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Domenico Guaccero. Rappresentazione et esercizio (1968)

Sacred action for twelve performers of Domenico Guaccero

Editing of biblical texts Notker Balbulus (Hymnus Spiritui Sancto) and of S. Juan de la Cruz (Canciones del alma, Noche Oscura) edited by Domenico Guaccero

Conductor Domenico Guaccero

Director Antonio Calenda

Choreographic consultant Marcel Rayez

Stage manager Stefano Tolnay

Lights and costumes Michiko Nogiri

With Compagnia del Teatro Musicale di Roma: Erminia Santi (soprano lirico-leggero), Michiko Hirayama (soprano sperimentale), Carol Plantamura (mezzo soprano), Tomaso Frascati (tenore lirico-leggero), Enrico Fioretti Idigoras (tenore), Therman Bailey (baritono), (voci maschili), Antonio Calenda (attore), Marcel Rayez (mimo), Nicola Samale (flauto), Bruno Battisti D'Amario (chitarra), Franco Barbalonga (tastiere)

First performance Perugia, Chiesa di S. Filippo Neri, 28 settembre 1968

Altre messe in scena:

Conductor and director M^o Sergio Rendine, *Nuova Consonanza 20° Festival, 1984*

Conductor and director M^o Bruno De Franceschi, *Nuova Consonanza 37° Festival, 2001*

From ritual to meditation for an inner action in Musical Theater

by *Daniele Vergni*

Between the late 1950s and the early 1960s there began to take shape within the New Music the idea of a New Musical Theater. Domenico Guaccero was one of the composers who more than any other contributed to redefining musical theater through his compositions, theoretical reflection and organization of experiences such as the *Compagnia di Teatro Musicale*, founded in 1965 with Egisto Macchi, and his organization and direction of the musical and improvisational theater group *Intermedia* in 1978. *Rappresentazione et esercizio* was the product of the basic experiences out of which Guaccero's musical theater was born: gestural compositions¹, conceived between 1963 and 1965, and *Scene del potere*, the first work of Guaccero's new musical theater, produced between 1964 and 1968, in which he put his theatrical ideas to the test: the use of multiple performers characterized by *de-specialization*²; the use of multiple locations for the action; a vision of the spectator as an active part of the play; the disarticulation of the story line and of the frontal mode of the action; the independence of the various languages used in the work; and the use of controlled unpredictability and improvisation. All elements that Guaccero re-elaborated in *Rappresentazione et esercizio*.

The work is divided into two parts, the first, *Rappresentazione* – subdivided into seven scenes³ – in which the spectator witnesses a ritual that narrates events linked by a logical thread, from the birth of Logos to the birth of mankind, up to the death of Christ. The narration, comprising a compilation of texts, gives prominence to vocal action in the first two scenes: the choral performance of *Logos, the Word as source of life*, and the vocal performance of *The creation of the world*.

The real action begins in the third scene: *Creation of man and woman*. In the fourth scene, *The building of the temple, labor*, the voices are divided into two groups and a movable platform is brought on stage with palings in the apse, and around the tomb area the performers begin constructing the temple, using props such as a wheelbarrow, a hammer, nails, etc. Instrumentalists, singers, a mime and an actor perform rhythmic actions. In the fifth scene, *The three temptations of the Anointed One, the Cristòs*, and sixth, *The violence of the three powers: Caifas, Herod, Pilate, inflicted on the Anointed One*, there is a choir of three female voices. In the last scene, *Death and burial of the Anointed One*, is exclusively vocal, the lights are gradually dimmed into darkness as the chorus emits a lament. Everything was born out of darkness and *Rappresentazione* ends in darkness.

It is in this first part that Guaccero experiments most with his vocal techniques – including spoken, glissando, double breathe-in sounds, rapid plugged/normal alternation, micro- and non-microtonal oscillations, full vibrato and variable amplitude, quarter tones of phonemes, and counterpoint between rapid murmurings with different timbres – which above all the six voices have the task of carrying out, but, as marked in the score, “all the performers move and participate in vocal

¹ *Incontro a tre (variazioni su Ionesco)* of 1963, *Nuovo incontro (a tre)* and *Negativo* of 1964, *Esercizi per voce femminile* and *Esercizi per attrice o mimo* of 1965.

² An expansion of the performer role through interdisciplinarity and interchange of techniques among the various interpreters, essential aspects of his 1978 lab project *Intermedia*, for the purpose of examining the relationship between improvisation and musical theater.

