

A Brief Overview of Walter Marchetti

For *Experimental Music Post-Cage* (CalArts, Michael Pisaro)

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Walter Marchetti (1931-2015), born in Canosa di Puglia in southern Italy, was a fairly enigmatic figure even in the context of 20th century experimental music. His various experiments were not always confined to the auditory; he incorporated visual and performance-art elements in varying degrees alongside his literal music.

Marchetti might be considered a maverick in his relative rejection of European experimental music trends. Very unusually, during the increasingly influential rise of the mid-century European avant-garde, he chose to follow the path of the American “resistance” movement of artists who had largely turned away from the European institutions. This American movement was essentially spearheaded by John Cage, who had already become a beloved symbol of the American avant-garde by the mid-fifties, or even earlier- alongside other figures such as Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown. Always present was the larger army of Fluxus, an international group (with American origins) which created and performed experimental music and art heavily informed by Cage and his ilk in the 60’s and 70’s. Very broadly, it could be said that these American artists rejected powerful European experimental composers such as Stockhausen and Boulez. They postulated that the European school was over-reliant on various composing “traditions”, and that no matter how much European composers of

the time experimented with electronics or other relatively new musical possibilities, that they could not (or *would* not) fully extricate themselves from the comfort of the academy. As described in the “Fluxus Manifesto” of 1963 (by George Maciunas, a Lithuanian-American artist and founding member): *“PURGE the world of bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual’, professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art,- PURGE THE WORLD OF ‘EUROPEANISM!’”*¹ For a European perspective on this, we can consider Cage as described by Italian composer Boris Porena in his *Festa Musicali a Bologna*, June 1978: *“The Cage Phenomenon is quite singular and to understand its impact the traditional parameters of the European music must be abandoned, particularly the strict rational constructivism, that is its essential premise. If any (not that much actually) invisible thread ties the American avant-garde composers of the this century, this consists of the pioneering freedom from the historical European Dictum.”*²

In this context, Marchetti was one of only a handful of European artists who defected to the American school of experimental thought. In the late 50’s, alongside his longtime friend and artistic collaborator Juan Hidalgo from Spain, he founded the experimental group *Zaj*, which became a sort of European Fluxus. Cage himself was a supporter of this new group, and it often overlapped with Fluxus; various *Zaj* members even performed at Fluxus events organized by George Maciunas in the 60’s and 70’s. The importance of Marchetti’s collaboration with Hidalgo cannot be overstated. They even worked together with Cage (whom Marchetti had known personally since Cage’s 1959

¹ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-fluxus-movement-art-museums-galleries>

² <http://www.johncage.it/en/1978-cage-train.html>

trip to Italy)³ and other Zaj members on a project in the 70's, involving musical performances on three different Italian trains; with the use of strategically placed microphones, the passengers *"would hear the train's very noises enriched by an additional mix of local music and sounds, giving an audio-portrait of each stop."*

In an effort to examine some of the reasons why Marchetti identified more with American radical art than with his native European paradigms, we can examine his musical background and upbringing. He came from a working class background, and had experience in many labor jobs including grape picking, brick laying, saddle making, frame welding, music and wine sales, and many more. Throughout his many years working jobs such as these, he had attempted to teach himself music (he maintained that he was entirely self-taught). It was after many failed attempts to learn music "seriously" that Marchetti realized his efforts would bear fruit if he considered music "as anything other than serious!"⁴ This is very much in the spirit of Cage, who was fully cognizant of the fact that "music" was a broad auditory phenomenon, far from being confined to the traditional score or concert setting.

-Exploring some of Marchetti's Works-

Natura Morta (Solo Piano, 1980)- an hour long work, which is airy, slow, and light on its feet but very vast, sinking into what seems like an endless pool. The notes are generally played one at a time in consistent rhythms and dynamics, with pauses of varying length sprinkled throughout. The notes move slowly enough that each one feels noticeable and important, even though they are largely unchanging and all part of the

³ <https://datacide-magazine.com/all-was-music-on-walter-marchetti/>

⁴ <https://www.interpretations.info/article-on-walter-marchetti/>

same fairly small register. The pedal is held, allowing for gently vibrating tone clusters to form and gradually fade away- although silences are only very rarely reached before new notes are ushered in. In pianist Reinier van Houdt's 2014 Los Angeles performance of *Natura Morta*, a tray of fruit was placed on top of the piano for the duration of the work (I'm not sure if this was part of the original score.) According to critic Paul Muller:

"This gave a faint, but unmistakable flavor to the air that increased as the piece went along and provided an additional sensory dimension to the music. Natura Morta is deliberate music consisting of a simple, steady melody line of single quarter notes. The dynamic never varies from mezzo piano. This line is repeated with the same notes but not in exactly the same sequence, and this gives the piece an organic, plant-like feel. It is as if you are looking at a vine – similar form and material, but never identical in every segment. The linear melodies seem to meander and hang in the air, like the fragrance of the ripened fruit. One of the scores available for this piece specify three kinds of fermata, the duration of each one being determined by the length of the preceding phrase – the longer the phrase the more time given for the harmonics to die out. In this way the decay of the fruit still life is reinforced by the music as well as the scent in the air. Natura Morta runs on for an hour and the feeling of the phrases is ambivalent: not quite melancholy, not quite aimless – but there is a sense of a natural organic process at work."

The title "*Natura Morta*" means "Still Life"- in the art world, a common example of a still life involves depicting a tray of fruit, creating a challenge for a visual artist to capture all the different textures and colors present. Here, it could also refer to the feeling of "stasis" which the music itself evokes, being a series of suspended patterns which seem to float through space without arriving anywhere.

Antibarbarus, recorded 1998 (written in 1980's?) This is almost a form of *Musique*

Concrete, in that the sound of a toilet flushing provides an impetus for a chaotic expanse of sound. It is a dense noise and has a viscous texture, with lots of subtle hints of tones in the background. The texture changes only gradually, dying away until the toilet is flushed again, birthing a new extended sound. It is as though the listener is being swept through the sewers along with the water- a black hole of noise.

Concerto for the Left Hand in One Movement (Solo piano, 1994)- one of a series of works belonging to a larger group called "*Canonic Variations for Orchestra on Prolapsed Time From Development to Hiccup of Black Cherry Jam.*" These works represented a return to traditional notation, though they are not without performance art elements. In *Concerto for the Left Hand*, the pianist's left hand is holding an open umbrella the entire time- while the right hand plays notes. This implies a paradox- one that implies the impossibility of the "true" score, as the notes must be played with the opposite hand than is indicated, causing the music to cease existing. Or, perhaps the "concerto" is the act of holding the umbrella, while the right hand is the accompaniment for the soloist (or even just incidental noise.) The zen-like stopping of sound connected to this concerto's paradox connects Marchetti to the anti-rationalism of Fluxus. The author Howard Slater also makes the point that Marchetti "rejected definition in favor of contradiction."

Per la Sete dell' Orecchio (Recorded 1989) - this piece consists of a heavy object

(or objects) being tossed into water over and over again, usually with long breaks in between. The splashes reverberate for long periods and vary only slightly in “depth” level. It is an unusually pure instance of a “natural”, non-musically-programmatic noise (a splash) being made into a musical piece, as the varying tones created by the different splashes provide rhythm and even a perverted kind of melody. When combined with his use of the toilet on *Antibarbarus*, one could easily associate these splashes with human defecation. After all, Marchetti did famously describe his work as “the arsehole of western music”!⁵ This could be looked at more deeply: it may fall in line with the concept of “purging” set forth in the Fluxus manifesto by George Maciunas. In buddhist Tantric practices (which Marchetti may have been aware of, as Cage was a buddhist practitioner), defecation, urination and vomiting can represent waste, renewal, and fecundity.

In Terram Utopicam - a set of works from 1974 - 1975, including "*J'aimerais jouer avec un piano qui aurait une grosse queue*"- or "I'd like to play with a piano that has a big tail". “Queue” is popular French slang for the male sex organ, so they may be a sexual component to Marchetti’s work. Sex was a central part of Fluxus, and some male Fluxus artists attempted to benefit as much as possible from the “sexual freedom” philosophy of the 60’s.⁶ It is possible that Marchetti’s hope to engage with a piano sexually represented another type of “purge”, one which liberated music from the “clean” or overly precious, and instead helped music exist without boundaries.

⁵ <http://archivioconz.com/artist/walter-marchetti/>

⁶ <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/fluxus-090911-120311/>