

Luigi Russolo (left) and Ugo Piatti (right) with "noise-intoners."

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Discussions of Futurist music have been incorrect and misleading because after the period, musicians and critics have known *only a concept* of the music, which has been modified by subsequent theorizing and interpretation. Everything that does not fit into the theories has been regarded with suspicion, considered not to be music, and "relegated" to the domain of the visual arts or theater. History needs to be re-evaluated in terms of avant-garde movements such as Futurism so that those attempts that have opened the path to later artistic activity may be distinguishable from those which have fallen back on themselves, and have therefore failed to connect with the evolution of artistic thought.

Early in the 20th century the Italian musical world was characterized by the persistence of the late Romantic tradition. The curtain had already come down many times on *Parsifal* and on "program music" but the "season" continued (with inferior imitations). During this time one figure stands out as the initiator of a new musical concept (one that can be located at the root of Futurism and other avant-garde movements)—Ferruccio Busoni, who was also one of the greatest pianists of his time. Seeds of all the ideas that were later enthusiastically expressed by the Futurists Babililla Pratella and Luigi Russolo can be found in Busoni's essay, *Entwurf einer neuen Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Sketch of a New Esthetic of the Art of Sound), 1907, published in Trieste by Schmidl.

Busoni speaks of "renewal" through a re-reading and synthesizing of the past. In contrast to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "Let's destroy the museums and libraries," Busoni believed in the importance of tradition:

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The transitory qualities of a work constitute the "modern"; those qualities which are immutable preserve it from becoming "old fashioned." In the "modern" as in the "old" there is the good and the bad, the authentic and the false. In an absolute sense, the modern does not exist—in art there is only that which is born earlier and that which is born later, that which flowers for a long time and that which soon withers. There has always been the modern and there has always been the old.¹

This relationship to history is all that differentiates Busoni's programmatic principles from those of the Futurists. Coinciding with Busoni's concept of renewal but more importantly revealing the relationship between Futurism and anti-traditionalism, Pratella begins his second manifesto with:

All innovators have, logically, been Futurists in relation to their times; Palestrina would have judged Bach mad, as Bach would have judged Beethoven, and as Beethoven would have judged Wagner.²

The significance of Busoni's essay lies in his statement that traditional instruments were "tired." His intuitive recognition of new tonal possibilities allowed him to believe "... in abstract sound; in technique without obstacles; in the limitlessness of sounds.

Every effort, therefore, must lead toward a fresh source, a new beginning."³ Six years later Russolo applied himself to this process of innovation, writing: "We must break this restricted circle of pure sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds."⁴ (This, also in order to come to terms with Beethoven and Wagner but not through Busoni's solution of continuity.)

Microtonal research—which Busoni deals with amply (as do Charles Ives, Alois Hába and the later proponents of electronic sound)—is the basis for the application and practice of this new musical concept which Russolo put into effect by constructing *intonarumori* or "noise-intoners." This decompositive process first explored by early Futurists, then adopted by the Dadaists, to finally become a characteristic of all the historical avant-gardes, is what really lies on the threshold between the 19th and 20th centuries. A sharp change had occurred in the definition of the nature of a musical work, now understood as a structure of sounds.

It is no accident that John Cage was one of the first musicians to be interested in Futurism and in Russolo's experiments. In 1946, when he had already created works for a prepared piano, he wrote:

In several of its important aspects, modern music of the twenties is known only by hearsay. The Italian "Art of Noise" established by Luigi Russolo has totally disappeared; in memory it is mistakenly associated with Marinetti. The work done with speech orchestras, divisions of the half-tone and electrical instruments is, for the most part, forgotten. Many composers exist today only as names.⁵

Cage was absolutely correct; musicians like George Antheil are little-known, and the history of 20th-century music ought to be rewritten, giving a greater



Cover and opening page of score for *Musica futurista per orchestra*, 1912, by Balilla Pratella; cover design by Umberto Boccioni.

Musica futurista per orchestra

F. Balilla Pratella, Op. 10

Cantando allegretto e perduto.

Pianoforte.

