

## THE HYPNOTIC GARDEN: REPETITION AND TRANCE IN SALVATORE SCIARRINO'S WORKS FOR FLUTE<sup>1</sup>

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**SUMMARY.** Salvatore Sciarrino creates what could be described as an isolated, mysterious “sonic garden”: a ghostly world of sounds where the archetypal corporal processes, such as breathing or heartbeat, are transformed into music. His conceptual thinking – refreshing the musical perception, the ecological hearing, the persistence of repetition, the figures of music (formal archetypes that can be adapted to any kind of art) – as well as his very particular, non-traditional sound make Sciarrino’s music an incredibly rich world to explore. The flute seems to be his favourite instrument, due to its ability to incorporate so many corporeal noises of the performer (from voice to fingertips), becoming almost an extension of his body. The many and ingenious ways of applying repetition in his work, as well as the play with time length – taken to almost unbearable boundaries – make Salvatore Sciarrino one of the true explorers of musical trance today.

**Keywords:** Sciarrino, flute, contemporary music, repetition, persistence, musical figures

„With me, music inhabits a threshold region. Like dreams, where something both exists and does not yet exist, and exists as something else as well. [...] These are the sounds found close to the horizon of the senses, those, surely which, come from the purgatory of the infrauterine, magnified by ancient silence, through some submerged collapse of memory. They fluctuate, and you stand in the center, and an intact space soon pulsates in the dark”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first published in the *Muzica* magazine, Ed. Muzicală, No. 5/2020, p. 87-100

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<sup>3</sup> Sciarrino, Salvatore, *L'Opera per flauto*, vol. I, presentation of *Hermes*, Ricordi, Milan, 1990, p. 7

This is how Salvatore Sciarrino presents his *Opera per flauto*, a two-volume cycle reuniting twelve solo works for flute – the instrument he seems to hold most dear –, written over more than two decades, between 1977 and 2002.<sup>4</sup> Extravagant, brilliant, arrogant, Sciarrino stands out, in the kaleidoscope of new music, as one of the most original, also one of the most polarizing, composers. Born in Sicily in 1947, he rose to fame in the 1970s – the climatic period of the Western musical avant-garde and experimentalism – by his rejection of the time’s fashionable techniques, integral serialism, and structuralism. “A breath of fresh air”, his music gradually enters the elite of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music, like an ever-rotating kaleidoscope, repetitive, refined, organic, of a hypnotic slowness and extremely particular as regards timbre. The very dilated, monotone musical process is reminiscent of American minimalists’ compositional principles, Steve Reich’s in particular; his music is thus part both Western-type development, specific to vectorial temporality, and of the expositional stasis of a non-linearity correlated with the vertical, circular time of the Orient, a minimalism quite original on European soil and which influenced especially young Italian composers.

Salvatore Sciarrino’s thought unfolds on several main coordinates: radical synaesthesia,<sup>5</sup> the physiology of musical perception, naturalism,<sup>6</sup> repetition as *persistence*, and musical figures,<sup>7</sup> all of them in tight interrelation with one another. The composer wishes to renew and refresh musical perception by reducing it “to zero” (*azzerare*)<sup>8</sup> and by proposing the notion of “eco hearing”<sup>9</sup>: a *different listening to music* in the concert hall. In other words, a much-needed cleaning of the ears. German musicologist Marina Seiber writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Volumul I: *All’aure in una lontananza* [Far-Away Breezes] (1977), *Hermes I* (1984), *Come vengono prodotti gli incantesimi* [How Spells Are Made] (1985), *Canzona di ringraziamento* [Songs of Gratitude] (1985), *Venere che le Grazie la fioriscono* [Venus, May the Graces Adorn Her with Flowers] (1989), *L’orizzonte luminoso di Aton* [The Luminous Horizon of Aton] (1989), *Fra i testi dedicati alle nubi* [Among the Texts Dedicated to Clouds] (1989). Volumul II: *Addio case del vento* [Good-bye Houses of the Wind] (1993), *L’orologio di Bergson* [Bergson’s Clock] (1999), *Morte tamburo* [The Death of the Drum] (1999), *Immagine Fenicia* [Phenician Image] (2000), *Lettera degli antipodi portata dal vento* [Letter from the Antipodes Carried by the Wind] (2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Vinai, Gianfranco, *Salvatore Sciarrino, l’invitation au silence*, in *Résonance*, Ircam/Centre Pompidou, Paris, May 1999, p. 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> See Giacco, Grazia, *La notion de „figure” chez Salvatore Sciarrino* [The Notion of “Figure” in Salvatore Sciarrino’s Works], L’Harmattan, Paris, 2001, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> See Sciarrino, Salvatore, *Le figure della Musica, da Beethoven a oggi* [Musical Figures from Beethoven through Today], Editura Ricordi, Milano, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Giacco, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Notion presented in the conferences during the 2008 *Acanthes Metz Festival*.