³ 01. The Logos, the Word as origin of life; 02. The creation of the world; 03. The creation of man and woman; 04. The building of the temple, labor; 05. The three temptations of the Anointed One, the Cristòs; 06. The violence of the three powers: Caifas, Herod, Pilate, inflicted on the Anointed One; 07. Death and burial of the Anointed One.

performances.”⁴ This feature of *multiple interpreters* is to be understood in two ways: the various interpreters play multiple characters, such as the soprano who in scene three mimes the birth of woman, in scene five plays the tempter and in scene six one of the powers who commit violence against Christ; and above all the various performers, in addition to their specialty, must be open to other disciplines and other techniques through what Guaccero calls *de-specialization*.⁵ In the second part, *Esercizio* – divided into four scenes⁶ – the spectator is conscripted to co-participate in a collective phase of the community: the lights are turned off and the twelve performers are grouped together in the tomb area, with braziers set before them (in the version directed by Bruno De Franceschi each of them lights a candle). In *Esercizio* there is no longer acting: narration stops and collective meditation takes over. This part has been defined by the author as a “turning in on themselves.”⁷ A meditation on the destiny of man, born out of darkness – scene devoid of action – and returning to darkness – scene seven ending in permanent darkness for the whole second half – in which the performers act out this descent into darkness – the absence of lights and the verses of St. John of the Cross’s *noche oscura* – which only through the act of meditation can lead to a new light. The involvement of the spectators is therefore unrelated to a gestural type of action but rather to a psychological state, an *inner action*.⁸ The stage location is a Church and the places assigned for the action are three (the apse, the tomb and the tool place). In scenic terms the visual apparatus employs different intensity lights that disappear in *Esercizio* to give way to darkness. Work costumes are used, the same for everyone, at least until the end of scene three, where the costumes differ according to sex but then go back to being all the same as before in the second part. The languages used are Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian and Spanish (the last for the verses of S. Juan de la Cruz), and an artificial dialect created by Guaccero by blending the dialects of Nuoro and Bari for the translation of certain passages of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

The stage writing experimented by the theater of the 1960s has a parallel in the new *open* writing that characterizes the new music. In particular, in Domenico Guaccero’s writing *gesture* is an open operation, written into the score but also improvised⁹. The score for *Rappresentazione et esercizio* allows for margins of openness through the use of various forms of improvisation by the musician’s voices, etc. And of controlled unpredictability. In this way, as Alessandro Mastropietro notes, “the performer is complicit with the composer.”¹⁰ In terms of compositional technique what Guaccero chooses is a kind of compilation, which “generally involves a certain degree of fluctuation in choice within limited repertoires, in temporal placement and the development of scenic-sound events, a fluidity capable of achieving a direct dramatic valence.”¹¹

If much of the musical theater of the 1960s took its cue from happenings – especially John Cage and Sylvano Bussotti – or from an idea of musical theater as “an attempt to make the musical processes theatrically real”¹² – Luciano Berio and Luigi Nono – Guaccero’s musical theater, and especially *Rappresentazione et esercizio*, had the merit of re-depositing at the center of theatrical and musical action ritual as an experience that combines speech, music, gesture and action – aiming the work toward a relational aspect not with a mass spectator, creating a musical theater in which it was the wholeness of the action that underpinned the audio-visual apparatus through a method of musical composition.

⁴ D. Guaccero, *Dalla premessa alla partitura*, in D. Guaccero, *Rappresentazione et esercizio*, Ricordi, Milan 1969.

⁵ “I’ve always worked at overcoming performers’ specializations: a singer should also know how to speak, act, play, a dance speak, play, etc. It’s clear what all that implies: an effort of continual, interdisciplinary exercise, a new idea of (musical) theater in which music isn’t, as in opera, the only structural element,” in D. Guaccero, *Un’idea di teatro musicale*, in the scene schedule of the Piccolo Festival di Positano, June 30-July 9, 1972, pp. 19-20, also in D. Guaccero, (ed.), Alessandro Mastropietro, *Un iter segnato. Scritti e interviste*, Ricoldi-LIM, Milan 2005, cit., p.478.

⁶ 01. Meditation of light and hymn to the Holy Spirit; 02. Descent into darkness: text of Jonas swallowed by the whale; 03. Darkness in its negative and positive aspects: the blessed *noche oscura* of S. Juan de la Cruz; 04. Return to light: toil and patience on the road to perfection.

⁷ D. Guaccero, *Dalla premessa alla partitura*, cit.

⁸ It is Daniela Tortora who speaks of inner action and of the “absolute newness of *Esercizio*, which strives to ‘step up’ from a theater that simply represents and documents, to a theater that, in going beyond itself, prevails over the artifice, the staging, to become a true form of collective self-knowledge,” in D. Tortora, *Dalla «noche oscura» di Esercizio alle «altre stelle» del commiato: motivi ricorrenti nel secondo Novecento italiano*, p. 202, in D. Tortora (ed.), *Teoria e prassi dell’avanguardia – Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi*, Aracne, Rome 2009, cit., pp. 199-212.

⁹ An in-depth examination of the matter: G. Guaccero, *Segno gesto suono. Domenico Guaccero e le prassi improvvisative*, pp. 121-128, in A. Sbordoni (ed.), *Improvvisazione oggi*, Libreria musicale italiana, Lucca 2014.

¹⁰ A. Mastropietro, *Tra improvvisazione e alea: il macro-fenomeno nel teatro musicale delle neo-avanguardie romane*, cit., p.129.

¹¹ Ivi, cit., p.136.

¹² L. Berio, *Problemi di teatro musicale*, in L. Berio, (ed.), I. De Benedictis, *Scritti sulla musica*, Einaudi, Turin 2010, p. 46.