Violini I, Violini II, Violoncelli, Contrabbassi, Fagotti, Clarinetto in sol, Clarinetto in si bemolle, Trombe, Tromboni, Armi, Percussioni, Timpani, Triangolo, Tamburi, Rullanti, Campane, Sordani, Chitarre, Pianoforte.

Edizione F. Boccioni (1912) - Roma.

Proprietà dell'Autore.

= Deformazione lirica =

= Fivoglio - Gaietta = (4/4, d. = 1/4) (4/4, d. = 1/4)

J. Balilla Pratella

Balilla Pratella, Detail from the score of *L'Aviatore Dro*, 1915.

experiments avoided the problems of modern music and outshone them in every sense by proposing questions which were far too dangerous to handle.⁹ Russolo's background was that of a visual artist, rather than a professional musician. He was, therefore, quite far removed from the linguistic studies of the Conservatory composition classes and was the first to have the courage to create something like noise-intoners even if the kind of precedent as cited by Fred Prieberg in *Musica ex machina* did already exist.

The close relationship between exotic music and noise was made public for the first time in the work of Carol-Bérard, who was born in 1885 and was a pupil of Isaac Albeniz. He not only studied and was influenced by primitive music and instruments, he also composed a *Symphony of Mechanical Forces* in 1910, some years before Futurist interest in music. Moreover, he experimented with noises as music, he developed a notation system for noises and wrote on the problems of the instrumentation of noise music. It is not known, however, whether he was a forerunner of or if he formed later relationships with the Futurists.¹⁰

Prieberg adds no further information. We know nothing more about Carol-Bérard, and the *Symphony of Mechanical Forces* has not been found.

Noise, according to this new definition, has two essential musical uses:

1. an onomatopoeic function, as a signal which has precise connotations,
2. as a structural element in composition, and therefore a further tonal evolution in certain ways tied to late 19th-century symphonism.

The first of these uses developed out of the Futurists' *Poesia sonora* (Sound Poetry), such as *Battaglia di Adrianopoli* (Battle of Adrianople) by Marinetti, or *Onomatologia* (Onomata-Language) by Fortunato Depero. The second use was taken up by Russolo. In a manifesto of March 11, 1911 he says:

It will not be through a series of lifelike noises but through the fantastic associations of these various tones and rhythms that the new orchestra will obtain the most complex and new sound emotions. Thus every instrument will have to be able to vary its tone and will have to extend its range to some degree.

In writing music of the city of the present and future, Russolo uses descriptive techniques which are somewhat similar to Debussy's realizations of pre-Raphaelite/Symbolist/Impressionist compositions which evoke mood by "stopping" time. Russolo's noise of the city is different from Debussy's dreaminess but it is nonetheless still a dream—the myth of the machine. Russolo's work has always been examined and judged by comparing the theories of the "Arte dei rumori" (Art of Noises) with the only existing document of noise-intoners, the 78 rpm recording, *His Master's Voice*, R6919/20 which contains two passages, *Corale* and *Serenata*. But these two compositions are by Antonio Russolo, Luigi Russolo's brother, a professional musician who used the noise-intoners together with other instruments. The record is misleading because the noise-intoners are used tamely, giving the impression of a commercial operation using his invention like at Bal Tabarin,



Cover designed by Giacomo Balla for Nino Formoso's *Ti Ta To One Step*



Cover of Luigi Grandi's *Cavalli + Acciaio / meccanocavalcata*, 1935



Cover of the first issue of *L'Antologia musicale*, December 1930.

which is harmful to Luigi's reputation. (The various scores that Luigi wrote have all been lost or perhaps "misplaced" by his brother Antonio, whose own work, on the other hand, has survived.)

I say this after having partially reconstructed seven bars of *Risveglio di una città* (Awakening of a City) from the "Rete dei rumori" (Network of Noises) which Luigi Russolo published in 1914 in the magazine *Lacerba*.¹¹ In 1977 when the Historic Archives of Contemporary Arts of the Venice Biennale organized an exhibition of Russolo's work,¹² the curator, Gian Franco Maffina, had five noise-intoners reconstructed for the occasion. (Russolo's original instruments had all been destroyed during the Second World War.) This permitted me to partially perform the fragment written by Russolo, "partially" because I was unable to use all nine types of noise-intoners indicated in his score. With a multi-track tape recorder I was able to realize only eight of the 12 "voices," and yet despite this, and in spite of living in the '80s, after electronic music, the impact of the sound + emotion which had previously been expressed only theoretically in the manifestoes, was impressive. (The comparison to Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*, published in 1913, is inevitable. While they are quite different in realization and expressiveness, these two pieces of music have analogous intentions. The noise-intoners must have had an incredible effect on the average listener of 1913, perhaps even stronger than that provoked by the *Sacre*.)

