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Unconscious Rhythms and Absent Pulses

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Dr. Simone Spagnolo

Welcome everyone, thanks for attending our Rhythm Symposium, and thanks to all those who have contributed to the organisation of this event.

As I will be the first to present, please take my intervention as a preamble to the various topics that all the other speakers will later on discuss. I will try to put forward some considerations and unanswered problematics that will somehow continue through the presentations that we will hear during the course of the day. However, being a composer myself, I will do this – in an egocentric way – through the lenses of my own composition.

We have conceived this Symposium as an occasion to share reflections on rhythm, and I thought it would be interesting to take advantage of this event not only to offer some reflections on rhythm, but to also reflect myself on my own use of rhythm. A first reflection that comes to my mind, in fact, is that I don't usually start a piece reflecting on rhythm, but I tend to concentrate on harmonic matters and ideas, allowing these latter to drive melodic choice, contrapuntal combinations, harmonic movements, entire structures. This is probably the way most composers work, and perhaps the way most composers are encouraged to work. A bit more attention to rhythm as the starting point for a composition would probably make it more exciting to the ear, more engaging. I recall one of my lecturers quoting from a composer I cannot remember anymore saying that it doesn't matter how complex and dissonant a harmony is, as long as there is a good rhythm going on the listener will be fine.

Anyhow, in order to reflect on my own use of rhythm, I have been pulling out from dusty shelves some of my old pieces and, a bit like a psychoanalyst digging into someone's past memories, I have tried to distil a common thread between the rhythmic features of my own old writings; I have been looking for some sort of underlying, recurring, secret rhythmic patter running through my old pieces. To be clear, I never thought about developing some precise rhythmic material or idea across my compositions, and therefore, were I to find anything, such

a thing would have to be an unconscious seed, a somehow unintentional sequence. I do compose consciously, be assured; but I certainly do not consciously propose and develop rhythmic material across several pieces, sequentially.

And here is a second reflection, which possibly applies to most composers: I do consciously re-propose and develop musical material across my pieces, but such material is usually harmonic and melodic. In fact, I think I can easily list the principal harmonic features of my works, and I should be able to easily outline how I have developed harmonic structures, concepts, patterns, metaphors across my compositions over a few years. On the contrary, I wouldn't be able to easily state what rhythmic material characterises my pieces and how this has developed within a number of compositions. We somehow tend conceive our compositional evolution in harmonic terms, both as individual composers and historically. Rhythm happens to contribute, but in a seemingly secondary role.

Hence why my psychoanalytic digging: I was interested to see if I could identify an evolutionary pattern related to rhythm within my own music; an unconscious evolutionary pattern.

The first piece I pulled out, from the highest shelf, is titled *Tracce*, simply translating from the Italian as 'traces'. It is a piece for three pianists and electronics, originally composed for a ballet presented at Bonnie Bird Theatre in 2010.[1] I gave it a quick look, in search for some rhythmic peculiarity.

The piece begins with a fairly straightforward rhythmic motif, of a minimalist scent (Figure 1). The first piano articulates a triplety figure, from which a melody emerges delicately at the left hand.

Later on, when the three pianos play simultaneously, there is some interesting superimposition, as for example in this passage (Figure 2, bars 155-158), where quaver triplets are interlocked with both crotchet triplets and simple crotchets falling on downbeats. Nothing exceptionally interesting, really.

Eventually, in the second half of the piece, I found something rhythmically intriguing, worth of attention. The three pianos, still happening at the same time, have to play different fragments, gradually *rallentando* at different tempos, independently from each other, ultimately losing a common pulse, which is only re-established later, with the recapitulation of the opening. In bar 159 (Figure 3), in fact, I wrote this exact instruction: 'Play all the following repeats with

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[1] The recording of *Tracce* can be found on Spotify, accessible on:
<https://open.spotify.com/album/7J29QXkO3oAYse1USRFkb9?si=W4eYmq6NRaucMDQfWgxcVw>

rallentando. Each Piano must play its own repeat individually, without synchronizing with the others.'

What I found noteworthy, here, in term of rhythm, is the slow, subtle shift between a clear, decisive pulse – the one we have seen in the previous extract – and a section dedicated to pulse-dissolution. Here is the passage in question: I will play it from the phrase before the pulse-dissolution (bar 147), so we can hear the transition between the pulse-driven section and the pulse-dissolution one.

