

Scelsi: Aion

GIACINTO SCELSEI was born into an old family of Italian aristocracy on 8 January 1905 in La Spezia and died in Rome on 9 August 1988. *Aion*, the most symphonic of his six major orchestral works, was set to full score in 1961. Scelsi's ascendance from obscurity occurred in the mid-1980s, and was consummated in October 1987 at the SIMC International Festival in Cologne where his orchestral music was featured to great acclaim. *Aion* was first performed earlier, on 12 October 1985 by the West German Radio Symphony Orchestra led by Zoltan Pesko, also in Cologne. This is the North American premier. The piece is scored for woodwinds by threes excluding flutes, six horns, three trumpets, four trombones, four tubas, timpani, six percussionists, harp, viola, four cellos and four double basses.

Sometimes called "the Charles Ives of Italy" for both his musical foresight and position outside the musical establishment, Scelsi's life is shrouded in mystery, at his own insistence. He wrote no explanatory discussion for his mature works, disclaimed any analysis, and did not even allow photographs to be taken. In fact his eccentricity was so pronounced that he did not describe himself as a composer, but rather as a "messenger" who transcribed ideas into sound. His unconventional approach to creative activity manifested itself in an ascetic directness of expression which conflates the norms of musical argument. He does not confirm or oppose the musical trends of his time, but rather strikes off in an entirely different direction. Scelsi is fundamentally a musical visionary whose ideas were frequently worked out in improvisation and scored with the help of paid copyists. Although this arrangement has caused some people to doubt the authenticity of his authorship, his creative stature has been confirmed firsthand by many leading contemporary artists who worked directly with him to prepare performances toward the end of his life. He is described as a man of impeccable manners and of such overwhelming personal presence that the woman who later helped to organize his manuscripts, cellist Francis-Marie Uitti, recalls feeling faint when she first met with him. He left a partially cataloged musical output of more than one hundred pieces, including the six major orchestral works, five string quartets, several works for larger chamber ensembles, and a substantial body of solo & duo pieces. Scelsi frequently made use of the human voice, treated instrumentally, and published four volumes of French poetry.

Scelsi's early life is less opaque, punctuated by two articles about music aesthetics written while he was in Switzerland during World War II. The dense French prose is insightful and sometimes contradictory. Earlier, he studied the Viennese style with Walter Klein (a student of Schoenberg) in 1935-36 and then Scriabin's harmonic vocabulary with Egon Koehler in Geneva. His musical impetus nonetheless remained his own, and his early works are only casually reminiscent of those styles. They are already marked by the strict formal clarity and fascination for sonority which came increasingly to the fore following his bout with clinical illness. Scelsi had a breakdown in the late 1940s, silencing his creative activity, but he resurfaced in Rome in 1951 to compose in a completely new musical idiom. After traveling widely since his childhood, he now found a direct outlet for his interest in Eastern music and culture, expressed self-consciously but not in a derivative manner. This synthesis is the basis for his mature output, a provocative body of work which can be both simple and difficult. It is sometimes described as minimalist, and while that analogy has some merit due to the economy of harmonic means employed, there is generally a great deal of sonic variety at any given moment. Indeed, Scelsi's music typically exhibits a classical balance between static and dynamic elements, yielding to an even greater concision in his later years.

Like so many of Scelsi's mature works, *Aion* is titled by obscure historical or mythological reference, in this case the ancient Greek personification of eternity. The only description he provides for this substantial orchestral score is the subtitle, "Four Episodes in one Day of Brahma." Fortunately, just as in Scelsi's music, every action is packed with meaning, and the aphorism provides an orientation toward the work and also toward his typical style. In Hindu theology, *Brahma* is the creator-God and the very stuff of the Universe. Like the endless cycle of reincarnation, the Universe flowers and wilts in a great sequence of being, where each interval of creation is known as a *Day of Brahma* and has a

notional length of ninety thousand human years. The day is divided into four epochs reflecting the moral state of humanity, but this fact is likely incidental to the four movements of the present work. The incarnation of sound sustaining the Universe is also known as *Nada-Brahma*, giving the concept a firm sonic connection, although Scelsi's application is uniquely his own. While the eternal cosmology of the title might suggest a work of interminable duration, the writing is always compact. This self-contained expression parallels Hindu iconography, where the world's cycles are frequently depicted as bubbles, and bubbles within bubbles to ever-smaller spans of time. Perhaps more tangibly, the circle is the form by which the infinite becomes finite, and indeed Scelsi adopted a circle above a straight line as his emblem. The bubble analogy is particularly apt, because he conceives of musical notes as entities, with not only beginnings and ends but bodies as well.