Just how can critics presume to judge these works without having ever heard even those 25 infernal seconds of *Risveglio di una città*, confusing the works

of Antonio with those of Luigi? And ignoring the fact that Luigi's "Spirali di rumori" (Spirals of Noises), was the first noise-intoners concert probably introducing a practice of improvisation guided by outline? This practice, one of the fundamental tenets of Futurist esthetics, is the form that comes closest to achieving the art of events in progress, of extemporaneous and unrepeatable gesture.

The 1921 manifesto of Bartoccini and Mantia represents the first theoretical enunciation of the idea of improvisation in music, and opened the way for this practice, which has become so widespread in the last 30 years. In a report to the 1924 Futurist Congress Franco Casavola stated:

As song and rhythm, music rises out of an improvised intoxication. Also in current music, the necessity of playing it imposes upon the performer a collaboration with the author in such a way that the performance envelops a necessary integration of the musical idea. The Futurist ideal is to identify the performer with the creator, to bring improvisation to everyone. . . . The extemporaneous ingenious element of music, conceived as being the real art of eloquence, frees music from traditional forms and modes.

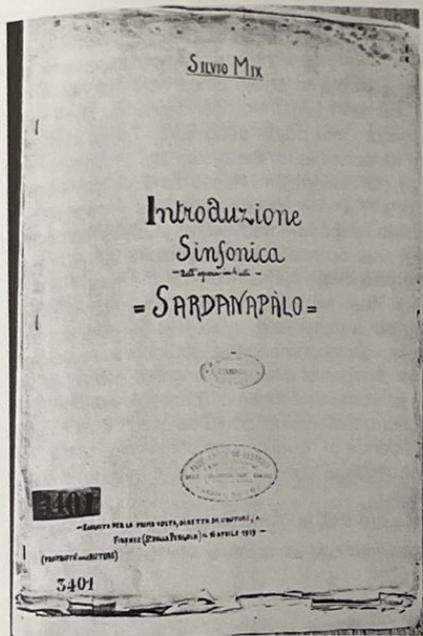
These statements, together with those of Russolo, are probably the most important of the Futurist esthetic. The three theoretical manifestoes by Pratella, which gave impetus to so much else, contain more passionate judgments than conceptual innovation (with the exception of the third manifesto, in which the discussions of rhythm touch upon an important theoretical aspect of music).

It is interesting to quote what Guido M. Gatti has said about Pratella's manifestoes:

The *distruzione della quadratura* (destruction of the framework) of 1912, which is almost Pratella's war cry, emerges immediately after the more general manifestoes, and is directed, more than anything else, toward teaching and artistic conventions. Let us immediately say that everything in these pages can be accepted without fear of excommunication: in the year of our Lord nineteen-nineteen we have seen considerably more daring work in the musical avant-garde. So much so that Pratella's manifesto is not Futurism at all, but merely the recognition of a rhythmic freedom which every musician, from Wagner on, has achieved day by day, shedding his habits and his mental atavisms.¹³

Elsewhere in Europe, particularly in Paris and Vienna, other composers accomplished much more profound transformations of the compositional method. Pratella, however, retains the distinction of having started a new vision of the musical esthetic in Italy with his first manifesto of 1910.