The second score I picked from my shelves is titled *Fanfara* (Figure 4). It was commissioned by Trinity College of Music in 2010 in celebration of Sir Charles Mackerras' life. It features a fairly large brass and saxophone ensemble with a bass drum and a marimba.[2]

This piece is much more exciting, rhythmically, and we can see it right from the start: 7/8 bars alternate with bars of 9/8, 3/4, 8/8, 10/8, and so on. Binary and ternary subdivisions, as indicated by square and triangle conducting marks, constantly alternate in a variety of combinations. This is how it sounds.

Such a metric alternation goes on for the whole piece, sustaining the overall rhythmic energy. But it is only at the end, in the final climax, within four specific bars, that the metric movement gets pressing and a rhythmical extravaganza is proposed. We can see this in bars 123-124 (Figure 5): the trombones firmly shake their slides on the downbeats, in line with the 3/4 and 4/4 time signatures; the two trumpets articulate triplets, which are however outlining binary motifs superimposed on the ternary subdivision of the triplets themselves, like a sort of hemiola variation; finally, the saxophones, on top, simply have to play demi-semi-quaver arpeggios as fast as possible. This is how the passage sounds.

Similarly to the previous piece, the whole of *Fanfara* strongly articulate pulses. Even if bars regularly alternate different time signatures, the overall rhythmic organisation has the ultimate purpose of emphasising and defining alternating pulses, divisions and subdivisions that emerge from the various time signature changes. What happens in the final bars of the piece – specifically in the bars I showed – is a quasi-annulment of the pulse. This latter is hidden behind the superimposition of the three rhythmic roles that saxophones, trumpets and trombones articulate.

Of course, this is very contained: it only takes place within four bars (from 121 to 124, to be precise). Yet, the connection with *Tracce* is rather evident to me, with the only difference that

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[2] The recording of *Fanfara* can be found on the author's personal website, accessible on: <https://www.simone-spagnolo.com/music>

in *Tracce* the bars' pulse slowly dissolves, whilst in *Fanfara* it is presented almost abruptly, in order to emancipate the final climax.

Unavoidably, I thought of another piece of mine titled *Carnascialesco*; a composition for wind quintet premiered at Janáček Academy in Brno, Czech Republic, about ten years ago (Figure 6). I went to pick the score from another shelf.

Like *Fanfara*, this wind quintet is heavily driven by constantly varying time signatures, though with more sophisticated melodic gestures, tuplets and instrumental effects. Just a few seconds from the beginning should provide an idea of its mood and rhythmical variety.

Differently from the previous two pieces, the rhythmical organisation of *Carnascialesco* moves towards some fairly extreme consequences. I think it is useful to schematise these in two ways: the first regards an idea of pulse-displacement. It can be found towards the end, and it wishes to function as an 'intensifier', as a 'destabiliser' perhaps. We can find it encapsulated in sections W, X and Y, on page 13 (Figure 7). Here, the bar-lines do not coincide anymore across the instruments. Nor do the binary and ternary subdivisions do, as shown by that tangle of square and triangle marks assigned to all five instruments. In fact, the time signatures themselves do not vertically coincide, and each musician has to follow a different one. The fundamental rhythmic unit underlying these different time signatures is the same for all five players – the quaver – and the whole passage is therefore kept together through this minimum common denominator (needless to say, it is rather difficult to play as a quintet, and the musicians easily get lost during rehearsals).

To contrast, the second extreme consequence centres around an idea of pulse-dissolution (I guess we can even call it pulse-destruction). We can see it in Page 20, in sections NN and OO (Figure 8). Here, the five instruments are assigned boxed fragments, which have to be repeated for a set number of seconds. Some instruments have to do these repetitions *accelerando*, and some others perform them *rallentando*. You can easily grasp how these tempo changes – *accelerando* and *rallentando* – totally cancel any sense of common pulse.

The first feature destabilises the pulse; the second, destroys it.

Let's listen to these two rhythmic effects. We can find them one after the other, consecutively, between sections GG and QQ.

