

Liquid pearls

<While making music
Sometimes,
the performer feels the hand of God on
his shoulder.
For an instant something changes.
For just one instant.
Can't you hear it here?>

<No!>

Waking up was always the same. A buzz of confused voices, opening my eyes to check if day had come, then all hell would break loose. A gang of bricklayers starting their day, the explosion of their hammers and power-drills a couple of metres from my bed.

The only thing separating me from that infernal noise, burrowing beneath the blankets, was a white wall. Plus the pink wax-plugs I'd stuffed in my ears the night before, knowing what was coming. It always happened at the same time. Eight o'clock. On the dot.

They'd been working inside the big, old building next door for more than a year. Over the months I'd tried to make my bed as far away from that wall as possible, dossing down in different corners of my own house to isolate myself from the racket. Not that it made much difference.

And it wasn't just the simple fact of being woken up at such an hour that rankled, more the knowledge that the noise was going to persist all day with only a break for lunch. The lunchtime lull lasted half an hour. Maybe five minutes more, if I was lucky.

I tried to stay away from the house all day, working as much as possible at night when a marvellous, near-forgotten silence fell on the narrow street where I lived. That's Via Diaz in the ancient centre of Pesaro, a city in the Marches, Italy. My nerves finally gave way in the early days of April with the start of new work on the western side of the building, the erection of another crane, a mixer, more new scaffolding, told me what was about to happen: more bricklayers, more pneumatic drills...

Black despair took possession of my mind and my soul.

The new operation entered the destructive-fury phase a couple of days later. They were knocking down internal walls, brick by brick, the intention being to put up new walls... brick by brick. I asked the foreman how long he thought the job was going to take. A polite answer came, but what it was I could only guess. A migrant worker stumbling on the tricky local dialect. I got the message, though. For as long as it takes. That was the gist of it.

At the time, I was in the final stages of my own work, which involved a very fine recording I'd produced a year or so before, and I was hoping to have it ready for the Book Fair in Turin where we take a stand every year to promote the latest CD of our company.

The work is similar to a film director working on the 'rough cuts' before making the final decision. You go back and listen to all the recording sessions, hours and hours of music, picking and choosing the most interesting material, sorting it and setting it up for editing, recognising and removing errors and minor imperfections. Given that the material was dedicated to music for voice and two lutes, refined and delicate Renaissance instruments, I had no alternative but to get away from the noise and do my work by night. In twenty-four hours I passed from heaven to hell, the latter too long, the former too short, because every night at a

certain point, I feel asleep with the music gently playing, coffee cups stacked one on top of another, sheets of music scattered all around, reels of tape, cigar butts dying slowly in the ashtray. I'd wake up sooner or later with an ache in my neck and crawl off to bed, never forgetting to stuff those useless wax plugs in my ears, before total oblivion descended.

The new restoration work didn't change this routine. But one day exasperation drove me to do something I'd never dreamt of doing.

- Good morning! I'm looking for a really powerful amplifier. You know, something really heavy? And some big speakers, the kind that let it out with a real big thump.

I found myself a big old Marantz with valves and two second-hand speakers from the eighties.

I had the gear set up in the studio double-quick, gave it a try, then I opened all the doors and windows, and I turned the volume up to maximum.

Outside an enormous crane was transporting gigantic objects up and down. A lorry with its noisy engine had been idling there for hours. And suddenly, this river of unchained music burst forth from my window, and I let out a yell of joy with all the force of which I was possessed.

The stereo played and I stepped out of the door to gauge the effect. The hallway and the staircase were awash with sound. Out in the street the music sounded fabulous. My part of the city was invaded by the music of Giovanni Antonio Terzi, and the lovely voice of Emanuela sang in all of its rich beauty. For the first time I realised just how fine the acoustics were in Via Diaz.

Apart from the symbolic and momentary act of rebellion, what really changed was the realisation that by carefully regulating the volume, I no longer heard the hammers and pneumatic drills. I could outplay them. The nightmare was over. I could work!

The volume I was using for the mixing sessions didn't seem to bother anyone. Even with the shutters tightly closed, groups of people kept forming beneath my windows, attracted by the music. My next door neighbour, fortunately, is deaf. She is a splendid eighty-year old. And on the floor below there is a restaurant. From that moment, work went well, day and night slipped back into their allotted positions, and my good humour was improving day by day. What was more, I couldn't help but notice that the constant presence of Terzi's music in the building had an improving influence on the other inhabitants. People were more friendly on the stairs. Life was looking brighter all round.