In Futurist music, the "implosion/explosion" evident in the paintings of Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla was attempted, but the energizing of space and the sense of speed, the simultaneity and interaction, found no suitable equivalent in the music. Polyrhythmic sound like just another rhythmic composition, the result of the sum of the partial rhythms which constitute it; sound fragments, because of their linear nature, offer the listener "sequential" development, giving the impression of a series rather than the action of sounds. Silvio Mix's short *Profilo sintetico musicale di F.T. Marinetti* (Synthetic Musical Profile of F. T. Marinetti), 1924, is one example. The 36 bars are made up of 10 different parts. The execution of the passage does not give a clear sense of the interaction of fragments, but rather, the impression of an allogical,



Silvio Mix, Symphonic introduction to the opera *Sardanapalo*, 1919.

surreal juxtaposition. The *Profilo sintetico musicale* is an example of what must have been the kind of improvisations which Mix often did at Futurist soirées. Antonio Marasco, a Florentine Futurist painter and a friend of Mix's, referred to one of them:

I organized Futurist evenings at the Salone Materazzi in Via Martelli, and at Botto's in Via Cavour, or else I participated in those of the bookseller/publisher Ferrante Gonnelli who opened the first Permanent Futurist Gallery. During the exhibition Silvio Mix made extemporaneous interventions at the piano, improvising on themes dictated by the public. On some occasions there were three pianos and another friend of Mix's from Trieste would participate, along with Maestro Boghen, the Professor at the Conservatory, a strange sort of artist always under an enormous hat. When these "improvisations" were held the public bought admission tickets which paid for everyone's dinner—a more lavish one for Professor Boghen, while Mix invariably ate rice and milk.¹⁴

The system of musical collage and polyrhythm took a different form of realization with Darius Milhaud and George Antheil. The latter did not have direct relations with the Italian Futurists, although his *Jazz Symphony*, 1925, and *Ballet mécanique* (the sound-track of Fernand Léger's film), are compositions which fit in perfectly with the Futurist esthetic. The answer to this unsuccessful attempt to free musical timing is based on the belief in the myth of "isochrony" (contemporaneity), the symbol for the perfection of the new industrial world, which Prieberg called the "romanticism of the machine." The infuriating repetitiveness of the rhythm was meant to shock, to cause the "intoxication" described by Casavola, something that certainly occurs in Maurice Ravel's composition *Bolero*, 1928.



Poster for a "Futurist soirée," March 9, 1918, with lectures and poetry readings by Balilla Pratella, F. T. Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni and others.

The most famous work deriving from the esthetic of the machine is *Pacifico 231*, 1923, by Arthur Honegger, an orchestral composition which describes in music the movements of a locomotive.

A brief but intense period of theatrical, ballet and pantomime activity opened with the advent of mechanistic music. The stage had been set for it by years of utopian literature and science fiction, and the new civilization of the machine appeared, mysterious, monstrous and transcendental, by comparison with human, biological rhythms. Unfortunately, although we know of the existence of such works as the *Angoscia della macchina* (Anguish of the Machine) by Silvio Mix to the text of Ruggero Vasari, which appears to have preceded Fritz Lang's famous film *Metropolis*, 1926, no examples of this activity have survived.

As in science fiction, futurist worlds relate to the beginnings of the history of man. Images of archaic civilizations, prehistoric upheavals, suggest a journey through time, as do the innovations of the technological age. Along with the *Angoscia della macchina* and *Astrale* by Mix, or the *Ballet mécanique* by Antheil, there is *Le Sacre du printemps*, by Stravinsky, *Création* by Milhaud, and *Tides of Manaunaun* by Henry Dixon Cowell, another musician who was not in direct contact with the Futurists but who was very close to them.

The fact remains that the provincialism of Italian culture at that time, maintained by a middle class which supported Fascism, staunchly prevented the normal interchange of artistic information and experiences. This was manifested as a return to "traditional-



Cover of *Dinamo*, a Futurist magazine edited by F. T. Marinetti.

ism." Russolo strongly felt this involution, but saw no escape; and Casavola, after a lengthy interest in jazz, retreated in the face of censorship and actually destroyed all his own Futurist work.

The most important example of Italian mechanistic music is an orchestral page from *Cavalli + Acciaio* (Horses + Steel), mechanicaulcade for large orchestra, by Luigi Grandi, a composer whom we otherwise know only by name. (A piano transcription by the composer was published in 1935.) This composition, like Ravel's *Bolero*, develops by means of a rhythmical structure, insistently repeats from start to finish and is made up of blocks of chords. The musical tempo indicated is *matto* (crazy).