Salvatore Sciarrino is a confessed „soundologist”. Surrounded by an environment that is constantly becoming louder and an accelerated perception of time, he advocated pausing for a moment. In the silence, the emptiness, he explains, we encounter ourselves, our nocturnal fears as well as our lost dreams.<sup>10</sup>

The *experience* therefore of a work by Sciarrino is comparable to a provisional escape into a “sound garden”, a shelter away from the daily rush, a sound space of recollection and introspection. Like John Cage in his famous 4'33”, Sciarrino challenges us to turn our “ear” to ourselves, to our emotions and our *body*. As Seeber again argues, he renders musical “archetypical corporal processes, such breathing and heartbeat”.<sup>11</sup> Like a gigantic, emaciated creature, his music breathes, hisses, groans, snores, vibrates, trembles or gasps in a very soft dynamic palette at time run by instances of violent incisiveness. Captive in a restless world, Sciarrino opposes it a barely audible music, one step away from silence; to stressful speed he opposes a barely tolerable slowness; to information explosion, a minimal material, polished with jeweller-like care. Sciarrino's naturalism proposes a transfigured presentation of a subtly distorted real: an aesthetic of the *phantomatic*. But not only those sounds from within the human body come through in his music: the sound of waves too, the wind howling, leaves rustling, the hypnotic monotony of rain or birdsong; I mention here his superb *Canzona di ringraziamento* [Song of Gratitude] for flute, in which three types of “birdsong” alternate, two in a *hoquetus* relation and a third functioning as insertion in the continuum, the “tortorello”<sup>12</sup> effect being the most conspicuous and obvious onomatopoeia. Sciarrino creates an *echo of nature*, because for him, as Seeber too tells us, “the echo is more important than the reality”.<sup>13</sup> The result is a sonic ambiance where we find ourselves charmed, lethargic, sometimes bored, other times on the contrary with sharpened senses, in a state of watchfulness.

The omnipresence of the *flute* in Salvatore Sciarrino's oeuvre is no wonder, for few other instruments have such a capacity to twist their sound palette, starting off in coloured transparency and reaching some shrill violence. And the type of sound production, directly into the embouchure, allows it to transform into an extension of the instrumentalist's body, into a fantastic creature using the performer's breath and excess thereof, incorporating growling

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<sup>10</sup> Seeber, Martina, “Salvatore Sciarrino Orchestral Works”, sleeve notes for CD *Salvatore Sciarrino – Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI, Tito Ceccherini*, Rai Trade, KAIROS, 2008, no. 0012802KAI, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Seeber, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> The effect is obtained by the simultaneity of a rapid chromatic motion in the left hand between G<sub>4</sub> and C#<sub>2</sub> and of D-D# trill (keys A B) in the right hand.

<sup>13</sup> Seeber, p. 12.

and the tongue – via percussion effects or the blocking of the embouchure (which transposes everything one major seventh lower, whereby the sound becomes fragile and “cavernous”) -, by the amplification of the haptic, of the noise that the musician’s fingers make on its keys. Through his timbral pursuits, supported by collaborations with the greatest contemporary flutists (from Roberto Fabbriciani to Mario Caroli), Sciarrino had a huge contribution to the discovery of new playing techniques, an entire palette of effects already associated to his name and massively enriching the contemporary repertoire. Mario Caroli remarked in a conference at the 2008 Metz Acanthes festival that by constantly avoiding the so-called “normal”, traditional sound, Sciarrino isn’t looking for one new, but for *the sound of an imaginary instrument*. This is for instance the case of *Hermes*, built almost entirely of harmonics (fragile whistles tones, biting clusters or jet whistles), suggesting an alternative, delicate or shrill pipe: the score<sup>14</sup> specifically asks that the work be performed “in places with the most echo” and that the musician look for an “impure” sound, as that of an “archaic instrument”. I take the opportunity to underline the *structural*, determining role in the musical form of *timbre* in Sciarrino’s output, his most perceptible element of repetition.

