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Citation

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Au creux néant musicien:
Recent Work by Aldo Clementi

For over 20 years Aldo Clementi has been proposing a cheerful, but unflinchingly negative view of the composer's task. Working from the premise that music is gradually approaching extinction (an assertion whose force the current mania for retrospects does nothing to diminish), he has produced a series of beautifully crafted sound-objects, teeming with inner life, whose outward conservation of a steady state denies the listener any cathartic illusions. So that when it became known that this long-standing enemy of dramatic indulgence was preparing an opera — or, as he describes it, a one-act rondeau, *ES* — critical curiosity was more than a little piqued. Although initially intended for the Rome Opera, *ES* was finally given this spring at La Fenice, Venice — and despite some cries of alarm from subscribers, the critics were warm in their applause.[1] Its run had hardly ended before Florence's Maggio Musicale began to make preparations for another of Clementi's music-theatre pieces, *Collage 4*, an abstract work involving mimes and visual materials.[2]

[1] A reaction undoubtedly aided by the fact that Italian opera houses actually cultivate contemporay music-theatre. In the last season alone, quite apart from Clementi at Venice and Florence, the Italians could hear Stockhausen at Milan, Berio at Rome, Bussotti and Petrassi at Turin . . . The pallid pragmatists who run equivalent British institutions on a diet of safety-in-nostalgia might care to take note.

[2] Thus reaffirming the precedent established by his only other theatrical work, *Collage 1* (1960), built around visual materials by Achille Perilli.

Example 1

But although, as all this activity would suggest, Clementi's stature has by now come to be generally acknowledged within Italy and France, the perennial timidity of concert organisers in the face of aesthetic challenge has kept his music well out of earshot on this side of the Channel. So the debut of *ES* offers an appropriate opportunity to try and give the readers of *Contact* some idea of what they are missing. I propose to concentrate on his more recent work, but it may be as well to supplement the account that he gives of his own development in the preceding essay with a minimal stylistic biography.[3]

Born in Catania in 1925, Clementi's advanced musical studies led him first to Alfredo Sangiorgi (an ex-student of Schoenberg) and then, from 1953 to 1954, to Petrassi, whose sober, intricately worked neo-classicism provided a congenial model for his own marked inclination towards abstraction. But it was his encounter with Maderna — and through Maderna, with Darmstadt — that first alerted him to the potential of a more radical idiom. In this he was not alone: such contemporaries as Donatoni, Nono, and Berio had all responded enthusiastically to these influences in the early and mid-fifties — producing in Donatoni's case as in Clementi's a sharp

[3] For a much richer survey of Clementi's work up to the late 1960s see Mario Bortolotto's *Fase seconda* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), pp. 170-192. Useful supplementary information may be found in Claudio Annibaldi's article on Clementi in the *New Grove*.

Example 2

change of stylistic direction. But Clementi embraced the formalism of this period far more serenely and wholeheartedly than did his three northern contemporaries, remaining quite untempted by the expressionist undercurrent that pervaded so much of the New Music. For a while he explored the control of fluctuating densities within a pointillist texture, but with *Triplum* (1961) for flute, oboe, and clarinet[4] he began moving towards a fascination with aggregate textures obtained through complex interweaving of parts. Example 1 shows a characteristic extract.

This device rapidly established itself as a basic feature of his style, and through the 1960s he produced a series of works — *Informels 1, 2,* and *3, Varianti A* and *B,* and *Reticoli* for various numbers of players — that proposed a single, densely complex structure rotating upon itself. At first the ear was encouraged to delve into this either by throwing other, randomly generated events against it, as in *Informel 2,*[5] or by hollowing out a differing succession of empty spaces within it at each repetition, as in *Informel 3* and the *Varianti*. The enormous forces required for these pieces (*Variante A* has 72 vocal parts and 72 instrumental parts — all independent of one another, and all continuous save for cancellations) gave way to the more modest resources of the four *Reticoli* — each labelled according to the number of performers involved. But as numbers became less extravagant, continuity within the polyphonic magma grew, until with the *Concerto per pianoforte e sette strumenti* (1970)[6] he achieved a completely seamless texture within which rhythmic density is the only large-scale variable.