Then, one morning, opening my window, I noticed a man leaning on the wall of the building opposite. He was looking up, and I had the sensation that he was waiting eagerly for the concert to begin. I had just started work on one of the vocal pieces: *Così le chiome*.

I had it down as the opening track on the recording. It was perfect. It started up with a few gentle notes, I liked the air of mystery it evoked, the rarefied atmosphere of two lutes waving a melody beneath a simple vocal line. And that man was always standing there, listening. The idea of a stranger hovering beneath my window, listening to what I was doing, threw me a bit. He'd been there all the morning. He was still there when I left the house later, his elbow resting on a black metal drum. I thought he might be a Slav. I nodded at him. He looked a bit rough, his eyes swollen, skin red, hair uncombed, a long white beard with tobacco stains. He did have nice shoes, though, brown ones with laces, and he wore an old raincoat that fell below his knees.

I could only wonder what would happen if they took that metal drum away. Would he still be able to stand up, or not? Two blues eyes met mine. I felt them fixed on my back as I walked away, and had to struggle not to look back.

- Marco?

- Hi, Lucci. There's a guy hanging about under my window. He's been there since this morning.

- Who is he?

- I've no idea. He looks... well, he looks like a tramp!

- Do you fancy lunch?

- You bet!

When I came back, the stranger wasn't there. I switched on the stereo and settled down to work. The builders were really going at it. They were having a field-day when the door-bell rang.

It was him.

He smiled and showed his gold-capped teeth. The bottom row had seen better days. They were almost worn through.

I managed to say something. His presence had me worried.

- Beautiful music. Beautiful, beautiful! He laughed nervously, as if it were the only word he knew.

- Oh, yeah, beautiful music, he said.

He was gesticulating. He seemed to be trying to make more of the words. Struggling with the few he knew. And the more he waved his arms about, the stronger the scent of talcum powder he gave off. It was the old kind of powder, the stuff that barbers used to use.

- Do you like the music? I asked him.

- Yeah, yeah. Beautiful. The music, I... the music, yeah, yeah...

- Music? I said, and touched my ear.

- I... Radio! Music, beautiful!

- Where are you from? I asked.

- Ukraine!

Who was he, in heaven's name? There I stood, talking with a stranger on my doorstep. For a moment, I seemed to drift. I was somewhere else.

Così le chiome played in the background.

- Beautiful stimme, he said.
- Stimme? Sprechen zie deutsche?
- Ja!

He spoke far better German than me. And how he spoke. And spoke. He wanted so much to speak. He had so much to say. He seemed happy when he spoke. His name was Giorgji. I learnt a lot from him about what I do in life. About music, that is. Though it must be said, if the truth be told, that he was a good liar.

Giorgji was sixty-six years old. His father was Russian, his mother German, he was one of 4 children. He had a degree in literature. And for thirty years he'd been the director of the classical music programmes on Radio Kiev. He said.

- Who is this singer?
 - She's Italian.
 - And the music? Who is the composer?
 - Giovanni Antonio Terzi. He was working at the end of the sixteenth century.
 - Why are you playing it so loud?
 - To drown out the building noise.
 - It is so beautiful! What are you doing?
 - I'm making a record.
 - Can I hear it?
- I sat him in the green chair.

He asked to see the manuscript and I had a fax copy. Then I went back to work, slightly embarrassed by this unknown presence in my house, this man who sat behind me, reading the music that I was working on. And time passed.

- There's a missing note! he shouted suddenly.
- A note?
- In this section here. The B flat's missing.
- Oh, come on. I can hear it!
- You heard it because there should be a B flat there. But the musician didn't play it. There's a note missing. Really. Listen carefully!

I listened to those two bars over and over again. He was right. There was a note missing.

- Do you like this piece? he asked.
- It's one of the best on the CD. I'm thinking of using it as the opening track.
- What's it called?
- Così le chiome

Giorgji seemed to fall under a spell while he listened to the music, his

thoughts far away.

- It's not an opening piece. No, there's too much tension in it. A CD's a bit like a lunch. You can't digest this one on an empty stomach. No. You'd ruin your appetite for the rest.

A CD like a lunch? The thought had never occurred to me. People in the record business advise you to fire your best shot first. In a shop, they say, the customer hears the first track, then decides whether to buy your CD, or one of the thousands of others on the shelves.

I felt intimidated by what he had to say. Was he trying to elbow me out of my job?

- Excuse me, how do you know these things?