Marinetti, the poet-animator of all Futurism, was the first to realize noise scores, preceding by many years Pierre Schaeffer's Concrete Music and Cage's compositions and anticipating the use of wireless sets. His *Cinque sintesi per il teatro radiofonico* (Five Syntheses for the Radiophonic Theater), is an application of the theories expressed in the "Radia" manifesto, and is composed of verbal scores which indicate the types and durations of sounds. Noises are assembled into a collage in which silence is an integral part. One of these syntheses includes a silence of three minutes—a completely new concept: a theater for radio, to be performed in a manner which suggests the existence of imagined space—this, 20 years before Cage's 4'33".

Futurist music did not have composers of the stature of Alban Berg, Schoenberg and Webern because, except for Pratella, no "professional" musician of any importance supported Marinetti's ideas which

were too advanced for the official musical climate of the day. As we know Russolo was a painter; Mix, a talented self-taught musician; Casavola, the professional, suffered a crisis and destroyed his Futurist scores in 1927. Virgilio Mortari was briefly a Futurist, as the improviser in the *Teatro della sorpresa* (Theater of Surprise) and as the composer of the amusing *Fox-trot del teatro della sorpresa*. Although he is often classified as a Futurist (insofar as he was Modernist), Alfredo Casella, the musician who in some people's eyes could today be considered perhaps the most important figure of Italian music in the 20th century, in fact never adhered to the Futurist movement. Pratella states in his essay, *Musica per pianoforte italiana*, March 19, 1916:

If even on the surface Casella's music seems harmonically and esthetically more daring than Futurist music, one must nevertheless not mistake it for Futurist music, since it is substantially removed from this, as indeed it is from the music of the French or Russian avant-garde.

Casella's work is still within the realm of impressionism and the exceptional effort of sensitivity, the music, in flux, starts out from an intimate musical state of mind, stimulator of a lyrical deformation and a purely musical, and not program-

matic and coloristic, construction. By this I do not mean to lessen the intrinsic worth of Casella's music. I mean only to define and to distinguish it.

Casella lived in Paris during the years 1910-15 and there breathed a freer cultural climate than that of Italy. His *Trois pièces pour pianola*, 1917, is one of the most important expressions which, in large part, derive from Futurist theories.

Russolo and the other Futurists, with the advent of Fascism, were restricted, not so much by Marinetti's artistic choices, but because the regime, from 1922 on, favored a policy of historic self-justification and put the mechanics of tradition into motion, attempting officially to tie musical experimentation to the schools and to categorize precisely defined styles, which concentrated on reviving academicism. The *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche* (Corporation of New Music) was founded in Rome in 1923, with Gabriele D'Annunzio, G. Francesco Malipiero and Alfredo Casella as its directors and Bernardino Molinari and Ildebrando Pizzetti as advisors. The numerous aims of the corporation were the complete antithesis of Futurist theories. In the course of time, Fascism

supported precisely those musicians like Franco Alfano, Casella, Malipiero, Pizzetti and Ottorino Respighi, who forged a compromise between past and future with works and themes which lay within the linguistic and semantic boundaries that the Fascist regime did not deem dangerous. These musicians were responsible for the systematic elimination of all traces of Futurism, and Russolo's noise-intoners paid the price. The musical spectacles with which the Futurists experimented were totally replaced by sweet little operas and cumbersome grand operas that tried to align themselves with the kind of "sacred values" that were slowly reduced to a mockery in travertine architecture.

Russolo's decompositive attitude was an easy target for charges of dilettantism, while Respighi's *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*, although works of unquestionable value, could be used by the Fascists as evidence of "quality" and of the value of the "new Italian musical style" which these musicians championed.

In *La prora* (The Prow), Casella ends his essay with: Besides, the future will sooner or later have its say, and it will



Cover and score for Virgilio Mortari's *Fox-trot del teatro della sorpresa*

know how to brilliantly set apart the few real "creators" of today—for whom the new sound technicalities are nothing more than simple means which are indispensable for reaching unknown forms of beauty—from the innumerable false revolutionaries, who use these same means in a clumsy and naive way with the sole aim of achieving immediate and ephemeral celebrity.¹⁵

The reference to the Futurists is clear enough, even though Casella's tactic, followed by most of the others¹⁶, was systematically to ignore all artistic activities which stemmed from Futurism.