Aion is biased toward low-pitched instruments, with an overall sonority resembling strokes on a gong of deep fundamental tone and shimmering higher overtones. Scelsi treats this collective sound broadly as thematic material, developing it by changing registers and varying timbre. Just as the highest overtones of a gong die out faster, similar changes can be carried out with greater precision across a broader canvass, using the entire orchestra to manipulate overtones in ways impossible on a single instrument. In fact, Scelsi returned to the orchestral medium in 1959 with four short pieces consisting of single notes scrupulously articulated. These have become models of orchestration, and the richness of sonority brought to each gesture is a feature of his style. Beyond variation in timbre, the more developed works mutate individual notes with glissandi or pull them by changing their overtones. The microtonal movement is nearly continuous in most of Scelsi's music, lending a strong sense of instability in stark contrast to the slowly evolving designation of particular notes. Chords mark points of stasis, but usually emerge from resonance between individual notes, giving them a special richness which can be displaced by violent eruption. Clearly identifiable melodies do appear, but are developed with primary attention to their constituent notes, often in minute detail. The rich infrachromaticism provides striking and unique harmonic motion within a tonal context, yet never yields to aimlessness.

Scelsi's individual movements are clearly delineated, and *Aion* contains four of sharply different character. While the nature of theme and development represents a radical shift from more traditional compositional practices, the basic framework of each movement is tonally conceived and the sonic density is typical of the classical symphony. The opening movement is both the longest and most formally direct, beginning with a descending motive in an ostinato rhythm reminiscent of a passacaglia. This basic motion is contrasted against an upward surge which serves to lengthen each restatement by the addition of material. The strong forward momentum of the opening is retarded throughout, until the motive becomes symmetric in contour, at which point a harp arpeggio punctuates this stationary point and leads to a slow but brief fade out. As a whole, the movement is a boldly direct vision of eternity, and can be likened to a perspective drawing in which the vanishing point is slowly moved to infinity, where the motion stops. The second movement is simpler in outline and more mechanical in spirit. Although not set to a distinct rhythmic contour, the relentless quality is evocative of a 20th century scherzo in which demonic aggression has been transfigured into a cold natural phenomenon. It begins in the smallest harmonic space around F, modified by small perturbations which grow and then erupt into a violent outburst, which in turn damps out quickly. This is followed by a brief central episode, followed again by a discordant outburst funneling into smaller motion to complete the outline of a palindrome. The slow third movement is the most enigmatic of the four. Again, there is no distinct rhythmic contour, but the human pace of breathing is clearly evident. Brief motivic material passes through a tense development of nearly contrapuntal outline, and then breaks into a radiant episode yielding a fleeting vision of eternal peace. The idyll becomes distracted, and is broken definitively by three quick staccato notes, signaling a return to reality as we know it. The final movement returns to definite rhythm, and is roughly analogous to a rondo. There is a charged epic climate, opening with a sort of cosmic horn call spread across multiple instruments to form the overall harmonic basis. The "horn call" is restated in successively different rhythmic guises, leading to an episode during which it moves in long note values to form the underpinning for a brief rhetorical battle between universal forces. Afterward, the call reasserts itself in regular outline but in modified harmonic context, only to fade away. At

roughly twenty minutes in length, *Aion* provides breathtaking vistas of the great beyond, packed into the smallest spans of time.

The visionary quality of so much of Scelsi's music is nowhere more exposed than in works such as *Aion* where it is forcibly expressed in overt form. However, the technical underpinnings cannot be neglected in a full assessment of what is otherwise an incongruous approach. The use of microtonality is strikingly original, emerging from the very formal substance of a piece, and mirroring melodic motion on a larger scale. The mirroring yields reciprocal approaches to exterior sound relating notes to each other and interior sound deriving from the modification of individual notes themselves. Scelsi has painstakingly explored the latter, giving a structural role to timbre. However, the technical innovations are subjugated to a personal expression which is both energetic and highly focused, and indeed the economy of means and unity of gesture set this music apart most clearly. It is never decorative nor pretty for its own sake, but rather rests on a potent combination of classical rhetoric and mystical serenity which are united to argue forcibly for particular modes of thought. Ultimately, Scelsi's stature is confirmed by the tangible cathartic reaction his music can evoke in even the most naive listener.

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