This piece is worth closer attention, for many of its features are characteristic of a wide body of Clementi's work. Space forbids reproduction of a whole page of the score, but Example 2, a few bars from the right hand of the piano part, will suffice to illustrate the principles

[4] Published by Suvini Zerboni — as are all the other scores discussed here. I am most grateful to the publishers, and to Silvio Cerutti in particular, for generous help in lending scores and supplying information.

[5] Recorded on ITL 70045.

[6] Recorded on CBS S 61455 and ITL 70031.

involved. The notation is deliberately skeletal, recording only pitches, attacks, and changes of tempo — so that the eye, ranging over the whole score, will be immediately directed to large-scale pitch retrogrades and the deployment of isorhythm at differing tempi. All other parametric processes are accounted for in introductory notes, so that the score literally analyses itself. (Clementi insists upon an absolute union between aesthetic and conceptual coherence: not for nothing does Brahms occupy the same cardinal position within his private pantheon that Mahler did for Berio during the 1960s.)

But the detail encapsulated here is equally revealing. Clementi is as fascinated by virtual as by real counterpoint — so that although the score consists of a piano part notated on six lines, plus six more lines for two interchangeable groups (three violas in one, clarinet, horn, and bassoon in the other — while the harmonium, here as in several other works, sustains a *ppp* cluster throughout), each line contains two parts notated by tails in opposite directions. The accompanying instruments articulate this virtual polyphony by choosing one line each to play continuously, while the other line is realised as a series of *staccato* interjections. But the pianist has to find other means. The twelve voices of the piano part are equally distributed among four pitch areas, each tuned at a different variant from concert pitch, and with three out of the four variously prepared.[7] Thus the two voices on the middle staff of Example 2 belong to different pitch and timbre areas. Within each area the pianist must differentiate between voices by assigning to each a different dynamic (*mf/p/ppp* — the range is typical), and though in a two-hand version the pedal must be held down continuously, in a four-hand performance the notes of each voice must be held for a different proportion of their duration (minimal/roughly half/whole). A closer look at the lower two staves of Example 2 will reveal the need

[7] The blurring of both pitch and timbre recurs frequently in Clementi's work. The *Concerto per pianoforte, 24 strumenti e carillons* of 1975 reverses the process adopted here by having strings and woodwind diverge to either side of the piano's concert pitch. It also represents one more in a substantial series of pieces involving a prepared piano, to whose literature Clementi has contributed with unusual generosity.

Example 3

for all this differentiation. They pursue pitch-class canons, of which the whole structure is a complex tissue.

The resultant aggregate, with its blurred, muted turmoil of canonically interacting lines, has remained characteristic of much of Clementi's music to the present day. But in one respect this Concerto marks a boundary within his work, for in the same year he was asked to write a piano piece based on the familiar musical version of Bach's name. He decided to fulfil this commission by employing materials from Bach's own work — though duly immobilising them within a closed system. A brief extract from *B.A.C.H.* is shown in Example 3. The piece establishes a constantly changing *staccato* interplay between three rising scales (two of them chromatic) played in different registers and at different dynamics — the whole to be executed as fast as possible. Over this a Bach fragment (of unspecified origin) is projected in slow, irregular motion, and the B-A-C-H motif, plus one of its permutations, is accented when the middle scale reaches the appropriate notes in successive ascents. A series of other B-A-C-H pieces developed from this witty, mesmeric conception — but at the same time the experience of working once more with materials of tonal origin alerted Clementi to their plastic qualities as contrapuntal elements. He accordingly began to construct his pieces from (usually anonymous) tonal fragments arranged in a polytonal canonic counterpoint that ensures near-continuous chromatic saturation — with which the potential individuality of each line stands in permanent, but only fleetingly audible, tension. (Throw dialectic out of the door, and it will fly in through the window.) These impeccable monuments to the death of music that simultaneously testify to an obdurate afterlife include a notable series of concertos for piano (1975), double bass (1976), and violin (1977), each accompanied by an instrumental group and a continuous chorus of toy carillons, as well as a number of other chamber and solo works.