The “radical synaesthesia” that Sciarrino aims for is connected also to a “natural” perception of music, free from prejudice and convention. Like such forerunners as Aleksandr Scriabin or Olivier Messiaen, Sciarrino believes that the audition of a work engages all senses, not only hearing, and that each one influences the others. Take for instance the immediate associations, in our cultural context, between sound registers and spatial perception: soft dynamics suggest distance, while a forte gives the impression of proximity, even of aggressivity. Sciarrino in fact very often plays with this technique of the echo and with the manipulation of the sonic space, inserting violent *sforzandi* in the most refined *pianissimo* textures. The tactile can be incorporated into music too: a short sound in the higher register “pinches”, while one low, deep, can create the illusion of “softness”.

The concern for a new type of perception as well as for the profound connections between the visual and the temporal arts led Sciarrino to develop a fundamental concept in his oeuvre – musical figures. Starting from the idea that there are some common principles of construction in all arts, the composer detects several archetypal organising structures which touch on the perception of musical material. These musical figures have thus an interdisciplinary, conceptual, abstract character, making them translatable into any artistic language; they are, in fact, identifiable structures that order form.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *L’Opera per flauto*, vol. I, p. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Sciarrino addresses figures at length in his *Le figure della musica da Beethoven a oggi*.

One such figure is the *window form*, a type of musical organisation borrowed from the visual arts. Looking at a photo, an instance of the past pinned down, we are allowed a temporal insertion in the continuity of the present: we dive into the past. In music, a temporal insertion of some “windows” to other temporal dimensions is related to an anti-rhetorical concept of form, one that valorises discontinuity, the fragmentary, unpredictability, a “short-circuiting of memory”.<sup>16</sup> Musically, the window translates as break and polytemporality.<sup>17</sup> Sciarrino assimilates this discontinuous, collage-like form, to when we change radio or TV channels.<sup>18</sup> One of his famous works is in fact based on this very concept: *Efebo con radio* [Child with Radio] (1981) for voice and orchestra, is an autobiographical work in which Sciarrino remembers his childhood fascination for changing radio channels, and in particular for the static thus created.

The *little bang* musical figure is the element of surprise that occurs in a static situation, and not without consequences. A short incisive bite, a pistol-shot noise in a delicate aural fabric, *little bang* serves to suddenly refresh the listener’s perception or to even cause a change in the work’s unfolding. This sudden and unpredictable condensation of energy is not necessarily followed by a tension resolving event, as in the ancient arsis-thesis concept, but on the contrary breaks the discursive monotony, rendering it tense and providing it with new meanings.

*Accumulation* and *multiplication* are two other musical figures illustrating the different forms that the evolution of sound material takes. Sciarrino calls them “mass phenomena”,<sup>19</sup> as they are tied to the global perception of the music. Accumulation is a natural, human process that Sciarrino generally applies on the macro-formal level.<sup>20</sup> This is the *chaotic* and *heterogeneous* development which heads towards a saturation point while also being an accumulation of energy, of tension, time seeming to condense within.<sup>21</sup> The visual suggestion is one of filling of space. By contrast, multiplication represents the *ordered* and *homogenous* development by periodic repetitions, a derivation of imitative counterpoint. The degree of predictability results in a lesser energetic accumulation than with chaotic development. In the process of multiplication, the homogeneity of sound material leads to a seemingly dilated time.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sciarrino, quoted by Sandro Cappelletto in the interview in *Il giornale della musica*, EDT&Allemandi, Torino, April 1988.

<sup>17</sup> I am sure to mention here Aurel Stroe’s morphogenetic musics as a local example of a similar formal compositional technique but with clearly different aural results.

<sup>18</sup> Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, p. 27.

