *is* expressive. But it is always a highly stylised expression, like a kind of theatrical scene in which the faces are hidden by masks.

The subject matter of another vocal work, *L'ultima sera* for female voice and five instruments (1980), deals with the themes of solitude and loss. But this piece exemplifies how Donatoni also 'contains' expression through macrostructural means. The work

sets eight texts, but all *fragments* of larger texts. In the musical context, these extracts are set amidst a fabric of instrumental sections that are themselves arranged as a series of well-defined, contrasting fragments – which Donatoni calls ‘panels’. These panels accumulate in an ‘ecological’ way, as a natural ecosystem continuously balances itself over time, growing organically, but never to the point of overload, entropy or chaos.<sup>24</sup> An expressive hiatus is never in sight.

Formal fragmentation also suggests a very particular attitude towards time and memory. In *Cadeau*, the seventh of ten pieces written in the tremendous year of 1983, each section recalls something of the previous one whether in terms of articulation, rhythmic phrasing, or pitch/intervallic repetition. But overall it is like repeatedly stepping into the Heraclitean river, where on each occasion the perception of the form has slightly altered. And even in a situation where memory may refer events to further back in the piece, as in *Refrain* (1987), what matters is the moment to moment *re-acknowledgement* of the material. Time, and form, are irreversible.

Donatoni has shown this in the connections from one work to another too. In the 60s, his music had fed destructively off his and other composers’ work, or acted, but now he had found a way of endlessly reinventing his own. Donatoni disavows a work complete and absolute in itself, and proposes instead one enormous, relative ‘work-in-progress’. If, for example, one looks forward from *Alamari* (1983), the initial 51-bar stretch in the piano part is redistributed in *Rima* for piano (1983), while the opening 34 bars of *Hot* (1991) are also lifted from the start of *Alamari*, with the woodwind and brass undulating lines subsequently added to its jazzy, pseudo-walking bass structure. *Alamari* itself takes its pitch basis from the work directly preceding, *Ala* (1983).

Despite (or perhaps because of) this attitude of sharing material and techniques between works, it may be argued that Donatoni’s most successful works are those that precisely override the common bonds between pieces, i.e. those that have a very work-specific structure and sonorous character. *Cloches* (1991) is surely such a work, particularly in the way its opposed groups of winds and pianos/tuned percussion move through slowly shifting harmonic fields within an ‘interlocking puzzle’<sup>25</sup> of panels to a true culmination point as the sound of bells finally rings out.

But at the same time what crucially refreshed *every* work was Donatoni’s recovery of the sense of the *quality* of music: a reconciliation with the intuitive part of the brain, which could allow him to shape the qualitative side of music into an abundant profusion of sustainable wholes, just as the overall effect of a cloudburst is made up of millions of individual droplets. Granted, Donatoni deliberately fails to acknowledge the connective pathways between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. But that would be to cloud the precise dualistic understanding that is at the heart of his compositional theory and practice. Moreover, any kind of admittance of an overall encompassing unity would either be (1) to acknowledge Cage’s Buddhist world-view on earth – for Donatoni it is only a *symbol* of Nirvana; or (2) ‘to identify oneself with one’s own qualitative being. And that would be a return to thinking in the subjective, expressive first person, i.e. romantic.... *Le style c’est moi* one can no longer say...’<sup>26</sup>

In psychoanalytic terms, Donatoni continues to do today what he was doing all through the 60s – to suppress his ego. But whereas

then the method of submission to the outside work became so extreme that it almost literally killed him, today the clarity of the division between intuition and rationality allows him to maintain a fragile thread between himself and the world. That world for Donatoni is often seen as a kind of elaborate playhouse in which one event will coincidentally trigger off another: the sight of a shop-window of cakes, for instance, may make you miss the traffic-light change which may then cause you to meet someone you know near the shop whom you would otherwise have missed... etc. etc... Donatoni reflects this in his method of discovery and elaboration of new figures which appear *by chance* from the results of the automatic growth. These elaborations, Donatoni says, are no more than ‘giochi per i bambini’. Perhaps... But if they are children’s games, we should not ignore the fact that it is the most sophisticated, knowing kind of innocence that has gone to fill up the lacunae of doubt from before – doubt that may indeed still be only a little way below the scintillating surface. Donatoni’s poetic and technique, as applicable to teaching as he has shown them to be, are, first and foremost, his personal mode of survival.