The sea-changes suffered by these fragments from a more lively past had in fact been anticipated by one of Clementi's most extraordinary electronic works. *Collage 3 (Dies Irae)* (1966-67) took three Beatles songs and transformed them, quite beyond recognition, into an acrid, 23-minute sound-barrage: no more devastating antidote to the Mellers syndrome could have been devised. A decade later, acknowledgment of the semantic proliferation always implicit in the use of *objets trouvés* has resurfaced in *ES* — but to more subtle and humanistic effect. Clementi found his verbal materials for the work in a play by Nello Sàito with the same Freudian title, and built from these fragments a single dramatic proposition, perpetually rotating upon itself. Three women — Tuni, a secretary, Rica, a housewife, Mina, an artist — fantasise about their relationships with a shadowy Don Giovanni, whose actual existence is in perennial doubt. From this self-renewing gyre there is no more possibility of exit than there is from the cycle of their daily routines — encapsulated in the symbolic single object from each of their environments that is forever falling over, and forever being replaced upright, in parallel with the myth of Sisyphus.

Rather than solicit a dubious empathy with fully formed 'characters', Clementi, mindful of the three typological axes with which Osgood seeks to define the components of such seductive dramatic fictions in his theory of semantic differential, uses three singers for each woman represented, assigning to each a single, fixed characteristic. Thus the three sopranos who sing the part of Tuni are required to be respectively infantile, neurotic, and tender, and so forth. As the work proceeds, further multiplication of each character takes place through replicas and mirrors. The staging at La Fenice (by Uberto Bertacca) visually amplified the same conception, providing parallel environments for each version of the same woman, placed one above the other, with flights of stairs separating each character-trio from the next — the

whole designed in the 1930s style demanded by the composer, and echoed in the dance fragments to be discussed below.

The tragic immutability of these women's situation is reflected in every level of the music. Clementi originally wanted to write an operetta (or even what he describes as a 'Music Hall'), and although he declares himself as yet 'insufficiently mature for so ambitious a project', its shadow nevertheless permeates the work. Thus although his initial material is in this instance a 16th-century Protestant chorale each of whose six lines generates one of the six scenes, the material is transformed into a series of nine-part counterpoints in waltz rhythm, to be played in canon by up to four different nine-part choirs (voices, high woodwind and two groups of strings — all in the treble clef to reinforce the female tessitura of the work). Since each scene follows the same overall structure — a waltz-canon followed by a dance collage and a brief, consolatory berceuse — a more detailed examination of the first scene will serve to exemplify procedures throughout the opera.

Example 4 shows the eleven-bar unit that forms the material for the first waltz-canon. The individual lines all reflect their derivation from a diatonic source, but since they are variously transposed, and subjected to a good deal of octave displacement (and, clearly, rhythmic reorganisation), they combine to generate Clementi's characteristic pan-chromatic magma. Canon entries are organised systematically: woodwind first, followed in the next bar by voices, which are followed two bars later by one string choir, which are followed three bars later by the other.[8] This first canon establishes a pattern of entering and deleted layers that remains constant, in alternate prime and retrograde forms, for the five succeeding ones. Since each canon ceases at the 17th gyre, the pattern can be summarised as in Example 5. From the fourth gyre of version A the vocal contribution to the canon is gradually reduced, leaving the instruments to provide a canonic backdrop (with entries consequently spaced at regular three-bar distances). Against this, the voices project materials in speech, Sprechgesang, and laughter. In the course of the six scenes, the order of entry for these materials is exhaustively permutated, with song coming before or after according to the direction in which Example 5 is being pursued. Each type of voice production is gradually infiltrated by the next, with entries from the top downwards in one scene being balanced by entries from the bottom upwards in the next, from outside to middle by middle to outside, and so forth.