I think that a recurring, evolutionary pattern starts to emerge. In *Tracce* we experience a subtle dissolution, in *Fanfara* we see a contained annulment, and in *Carnascalesco* we witness an organised pulse-crumbling; a crumbling that leads me towards a third reflection: when common

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pulses fade away, the musical score reveals its limit. When bar-lines, downbeats and *tempi* don't coincide, the score requires graphical information of a non-conventional nature. When this happens, the composer has to act as a designer and invent new notation.

And it is on this point that I thought of my opera titled *It makes no difference*, which I went to retrieve from yet another shelf.

It makes no difference is an operatic spectacle, for a rather large ensemble, that I originally presented at Tête à Tête Opera Festival in 2012, and then in its complete version at Laban Studio Theatre in 2014.[3] It's based on a non-linear narrative, and the score is largely notated in a conventional fashion, with common bar-lines and time signatures. Here you can see some random, indicative pages (Figures 9 and 10).

In Scenes 11 and 13, however, the needs of the narrative required melodic flexibility and rhythmic freedom (Figures 11). It was a dramatic necessity for the singers involved in these scenes to proceed in a rhythmically autonomous and arbitrary way, and, as such, it was a dramatic necessity for myself to invent my own notation, embedding in it visual representations of the ongoing drama.

It is hard to talk about pulse-dissolution or pulse-destruction in this context. There's certainly a lot of rhythmic information, but a sense of common pulse is just absent. Conventional notation did not manage to contain and satisfy my rhythmical exigencies. Very often composers have had to force themselves to invent and design new notation able to express their rhythmical demands. And it is on this point that I think it is worth proposing a fourth reflection: graphic scores have a privileged relationship with rhythmical exigencies, as opposed to harmonic ones. Extravagant harmonic combinations can mostly be scored through traditional notation. We can write twelve different pitches all at once on one or two staves, for instance. But we cannot easily write twelve different rhythmic patterns, or twelve different time signatures, or twelve different *tempi* happening at the same time. We need to seek alternative designs.

Graphic scores are a fascinating world, and I only now realise how rhythmically liberating they can be. After *It makes no difference* I explored them with great interest. Here is a tableau from

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[3] The first performance of *It makes no difference* presented at *Tête* à Tête Opera Festival, featuring solely the first act, can be found on MyNewOpera's YouTube channel, accessible on:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiigIvi4Htk&t=121s>

a piece titled *Le Tavole del Peccato* (Figure 12), which I wrote in 2013; and here is a 'glove' from another composition of mine titled *Touch-less*, from 2015 (Figure 13).[4]

Now, going back to the unconscious rhythmic evolution I was aiming to find within my scores, I think I could summarise it as follows: there has been a sort of unaware, slightly stubborn trend of writing pieces with clear, solid pulses for the ultimate purpose of breaking them apart; as if the disintegration of a common pulse was meant to be an unavoidable consequence as well as a natural way to reach a climax.

At first, this made me think of those children that build castles and towers to then knock them down, and I tried to consult some psychoanalytic theories of destruction. However, the Freudian notion of *destrudo* and his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* didn't help.[5]

I then realised that the primary intent was not that of destruction, but instead one of subtraction: pulses did not have to crumble, they had to disappear. They had to be absent, so to be missed. And I therefore shifted my attention from theories of destruction to theories of absence.

There's a beautiful book by the German composer Heiner Goebbels titled *Aesthetics of Absence*. In it, discussing one of his works, he observes that 'the attention of the audience was heightened when they were not shown but denied something'[6]. Goebbels mostly refers to music-theatre in his book, though it is not too hard to glimpse a connection with my pulse-absences. The music seems to acquire interest when common pulses are denied, in fact.