Going back to Sciarrino's musical space, he is concerned not so much with the physical spatialisation of sound sources, an obsession of such composers of the 1960s as Karlheinz Stockhausen or Edgard Varèse, as with a "mental space", defined by an essential factor in musical perception: memory. With the help of *repetition*, a fundamental technique in musical construction, listeners hear and memorize, recognize and anticipate, thus creating permanent connections between the three levels of linear, vectorial temporality: present, past and future. For Sciarrino, repetition has a dual purpose: to *fixate* a sonic image, to imprint it in the listeners' memory, and concomitantly to *transform* it, through the filter of memory. Sciarrino associates repetition with *persistence*,<sup>23</sup> a notion that he considers novel in Western music:<sup>24</sup> a sound object is "exposed", in the listener's auditive conscience, as an element of nature which simply *lasts*, with no consequence or perceptible development. We could call this process "durational repetition", like looking at a painting from up close – maybe one by one of Sciarrino's favourites, monochrome aestheticist Alberto Burri to whom the 1995 *Omaggio a Burri* for violin, alto flute and bass clarinet is dedicated.

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Analysing *L'opera per flauto*,<sup>25</sup> I was able to detect a series of structural techniques characteristic to the composer's entire oeuvre, all of them in close connection with the formal archetype of *repetition*. Sciarrino generates sonic continuities which he then distorts: the evolution of the musical material is like that of a living organism that grows, shrinks, is transformed, altered and parasitised by other organisms.

1. Sonic statism is materialized as the preference for *pedals* and repeated notes, whose horizontal, monotonous unfolding gradually fluctuates. The obsessive beat on a E<sub>b</sub> pivot-sound in *Immagine Fenicia* [Phoenician Image], from which other elements progressively grow, in their turn subjected to a bending process, is an example thereof.

2. The *persistence* of a sonic element over long durations acquires a hypnotic force, extending the perception of the sound object into the listeners' memory even after the music has ended – as with *Canzona di ringraziamento*,

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<sup>23</sup> Detailed in the conferences of the 2008 *Acanthes Metz Festival*.

<sup>24</sup> Variants of this idea however appear – in other forms – in Erik Satie ("furniture music") and even in American minimalists (from which Sciarrino is different, nevertheless, first and foremost by his aesthetics).

<sup>25</sup> In the PhD thesis "Transa recentă și principiul repetiției în muzica nouă" [Recent Trance and the Repetition Principle in New Music] completed in 2012 under the tutelage of Dan Dediu DHC at the National University of Music Bucharest.

which is, formally, a giant ostinato slowly evolving, with fluctuations on the various parameters, towards the upper register, or as with *Morte tamburo* [The Death of the Drum], where timbral repetition (tongue ram effect in occasional alternation with some harmonic cluster) is the most conspicuous.

3. A type of macro-pedal is the simulation of *breathing* through the obsessive repetition of the *crescendo – decrescendo* binomial. The process is integrated into the composer's naturalist suggestions. A slow background thus takes shape on which perturbing sonic ephemerides appear. This happens for instance in *L'orizzonte luminoso di Aton* [The Luminous Horizon of Aton], a slow uninterrupted cosmic breath of air sounds, like a strange windborne Gregorian chant over which remains of memory are occasionally placed.

4. *Continuous rapid motion* is another element which brings the naturalist suggestion to mind: a murmur, a rustle often barely audible, a vibration of nature present in almost all of his works for flute – and not only in those ones. *All'aure in una lontananza* [Far-away Breezes], the first work in *L'opera per flauto*, is a long tremolo harmonics flicker gradually turning into rapid air sounds melismas, a sound in the process of being born, pure and extremely delicate.

5. The *gradual replacement* of an element with another represents the formal simulation of a natural process of contamination. Sciarrino employs it too in *Come vengono prodotti gli incantesimi* [How Spells Are Made], where he replaces one pulsating mechanism with another, each of them based on a different timbral element: tongue ram (a), jet whistle (b), harmonics clusters (c) and a group of elements – *tortorello*, trill and microtonal glissando (d). The continuous type of form can thus be articulated into four distinct conjunct sections, according to the predominant timbral object.

