

Everything pop should learn from contemporary music

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There is something profoundly absurd, or at least bizarre, if for quite a few years true courage in music has been easier to find in contemporary classical music (or even in jazz), and not in hip hop. or in electronics, genres that should instead be the young, progressive and modern ones par excellence. Too bad, however, that (almost) nobody notices all this. Because if classical music and in part jazz are still accompanied by this aura of dusty, frowning contexts, for an audience of over fifty (jazz) or almost octogenarians (classical), it is also partly because it is really like that. Especially in Italy, this is really too often the case. But beware: it is not just the fault of the forts built by the traditionalists of those “high” musical genres. No: it should be said loud and clear, rock, hip hop and electronic audiences have a serious curiosity problem. You lose a lot of interesting things, out of sheer laziness. Or for fear of going for a visit to “other” (or “high” contexts, you decide how to play the consonant).

We admire musicians who overcome the rules, who have the courage to launch themselves into eccentric solutions, who want to go beyond limits and conventions, right? We all admire them, right? It would form the basis of the so-called rock culture, as well as the techno revolution, or hip hop cheekiness. Quite right? Well: know that all these characteristics are also and above all found in an event such as the Venetian Music Biennale. Indeed: they are there much more than in the umpteenth rock festival with the same names, in the hip hop “classification” where it is a competition to trace the winning sound of the moment, in dance electronics (which has not changed its appearance for twenty years at least, with the exception of micro-variations calibrated on the fashions of the moment) and also in the experimental one (which seems to have explored the explorable, and continues to retrace the same four or five clichés). They can be found in the Music Biennale, yes; but the Biennale is still very much a “hostage” to itself at the level of perception. The path of validation that it gives itself in fact still passes through the old, historic channels of the sphere of classical music. In other words, the conservatives, the often expert and frowning critics, the (partially) funded non-repayable institutions that turn the artists and the productions to each other and always compliment each other, not posing too much the problem of economic sustainability. That stuff there.

Perhaps it is a situation with no exits and no solutions. Maybe it's nobody's fault.

Perhaps non-pop music will never be able to act and survive according to mere market laws, in short, it will never quite manage to walk on its own legs; it will always need to be subsidized and looped through protected and, therefore, inevitably somewhat elitist

contexts. It can be, yes. But one thing is certain: for a long time now, in contemporary classical music one can encounter a radicalism and a courage that other musical spheres dream of. The real punks, the real acrobats without a net, the real iconoclastic experimenters without borders are, today, above all in classical music. For real. Seeing is believing. It is that those who love punks, acrobats without a net, the true iconoclastic experimenters, however, for the most part do not know: here is the problem. And above all, he would never think of finding it in Venice at a Music Biennale; he would not think of finding it at the Fenice or at the Malibran, he would not think of finding it among choirs, string ensembles, symphonic orchestras, operas.

‘Only the Sound Remains’, a two-act opera by Kaija Saariaho. Photo: The Venice Biennale © Andrea Avezzi

Among other things, the 2021 edition of the Venetian Music Biennale marked an important break: it is the first year with the artistic direction of the composer Lucia Ronchetti (a solid curriculum in the European circuit of contemporary classical), after the long reign of Ivan Fedele. Ronchetti, in a courageous and almost unconscious way, immediately “captured” herself in a cage that she built herself: a four-year assignment for her, and every year she has decided that it will be thematic, already deciding all the themes. In the first edition, the pivot on which to turn everything was the voice: voice as the protagonist (always), voice as a single instrument (very often), voice as matter to be decomposed (we’ll get to that). The oldest instrument in the world was thus immersed in the most “progressive” vision of classical music, and the result reached remarkable, truly remarkable peaks, such as in *Only The Sound Remains*, an opera in two acts by the composer Kaija Saariaho (awarded this year with the Golden Lion), where on truly brutally essential elements – both in the sparse composition of the orchestra and in the lightness of the arrangements and in the simplicity of the scenography – it was found instead a lot, a lot of expressiveness and poetry, even without following the story narrated by the libretto (Japanese mythology, translated to Europe by Ezra Pound), or perhaps above all by not following it.

Why yes: if you have in mind the contemporary classic as a sequence of dissonances and annoying sounds and people who move ceremoniously for nothing or in any case to play two notes on the cross, yes, there is still that too, and it is obviously a legacy of the avant-garde. to the Berio from which one cannot break away (not understanding that certain things in the 1950s were disruptive, but put out of their place they become museum and pure, if you do not make the effort of critical and philological contextualization, a little speckish); but the recovery that there has been in contemporary music of harmonies, melodies and even rhythms that are no longer radical and only deconstructed gives very interesting fruits. It happens for example in *Everything at once*, a piece by the 48-year-old Francesco Filidei in first absolute performance; or in the explosive *Timna* by the Israeli (but of Palestinian origin) Samir Odeh-Tamimi, an authentic masterpiece of strength and percussive growth that even the most badass of the power trio with guitar and double bass drum could equalize, all with a choir and an orchestra also reduced in the staff, nothing else. A magic, an incendiary magic.

Zuli’s concert at the Teatro del Parco in Mestre. Photo: The Venice Biennale © Andrea Avezzi

Just as it was a magic to find oneself inside the Basilica of San Marco (it always leaves you breathless), for a very interesting project commissioned directly by the Biennale of the well-established digital-sonorizer Christina Kubisch, who took the Venetian repertoire of the '500 (Monteverdi, Gabrieli, etc.) and interpolated it with its essential and harmonious geometries at the same time, using the choir's voice – or better still, its reverb – as an instrument. He did this by de-spatializing the performance: the chorus was visible only in the first and last piece (in two different places), otherwise hidden or semi-hidden from view and in continuous movement, creating an alienating effect, that under the imposing gold mosaics of San Marco was even more intense and evocative. The other name taken from the slightly more traditionally electronic scene has not disappointed either, that Zuli which intertwines the world of Autechre with the chants of his homeland, Egypt, without skimping on edges, noise and digital cavernosity. His execution was imperfect but certainly impactful. And it confirmed the remarkable talent – and still undervalued on a large scale, Aphex Twin endorsement aside – that is his.

Everything nice? No, of course. Good old George Lewis's electronic effects work on the vocality of Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart was, to make a compliment, approximate and dated, if one chews a little on the electronics that run in the twenty-first century (but also that of the late twentieth); the *Stabat Mater* by Arvo Pärt, making the right proportions a commercial hit in the world of contemporary classical music, it was performed in such a dull way as to highlight the limits of the composition itself (which is, we unbalance, overrated); the excess of rhetoric – musical and textual – has sunk the good intentions of *The simple ones*, first performance for this composition by Sergej Newski, which touched on the theme of discrimination against homosexuals in the Russian area. But in general we breathed in a music of a festival made with not many means – no grandeur, absolutely zero – but with taste and an eye to the future, to an art that in short, breathes and progresses instead of repeating itself. The exact opposite of what we were able to see of the Architecture Biennale instead, taking place in the same days (and until late November): in the spaces of the Arsenale, an idea of old, stereotyped architecture that takes refuge in words order of coexistence and sustainability by using only past and past recipes. As if you were scared of the future. So you are not going anywhere. The Biennale Musica, on the other hand, for what we have seen was quite interesting. And alive.

How long will it be before the rock, pop, hip hop and electronic worlds realize that it is worth doing local tourism a little more often from certain apparently dusty and staid lands? With pessimism we would say: a lot. Quite a lot.