There is a psychoanalytical principle that scholar Massimo Recalcati states with great clarity – following notions originally established by Jacques Lacan: 'the thing always has the semblance of the non-thing'[7]. In our case, rhythm always has the semblance of non-rhythm: it's the vanishing of the pulse that resembles the presence and centrality of pulse itself. This can seem a play on words to express a rather simple idea; the idea that only the loss of something enables us to notice the presence of that thing and to perceive its importance. But this seemingly simple idea, in psychoanalytic-linguistic (and paediatric) terms, determines the

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[4] Further details about *Touch-less*, Simone Spagnolo's graphic scores, and the notion of score-theatre can be found in: Spagnolo, S. 'Touch-less: Wearable Music and the Score-Theatre' in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, Volume 11, Number 2, Special Ed., ed. David Roesner, June 2017, pp. 147-164. Available on: <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/smt/2017/00000011/00000002/art00006;jsessionid=7lqmmiu656o7i.x-ic-live-03>

[5] Freud, S. (1901) *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

[6] Goebbels, H. (2015), *Aesthetics of Absence*, (ed. J. Collins), Oxon and New York: Routledge. p.28.

[7] Recalcati, M. (2019) *Una Nuova Clinica della Malinconia*, video-recording of Lectio Magistralis, IRPA, Dipartimento Clinico Gennie Lemoine, Istituto Leone XIII, Milano. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rnHqCTeu2k&t=847s>.
Jacque Lacan's original notion of the 'non-thing' can be found in his *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960).

origin of thought itself. Paraphrasing from French paediatrician and psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto, in order for the word, for language, and thought to exist, there must be the loss of the thing; for a child, it is only the loss of the breast (the loss of the proximity of the subject to the thing) that enables the word to exist.[8]

Returning to music and to Heiner Goebbels, in his *Aesthetics of Absence* he provides a rather comprehensive list of elements that constitute – to make a wordplay – the 'presence of absence'. Goebbels writes that 'absence can [thus] be understood as a polyphony of elements [...], as a division of presence among all elements involved [...], as a de-synchronization of hearing and seeing, a separation or division between the visual and acoustic stage'[9]; and, I would add, a separation between the visual and acoustic score, as we have seen in the previous graphic scores: I am referring to void that exists between the rhythms that we see, and the rhythms that we hear.

Now, I have put on the table quite a few problematics, which wished to creatively introduce some of the various topics that will be explored today as part of this Symposium. Some speakers will concentrate on rhythmic dissonances, polymeters, metric modulations and asymmetries; some others on rhythmic designs and alternative notations.

Of course, I thank all the speakers that will follow, and conclude with a very short passage extracted from a short novel I am currently reading. I bumped into this passage just a few days ago, almost prophetically, whilst thinking of musical absences and voids in view of this symposium. This is from the novel *Wimbledon Stadium*, by Daniele Del Giudice:

'I have also read that that centre does not exist, it is the void. Sometimes I feel there is nothing stronger than the void, or the nothing: it cuts every question, it makes it perfect, motivated. As an image for the feelings the void is remarkable, as it is the full or a sunset or a river'.[10]

Thank you.

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[8] Françoise Dolto, as paraphrased by Massimo Recalcati, in *ibid.*
Original Italian words by M. Recalcati, translated by the author: '*Perché vi sia parola, linguaggio, pensiero, ci deve essere perdita della cosa. E' solo la perdita del seno (della cosa; della prossimità del soggetto dalla cosa), che rende possibile l'esistenza della parola'.*
[9] Goebbels, H. (2015), *Aesthetics of Absence*, (ed. J. Collins), Oxon and New York: Routledge. p.4
[10] Del Giudice, D. (2021), *Lo Stadio di Wimbledon*, Giulio Einaudi Editore: Torino. p.35
Original Italian text, translated by the author: '*Ho letto anche che quel centro non esiste, è il vuoto. Certe volte mi sembra che non ci sia cosa più forte del vuoto, o del niente: taglia ogni questione, la rende perfetta, motivata. Come immagine per i sentimenti il vuoto è notevole, quanto il pieno o un tramonto o un fiume'.*

