

'In a Landscape'. A piece by John Cage, transcribed for Renaissance lute by Gilbert Isbin, by Silvia Amato (Il Liuto, N°14, May 2017)

On a January afternoon some time ago, when attending Professor Franco Mirenzi's introductory lessons to 20th century music, I really experienced the thrill of entering 'in a landscape'.

I had decided to enroll in the second level academic diploma course of Training for the communication and diffusion of cultures and musical practices - at the Conservatory of Music of Santa Cecilia in Rome - to broaden my knowledge in the field of music, but above all driven by curiosity to find connections between distant worlds through subtle inlays of harmonies, cadences, styles and languages. I attended (and still attend, but in Parma) the lute school and there were many questions and gaps that I intended to fill.

I felt the need to experiment and observe the music trying to grasp the message conveyed through time and styles. Among the subjects covered: Pedagogy and musical psychology, History of music for teaching, Organization of musical communication, Choir direction, Elements of composition for music teaching. As part of the latter subject we had indeed come to study the music of the '900 and that afternoon I had caused a lot of hilarity among my companions, ironically commenting on the videos we were following on the serial techniques or on the prepared piano, so far from the delicate harmonies of the lute.

At a certain point the Maestro chose to project the video of 'In a Landscape', a piece for piano composed by John Cage in 1948 for the dancer Louise Lippold (the piece in fact follows the rhythmic patterns of the choreography for which it was written). I was rapt and exclaimed: "But this is for a lute!" The teacher smiled and said: "Finally we have found something that Silvia likes!", And again: "transcribe it down for lute!"

This idea began to spin in my head until I even came to conceive a thesis on contemporary lute music, subverting all my previous (and biased) ideas on modern and contemporary music, forgetting in an instant the thesis I was planning to prepare for the exam. I started an exciting research that did not stop, I bought texts, sent emails, interviewed musicians from a distance, but everything always revolved around this composition, which had fascinated me to the point of dedicating myself to discovering the expressive non-familiar possibilities of the lute.

It was during one of these interviews that Gilbert Isbin, Belgian musician and composer, knowing of my intention to transcribe this enigmatic piece for lute, offered to do it for me and so he did, in a few days (it would have taken me much, much longer time), even thanking me for having brought it to his attention and for having offered him the opportunity to put his hand to a composition that also fascinated him. Incidentally, Gilbert Isbin recently published a manual for the Lute Society that teaches the improvisational technique on the lute in contemporary language.

He has published numerous collections of pieces composed by him and has affectionately supported and encouraged me in this research, also allowing me to publish his transcription. In a Landscape is a modal composition, which alternates modules in B and modules in G. It is clearly inspired by the style of Erik Satie and, like Satie's pieces, it produces an atmosphere of suspended and indefinite time: it is no coincidence that Cage was the first to bring Satie to America, having Les Vexations performed for thirty-six hours in a row with different interpreters.

In the present piece Cage, master of the combination of sounds and the exploration of unconventional sounds, uses numerical ratios by augmentation, but without a classic scheme, not even the total chromatic scheme of Boulez, with whom he formed a solid

friendship presumably imbued with reciprocal inspirations; and in fact 'In a Landscape' is a self-generating diatonic piece. It should be borne in mind that, having changed the ways of using music and its production, the techniques of composition have also changed profoundly: if on the one hand there has been an attempt to overlap and complicate musical writing (for example, for what it concerns rhythm, in Stravinsky), on the other hand there is the search for the maximum simplification of the language, up to the results of the minimalist current, as happens in Arvo Part's music, another composer whose transcriptions I hope to transcribe for the lute.

In this regard, it should be remembered how the search for his very personal style, the tintinnabuli, has its roots in Gregorian chant and in modal music. Going even further, Cage arrives at the random technique, in which part of the composition is left to the performer, who has full autonomy in the interpretation of the sign, with the effect of giving rise to new forms of notation.

This is what happens in Imaginary Landscape n. 5, one of the first compositions in which Cage, based on the draw procedures of the Chinese divination book I Ching, substitutes symbols and sequences of recorded music for the notation, creating one of the first examples of multimedia music. Returning to our piece, it can be performed, on the recommendation of Cage himself, both on piano and on harp; and now, thanks to the transcription of Gilbert Isbin, also on the lute. Its modal nature gives it a timeless aura, we could define it as music in the making, in becoming, which expresses the beauty and restlessness of our present.