

Scelsi: Piano Works (review)

Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988) wrote one of this century's largest sets of piano music. This pianistic output was concentrated into two relatively brief periods: 1930-1941 and 1952-1956. At that point, Scelsi's compositional development forced him to largely abandon keyboard instruments -- until then, the piano had been by far his most-used vehicle for self-expression. Scelsi was a virtuoso pianist, and even his most experimental compositions in this genre show a marked pianistic conception. The place which this output will hold in the repertoire remains to be seen -- Scelsi was basically 'discovered' in the 80s.

The first period of piano writing (1930-1941) occurred during Scelsi's early compositional phase in which his language was largely traditional. Here the greatest influences seem to be Scriabin, Berg & Bartok. This was also when Scelsi wrote his "rabbits" such as the extremely impressive String Quartet No. 1 (1944) and the still un-recorded cantata *La Nascita del Verbo* (1948). The early piano output includes four sonatas as well as the first seven suites. Some of these are lost, and the others will no doubt be recorded at some point.

After 1948, Scelsi abandoned composing for a few years only to emerge with his new style in 1952. The beginning of this period is again concerned almost exclusively with the piano, the following pieces being written at that time: Suite No. 8 (1952), *Four Illustrations* (1953), *Five Incantations* (1953), Suite No. 9 (1953), Suite No. 10 (1954), *Action Music* (1955), and Suite No. 11 (1956). The intended purpose of this article is as a review of Werner Bartschi's recording of Suites Nos. 8 & 9 on [Accord 200802](#).

Unfortunately, I have been largely unsuccessful at obtaining scores of these pieces, so my knowledge is not as large as I would hope.

The Suite No. 8 "*Bot-Ba* (Tibet)" is subtitled: "Evocation of Tibet with its monasteries on high mountain summits - Tibetan rituals - Prayers and Dances." Though it is described as less(!) violent than the Suite No. 6, the Suite No. 8 makes much use of toccata-style movements largely based on clusters. These alternate with slower meditative sections based on slow chord ostinatos, with still a hint of Schoenberg in the connecting sections. This Suite is immediately attractive for any barbarians who might like cluster toccatas and percussive devices, as it is still largely concerned with aggressive motion, despite the title. However, it is still successful at evoking Tibet -- or at least the recorded Tibetan music I have heard, which is more than a little dissonant. The suite is in six movements with the "center" in the third based on the golden section. This is followed by an extremely dissonant movement, then the slowest movement of the suite, and then the complex Bartokian finale. Bartschi's playing is admirable, particularly in the extremely virtuosic finale.

The *Four Illustrations* and *Five Incantations* are recorded by Suzanne Fournier on [Accord 200742](#). These works are much shorter than the Suites 8 & 9, and the *Four Illustrations* in particular is more concentrated in form. This piece is in four movements describing four avatars of Vishnu, and might be said to correspond roughly to a sonata -- in particular the *Four Illustrations* occupy the same position in Scelsi's middle output with respect to the piano sonata as does the massive orchestral work *Aion* with respect to the symphony. Both conclude with slow, fading resolutions. The *Four Illustrations* is charged

with a variety of ideas, and is a piece I continue to find fascinating after more than a hundred hearings -- I have little doubt that it is Scelsi's finest piano piece. For the most part it is a slow work based on murky passage-work in the middle registers and subtle interactions between the movements; the violent Varaha Avatar (as scherzo) is the exception. The *Four Illustrations* begins Scelsi's concentration on slow and static music. The *Five Incantations* are much simpler in conception -- though quite virtuosic pianistically, each is basically independent with a clearly identifiable theme. They might be described as rhapsodies, or possibly etudes.

The Suite No. 9 "*Ttai* (Peace)" is subtitled: "A succession of episodes which alternatively express Time - or more precisely, Time in motion, and Man as symbolized by cathedrals or monasteries, with the sound of the sacred Om," along with the comment: "This Suite should be listened to and played with the greatest interior calm. Restless people should keep away." This rambling piece is in nine movement, all clearly restrained and predominately quiet and slow. Though Halbreich repeats his comparison between Scelsi and Bruckner when discussing this piece in the CD notes, it is particularly here that the limits of this comparison are seen. I find that there is always a sense of striving (an idea which is surely inseparable from the 19th century) in Bruckner's music, and this Suite of Scelsi's is nothing but arrival. Scelsi returns more extremely to ostinato-based movements, as well as simply slow repeated chords; it took me several hearings to appreciate this suite, and it continues to occupy something of a singular position -- perhaps a rock on which Scelsi's further explorations during the 50s are levered. There are many moments of evocation of various world musics, in particular the compressed southeast asian style polyphony of the fourth movement, which is something of a resolution for the first part of the suite. Another high point is the eighth movement which is then followed by a slow finale. In this eighth movement, Scelsi starts a polyphonic style which he was to use later in his string writing. I also hear something of the style of Charles Tournemire in his *Don Quixote* / *Vanity* movements; whether Scelsi knew Tournemire I do not know, though I think the comparison is apt as this suite is one of Scelsi's most vain pieces.

The Suite No. 9 has also been recorded by Marianne Schroeder on Hat Hut CD, along with the Suite No. 10 "*Ka* (Essence.)" Though Schroeder's performance is good, Bartschi's is better. Not only does he bring a deeper sense to the music, but he plays it 10% faster (something which doesn't hurt for this piece.) The Suite No. 10 is not very successful, in my opinion -- the bind in which Scelsi finds himself here might have had something to do with his abandonment of the piano shortly afterward. At the beginning, this suite offers something of an introduction to the earlier piano music (and this is something Scelsi was to continue for some years: an incredible new idea emerging like a boulder, followed by somewhat easier pieces which function as something of an explanation for the first; example: String Quartets Nos. 2 & 3.) The first three movements use more traditional western figurations in Scelsi's slow ostinato style, followed by a fourth movement which combines these and then three other movements which close the seven movement suite. These last three movements are largely based on quickly arpeggiated chords in the highest register over slow recitatives in the lower ones. Some of the new sound ideas here do point toward Scelsi's later output, such as the highly singular world of *Pfhat* (1974).

The *Action Music* and Suite No. 11 are not yet recorded, though I suspect Accord will be coming out with them soon. I expect that *Action Music* returns to the cluster toccatas of Bot Ba, and that the Suite

No. 11 develops further some of the later ideas in *Ka* -- though I would really like to find out how Scelsi ends his piano output (not surprisingly at the same time as he was writing *Triphon* for solo cello.) In addition to these pieces, there is a later piano piece *Aitsi* (1974) which uses electronics to de-temper the decaying resonances. This is similar to Stockhausen's *Mantra*, though the effect is quite different. The String Quartet No. 5 is based on *Aitsi*, and the piano piece is arguably more effective -- the contrast between attack and decay is much more extreme. Here as in most of Scelsi's last music, the language is quite harsh and largely eschews any traditional development. *Aitsi* is one six-minute movement, based on a chord expanded in a style similar to Indian classical alap (though stacked vertically.)

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Todd M. McComb
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