But the variety achieved by these means would not be sufficient to sustain a large-scale musical structure were it not for Clementi's meticulous control of density, tessitura, and aggregate rhythm in successive waltz-canons. Tessitura describes a simple arc upwards and downwards throughout the work, but density is given a complementary, but more complex role. It will be clear from Example 4 that contrasting levels of density are an important feature of the materials for Canon A, which contains two tutti passages, one six bars after the other. The canonic entry scheme described above means that where woodwind and first strings play together (compare Example 5) at three bars' distance, their combination will create a relatively stable density and a clear alternation in timbre. But where the three instrumental choirs play together, one tutti from the second strings (six bars behind the woodwind) will coincide with and thicken the other from the wind, thus creating a more fluctuating density pattern, while toning down the contrast in timbre. Canon B preserves the same scheme in outline, though allowing for more agile movement within the parts. Canons C and D define the contrast between full and thin textures even

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[8] Which, in accordance with the Fibonacci series, is followed five bars later by the return of the woodwind to their starting-point.

Example 4

[musical notation — three systems of staves]

further; Canons E and F, on the contrary, dissolve into a continual interplay of overlapping parts, with F reduced to a sparse, seven-part texture throughout. Tempo is controlled in a simpler, more systematic fashion. Each canon starts faster than, and gradually slows down to ♩ = 120, but whereas Canon A starts from ♩ = 180, each successive scene starts at a metronome mark ten points lower than the last, so that by Canon F we have reached ♩ = 130.

Each waltz-canon is followed by one of two alternating sets of superimposed dances — both of them derived, with typical parsimony, from Canon A. A comparison of Example 6 — Clementi's autograph of the first group of dance fragments — with Example 4 will illustrate the process. Pitches from each line are combined with a rhythm taken from one work in the operatic repertoire, and with words from another to form a constantly repeated module. (I leave the tracing of sources to masochist opera buffs with an idle hour to spare.) Each singer has her own piano, saxophone, or accordion behind the scenes, to accompany her at her own specific tempo, and she gyrates mechanically towards and away from the audience at the points indicated by the arrows — though just occasionally sketching in the proper step for her dance. All this activity is surrounded by a cloud of strings, playing the complementary half of Canon A as a six-bar canonic gyre, imitated after one and then two bars.

Each dance relapses into an instrumental berceuse — a series of ever denser canons upon the lulling theme given in Example 7. Starting from a nine-part canon at the unison from woodwind in Berceuse A, three string choirs successively add their own versions at different transpositions and rates of movement in Berceuses B – E.

Example 5

A→	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	←B
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	

voices _____ ___ ___ ___

woodwinds _____

strings 1 _____   _____

strings 2 _____   _____

Example 6

Finally, in Berceuse F, the voices join in to create a *pianissimo*, 45-part canon. Each berceuse is longer and slower, as well as denser, than the previous one, and their mournful quiesis is shot through with three layers of accordion clusters, ebbing and flowing at different rates on the very threshold of audibility.

Although *ES* is certainly Clementi's major achievement of the past few years, he has also been remarkably prolific in his work for the concert hall. His oblique contract with musical history has proliferated in many directions, allowing strange games of frustrated connotation to play themselves out between the tonal originals, specifically evoked in such titles as *Collage 4 (Jesu meine Freude)* and the canons on *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* for three trumpets and two trombones (1980), and their unrecognisable, pan-chromatic issue. The ensemble itself may provoke such tensions, as in *Otto frammenti* (1978) for soprano, countertenor, organ, lute, and viola da gamba, as may the titles that he assigns to his instrumental works. These have moved from the austere abstractions of the 1960s, and the simple *Concerti* of the late sixties to mid-seventies to such evocations as *Capriccio, Berceuse, Madrigale* and *Elegia* — the last a remarkable work for solo flute with bassoon, horn, and trombone choirs, pursuing in a lower, darker register the canonic obsessions of *ES*. Is Clementi's tutelary deity quietly changing from Brahms to Mahler as he draws ever more of the surrounding world into his implacable games? (And will some kind, courageous concert promoter give us the chance to find out for ourselves?)

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Example 7