Figures

Figure 1: *Tracce,* opening bars

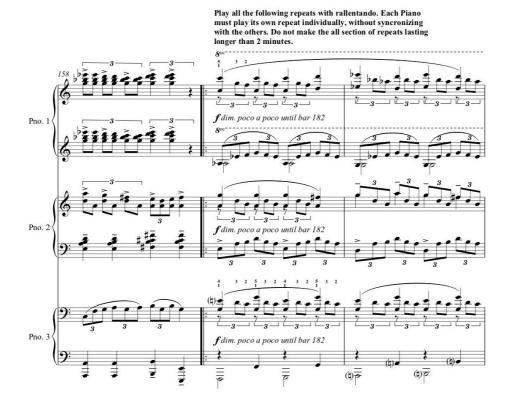Figure 2: *Tracce,* bars 155-158

Figure 3: *Tracce,* bar 159

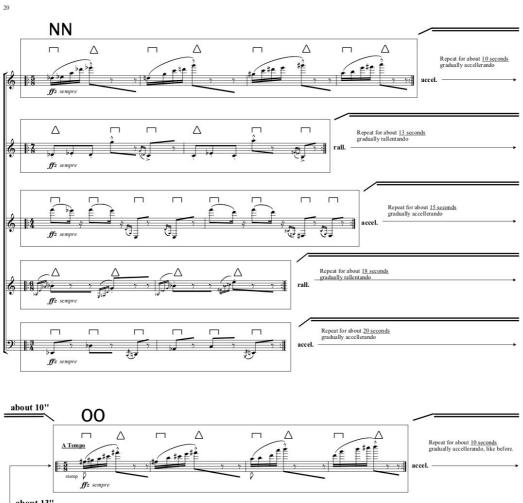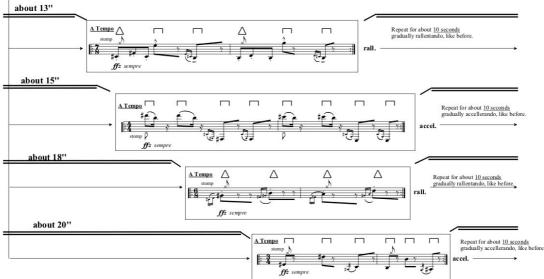Figure 4: *Fanfara,* opening bars

Figure 5: *Fanfara,* bars 123-124

Carnascialesco
for Wind Quintet

Simone Spagnolo

Figure 7: *Carnascialesco,* sections W, X, Y

Figure 8: *Carnascialesco,* sections NN and OO

Figure 9: *It makes no difference,* beginning of Scene 2
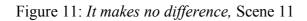
Figure 10: *It makes no difference,* bars 857-858

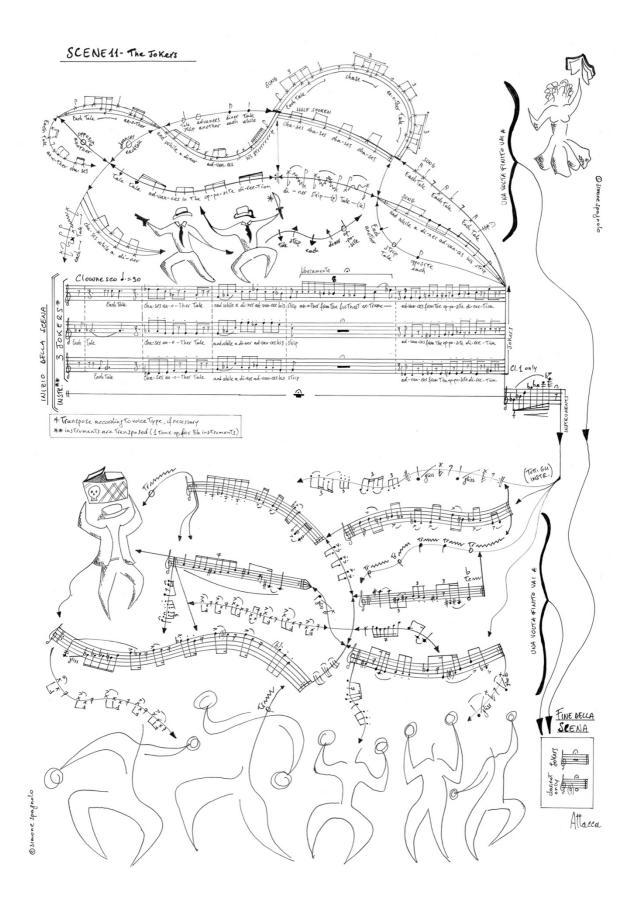Figure 11: *It makes no difference,* Scene 11

Figure 12: *Le Tavole del Peccato,* tableau 4

Figure 13: *It makes no difference,* Hand 2