#### Notes

1. Quoted in accompanying booklet of Etcetera CD KTC 1053
2. Franco Donatoni. ‘Presenza di Bartók’ in *Il sigaro di Armando*, edited by P. Santi: Milan Spirali 1982.
3. *ibid* p.88
4. Franco Donatoni. *Questo*: Milano) Adelphi 1970, p.12.
5. Franco Donatoni. ‘Il materiale in opera’ in *Il sigaro di Armando*, p.109.
6. *ibid* p.111
7. The title was suggested to Donatoni by the Italian musicologist, Mario Bortolotto, whose ideas have had a major impact on contemporary Italian music in general.
8. ‘Glissatori’ are pieces of wood of various lengths used to press down on parts of a keyboard to obtain clusters of precise sizes
9. Franco Donatoni. ‘La somiglianza della continuità’ in *Il sigaro di Armando*, p.81.
10. Gianmario Borio. ‘La poetica della figura nella recente produzione di Donatoni’ in *Autori vari*, edited by Enzo Restagno Torino 1990, p.224.
11. Quoted in Ivanka Stoianova. ‘Franco Donatoni: Souvenir’ in *Musique en jeu*, 20 (September 1975), p.11.
12. G. Borio. *Op. cit.* p.225.
13. Franco Donatoni. Interview, ‘La vita’ in *Autori vari* p.43.
14. *Portrait* for harpsichord and orchestra (1976-77); *Arie* for voice and orchestra (1978); *In cauda* for chorus and orchestra (1982); *Sinfonia op. 63 ‘Anton Webern’*. N.B. *Sinfonia* is scored for chamber orchestra; no works to date have been written for symphony orchestra without solo or solo group.
15. Quoted by Enzo Restagno; Franco Donatoni. Interview, p.43.
16. Quoted in Colazzo S., ‘Ironia e teatralità nelle composizioni dell’ultimo Donatoni’ in *Autori Vari*, op. cit. p.125.
17. Indeed Donatoni suggests that ‘in truth I have always felt myself to be a composer a little *alla Rossini*’; Franco Donatoni. Interview p.63
18. Donatoni mentions in particular the oboe leaps in *Cadeau* (1983).
19. Franco Donatoni. Interview p.32.
20. ‘Questionnaire on complexity in music’ in *Complexity?*, accompanying booklet to festival, Rotterdam, March 1990.
21. Franco Donatoni. *In-oltre*: Brescia, L’Obliquo 1988, p.17.
22. Donatoni has had more pupils from Italy and around the world than probably any other composer teaching today.
23. Franco Donatoni. *Antecedent X*, Milan, Adelphi, p.16.
24. Franco Donatoni, *In-oltre*, op.cit. p.21
25. This image was frequently used by Donatoni during his 1989 Summer Composition Class at the Accademia Chigiana, Siena.
26. Franco Donatoni. Interview p.67.
27. Salvatore Colazzo, ‘Pensare la musica. Intervista a Franco Donatoni sul comporre’ in *Quotidiano dei poeti*, ed. by Cultural Centre ‘Pensionante de Saraceni’ (Lecce), March 1989.



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### Collections

Dossier Donatoni, *Entretiens*, 2 (November 1986)  
*Autori Vari, Donatoni*, edited by Enzo Restagno, Turin 1990

### CD discography

- *Alamari*: Adda 581133
- *Ave*: Adda 581133
- *Cadeau*: Erato 45366-2
- *Clair*: Finlandia 366
- *De près*: Etcetera KTC 1053, Adda 581143
- *Diario '76*: Harmonic H/CD 8616
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- *Feria*: Adda 581143
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- *Lame*: Harmonic H/CD 8616
- *Le ruisseau sur l'escalier*: Adda 581143
- *L'ultima sera*: Adda 581143
- *Lumen*: Adda 581143
- *Nidi*: Adda 581133
- *Ombra*: Harmonic H/CD 8616
- *Refrain*: Etcetera KTC 1053
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