6. The most frequently used structure is the *macromechanism of intersected cycles*, each of them representing in its turn a repetitive mechanism which either amplifies, then gradually reduces an element, or is based on a string of numbers slightly varying with each iteration. In *Immagine fenicia*, the obsessive tic-tac on sixteenth notes on E<sub>b</sub> is initially ordered as a string of numbers (6-3-4-2-5-1-28-7 beats), later repeated throughout the work, at first identical and then varied (by permutation, omission, addition, or subtraction); the initial tongue ram effect turns too into an air sound, a bichord structure or a shadow cluster. This chain of numerical cycles intersects with other timbral elements which gradually change colour too. In *Lettera degli antipodi portata dal vento* [Letter from the Antipodes Carried by the Wind], after a violent introduction sixteen cycles are presented, intersected, and built on the principle of wail in an ascending, microtonal *glissando*; an immense *lamento* is thus produced, a lamentation reminiscent of the Baroque *passus duriusculus*.

7. Sonic cell/sound object *permutation* is used for instance in the first section of *Venere che le Grazie la fioriscono* [Venus, may the Graces Adorn Her with Flowers], a figurative continuum where all cells derive one from the other by sound amplification, condensation, addition, or elimination.

8. Mechanic repetition with *the changing of just one parameter* – timbre: in the same *Venere*, the second section,<sup>26</sup> a two-voice, three-note (D – B – E<sub>b</sub>) ostinato canon intervenes on three timbral planes: tongue ram, key clicks and air sounds with embouchure hole coverage (resulting in a descending major seventh) gradually transformed into a jet whistle. The canon constantly overturns two short inframelodic segments, one continuous and one discontinuous, each with its “colour”. All six possible timbral combinations of the three methods of attack are used, the combinations appearing in an ever-permuted order.

9. *The organic evolution* of a repeated element by amplification and condensation is characteristic of almost all the works. A particular case of this process is *Morte tamburo*, where a melodic cell evolves by “rolling”: with each repetition it gains a sound at the end but loses the one in the beginning (at one point nothing is added and the cell eventually vanishes).<sup>27</sup> We might call this an almost cinematographic technique, as it simulates the camera’s movement from left to right (“repetition by camera shift”).

10. The introduction of some onomatopoeic *micro-mechanisms* and the immediate repetition of a musical gesture or of a sound.

11. *Staggered ostinato*: repetition is applied to several parameters, but the repetition sequence is different for each of them as well as changed throughout the mechanism.<sup>28</sup> In the incipit of *Fra i testi dedicati alle nubi* [Among the Texts Dedicated to Clouds] we see, after a short introduction, an eighth note ostinato unfolding over segments of *seven* units: seven eighth note pulsations in alternation with seven eighth note rests (changes will later appear). Over this rhythmic ostinato an intonational one is placed, of another dimension, a row of *eleven* multiphonics to be repeated (identically, amplified, permuted, or changed) another twenty-eight times throughout the work.

12. *Insertion*, with distinct roles: *perturbation of the mechanism*, *figure in the background* – a signal system grafted onto a homogenous sonic mechanism (as in *Hermes* or *L’orizzonte luminoso di Aton*) and *window*, unpredictable rupture with slow appearances and no formal consequences.

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<sup>26</sup> *L’opera per flauto*, vol. I, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> This technique is presented very clearly in the score, vol. II, p. 15, beginning with the 4<sup>th</sup> system, in the row of jet whistles and especially in the row of tongue rams.

<sup>28</sup> The technique is similar to the mediaeval isorhythmic process: the gap between *talea* (the rhythmic ostinato) and *color* (the melodic ostinato).



13. *L'orologio di Bergson [Bergson's Clock]* (1999) has a particular structure, based on *variation through translation* (present, on a smaller scale, in other works too), a process which consists of gradually moving a sound object in the opposite direction of the passage of time, namely, the 4/8 time signature. The visual result is a diagonal symmetry; the composer confessed the influence of modular variation found in Persian tapestries, giving in his book an example from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup>