As early as 1911, Pratella's manifestoes had been checked to the extent that Pizzetti wrote to Malipiero:

Regarding what you wrote me concerning the necessity of having faith in a better future for the fortunes of us young Italian musicians, and concerning the need to unite in a compact group, acting for the common interest, I—I repeat—am somewhat skeptical. As regards myself, I am and shall always be ready to give of myself, with my own energy and with my own work, to do everything of which I am capable, but who else will know how to do the same? ... Will you be there? All right, I believe you will. Will Bastianelli be there? Very well: we shall be three. And then? ... Just think, my friend; against us there are already musicians like

Zandonai and Pratella—that is, sly profiteers and crafty ignoramuses, dozens of them! And we, I at least, we are naive compared to them!¹⁶

In essence, Futurism grew so weak that it disappeared with the advent of Fascism, which favored the kinds of artistic expression that would consolidate its power. It is also true that among the Futurist musicians there was no one figure who managed to establish himself or the esthetics of Futurist music by producing anything of truly great significance. The poet Francesco Cangiullo wrote in his autobiography:

... apropos the musicians Casavola and Mortari (whose names have only been touched upon in this book but can be found in the last Futurist lists), and the painters Depero and Prampolini: that Casavola and Mortari, musicians of unquestionable value, in reality never did know how to compose what might have been Futurist music; nor did Balilla Pratella. The unsurpassed innovative composer of that period was Stravinsky.¹⁷ ■

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Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore.

1. Ferruccio Busoni, *Abbozzo di una nuova estetica della musica* (Outline of a New Musical Aesthetic) in *Lo sguardo iseto*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1977, pg. 40.
2. Balilla Pratella, *La musica futurista* (Futurist Music) - technical manifesto, Milan, March 11, 1911.
3. Busoni, op. cit., pg. 61.
4. Luigi Russolo, *L'Arte dei rumori* (Art of Noises), Futurist manifesto, Milan, March 11, 1911.
5. John Cage, *The Dreams and Dedications of George Antheil* in Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage*, London: Allen Lane, 1974, pg. 73.
6. *Antologia della rassegna musicale*, edited by Luigi Pestalozza, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966 (music review founded and directed by Guido M. Gatti, published 1928-1943).
7. *Antologia della rassegna musicale*, ibid, pg. XLIX.
8. Armando Gentiucci, *Il futurismo oggi* (Futurism Today), in *Discoteca*, Vol. XI, no. 107, Milan, 1971, pp. 18-24.
9. *Antologia della rassegna musicale*, op. cit., pg. LI.
10. Fred Prieberg, *Musica ex machina*, Turin: Einaudi, 1963, pg. 84.
11. Cf. Lacerba, *1914*, Vol. II, no. 10.
12. Russolo, *L'Arte dei rumori 1913-1931*, catalogue edited by Gian Franco Maffina of the Varese Art Documentation Center, Venice: ASAC Biennale, October, 1977.
13. Guido M. Gatti, *Musici: moderni d'Italia e di fuori* (Modern Musicians from Italy and Abroad), Rome, 1919.
14. Cf. Verdone, *Teatro del tempo futurista* (Theater of the Futurist Period), Rome: Lercini, 1969, pg. 228.
15. Alfredo Casella, *Problemi sonori odierni* (Present-day Problems in Sound) in *La prova* (The Prow), monthly review of the *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche*, Rome, 1924, Vol. I, no. 1, pg. 18.
16. Letter by Ildebrando Pizzetti to Gian Francesco Malipiero from Forte dei Marmi, July 30, 1911, item no. 44 of the exhibition "Musica italiana del primo Novecento/la generazione dell'80" (Italian music of the beginning of the twentieth century/the '80s generation), curator Fiamma Nicolodi, May-June 1980, Florence, Palazzo Strozzi.
17. Francesco Cangiullo, *Le serate futuriste* (Futurist Soirées), Milan: Ceschna, pg. 344.