- I told you. I used to work for the radio. In Kiev.

Così le chiome was still playing away.

- Have you got any other takes of this piece?

- Of course, I replied.

- Shall we listen to them together?

Of all the takes we'd recorded, Giorgji was most impressed with the first. Così le chiome begins with a fifth, a C against a G. There's a slow dialogue between the lutes, then the voice comes in, a simple melody, not too many notes, all ascending.

- This is the one, he said. This is the most beautiful.

- Why do you say that?

- Just listen to the opening notes, the sense of calm beneath them.

It's a bit like saying, "hey, this piece is so beautiful, we're stretching it out, making it last as long as we possibly can." And listen to her voice! It's so smooth. Like silk or velvet.

He couldn't stop talking.

- Listen to those opening notes!

He liked the way the players took a deep breath before they plucked the first note on their lutes, the shy clarity with which the singer intoned the word Così, and modulated the vowels in soavemente. He liked the scale the lute played beneath the word chiome, running up, then coming down again, suggesting that he saw the light and shade of the maiden's braided hair in the arrangement. It was rare, he said, to be able to hold a note so long and so perfectly in tune without betraying the fact that the singer had to breathe.

- While making music sometimes, the performer feels the hand of God on his shoulder. For an instant something changes. For just one instant. Can you hear it here?

- No!

I couldn't hear any such thing. The music hadn't made an impression of that sort on me. And I felt a fool. This man was hearing things that I could not. He drew images from sounds, and he was convinced by them.

There was only one possible explanation: he was a mad visionary.

- Do you believe in God? I asked him.

- Yes, of course!

- And you think He sits in with the musicians now and again?

- Oh, yes!

Exhaustion point was reached shortly after dusk. He had to go, I realised, as he stood to his feet and put the green chair back in its place. He touched my hair and looked at me with those wide, blue eyes of his.

- Thanks! he said.

I closed the door. Così le chiome was still playing.

He turned up on my doorstep for fifteen days on the run, Saturday and Sunday included. No appointment was needed. He would just arrive, more or less at the same hour, and we worked together until each piece was in the 'can'. If I asked him where he lived, or how he lived, or what he did, he avoided the question. Memories, anecdotes, were his answer. The musicians he had met. Concerts he had heard.

We only ever disagreed once. The last time.

We were listening to Liquid pearls, the duet for lutes that was to be the title piece of the CD. He listened to it after his own fashion, and it was becoming my fashion too, comparing the different recordings of the piece. Giorgji could talk, drink, move around the room, whatever. He didn't miss a single note coming out of the speakers. In his search for the hand of God, he'd stop and smile now and again. That was the sign. He'd heard it. He was a sort of sounding-rod, a seer, if you like, and music was his element.

Of the eight recordings of the piece, Giorgji got most excited about the sixth. Again, there was nothing in my notes that pointed to anything extra special about it, but he was insistent. The lute was stroked with the fingertips, everything was delicate, refined, pianissimo. Even with the volume turned up, the players barely seemed to caress the strings. It was as if the two marvellous players, Franco and Gabriele, were afraid of waking up a baby sleeping close beside them.

- Isn't that wonderful? His eyes narrowed and his fingers of his right hand played lightly near his face.

The fast, descending passages drove him wild with delight. The players' fingers seemed to make more sound moving through the air than the notes that they plucked

- We can't possibly publish this. It's too delicate, the whole thing is just too quiet!

His voice quivered:

- It's truly beautiful. There's no such thing as too quiet. It should be the last piece on the recording.

I disagreed with him. I was not going to use that version on the final recording. No way! That evening, March 27, 2003, was the last time I saw

Giorgji. His old-fashioned talc, his voice were gone. He never touched my hair again. He never came back. I was worried and looked all over the place for him for days: the police-station, the hospitals, help-centres for immigrants, prison, the lunatic asylum. Nothing. He'd disappeared off the face of the earth. Then, suddenly, I recalled what he'd said on that last evening. It was the first time he'd ever used the expression. See you tomorrow, he had said. I should have known that he was lying.

I miss him. How I miss that man who looked for the hand of God in music!

Liquid pearls was ready for publication some days later. What a pity he wasn't there when we chose the cover-picture. He'd certainly have had some constructive comment to make about it. I put all his favourites on the CD, including take number 6 of Liquid pearls as the final track. I just hope that one day, somewhere in the world, when someone plays this music loud through an open window, Giorgji will step out of the shadows and smile.

Copyright: Marco Mencoboni
May 7, 2003

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