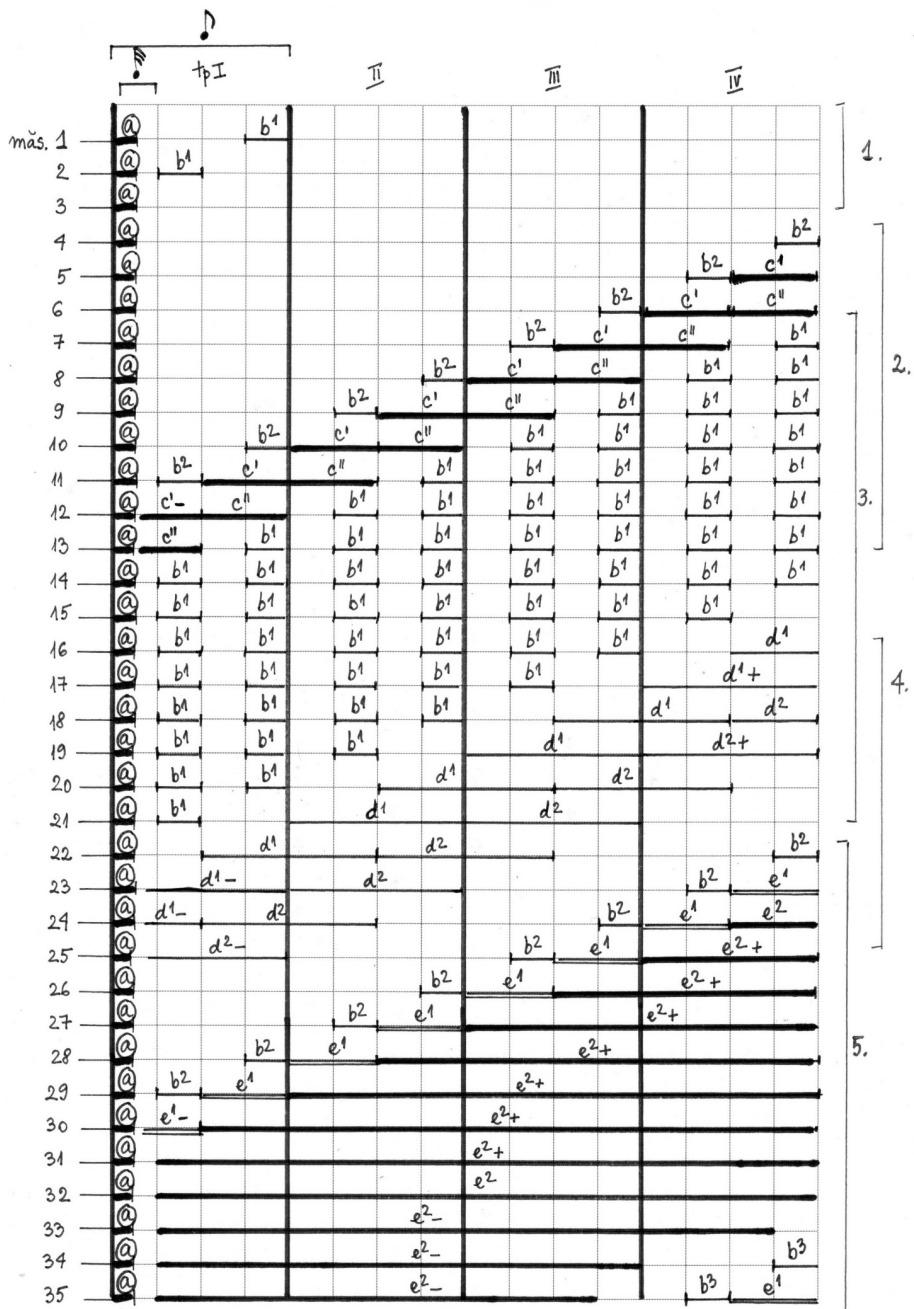
Below is the chart of *L'orologio's* tapestry-score:<sup>30</sup> *a-i* are the nine distinct sound objects (with their variants) and on the right-hand side there are the ten conjunct waves, each exposing a different object (the first wave is one introductory). The arrows indicate the three main sections of the piece:

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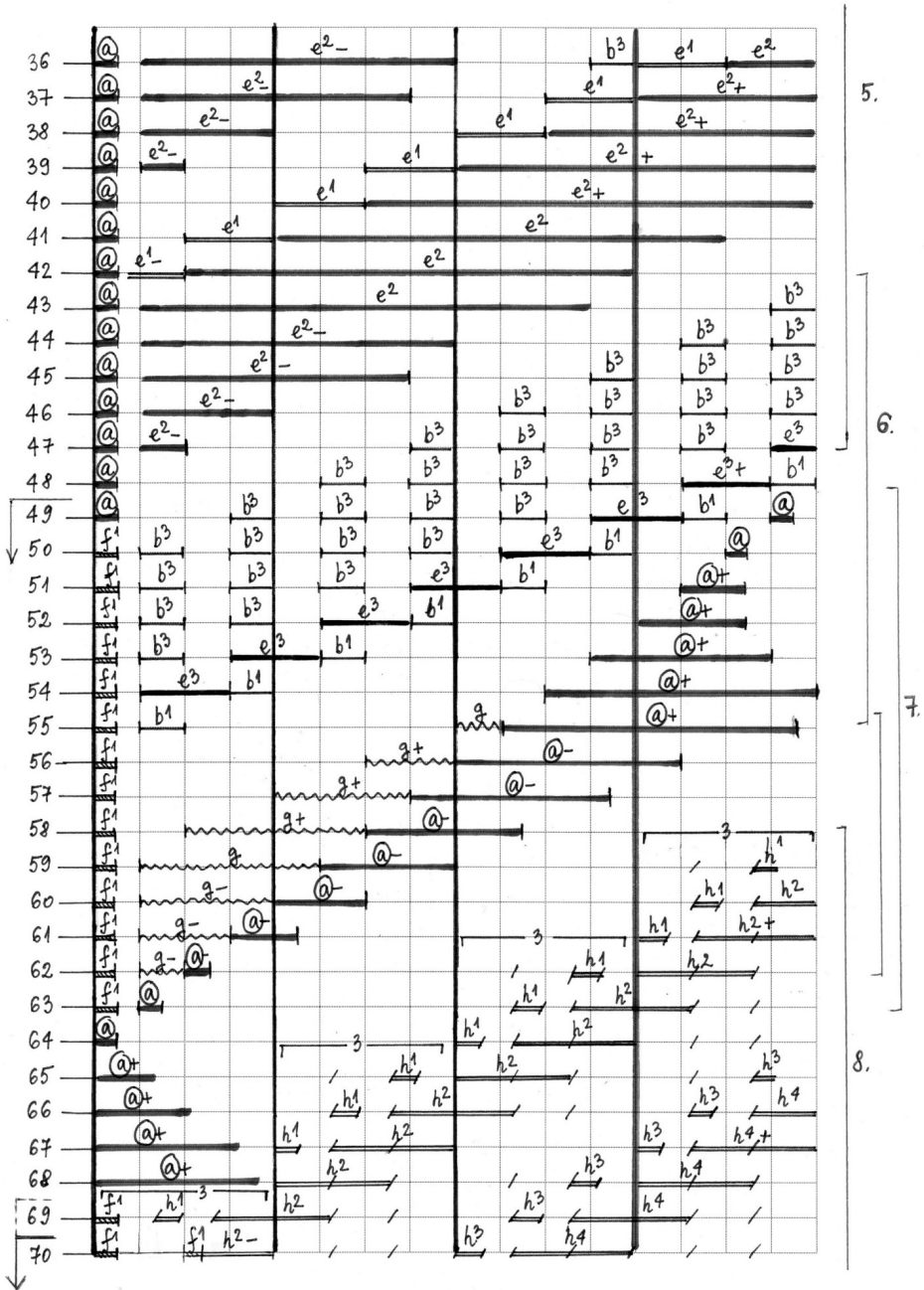
<sup>29</sup> Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, fig. 69, p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> The chart is taken from Diana Rotaru, "Transa recentă și principiul repetiției în muzica nouă", p. 183-185

Table 1



THE HYPNOTIC GARDEN: REPETITION AND TRANCE IN SALVATORE SCIARRINO'S WORKS...



Salvatore Sciarrino's repetitive minimalism, so particular to him, is justified by the idea of a musical *anti-rhetoric* towards which the composer strives, by the elimination of Western narrativity and its replacement with an organic evolution of the sound material, not only as in nature, but also as in ritualic, trance music. If audiences, be they knowledgeable, have divergent views, such divergence cannot deny the importance and profound originality of this *garden-like composer*, bizarre and ever fascinating.

Translation by Maria Monica Bojin  
Martina Seeber quotes: © Martina Seeber, 2008  
Salvatore Sciarrino quote: © Salvatore Sciarrino, 1990

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