

A RAVING REVERIE

A SUBSTANTIAL ANTHOLOGY
of

MARINO PIAZZOLLA's

FLAMBOYANT POETRY AND WITTY PROSE

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Preface

For Marino Piazzolla

It is seldom that artists, once they have attained a certain style of their own, a personal brand, resist to the temptation of repeating it ad infinitum all along their career, thus achieving a sort of serialization which – though often profit-bearing – bears also witness of an innate intellectual laziness, a very cheap gratification and, above all, a substantial withering of one's inspiration and creative ferment.

This is certainly not the case with Marino Piazzolla (1910-1985) who has gone through the 20th Century remaining always open to various poetic and artistic experiences born and bred within the fervor of a very vital, creatively restless epoch, an age tirelessly tending to the discovery and conquest of originally expressive new horizons.

Piazzolla's very beginnings are characterized by what will turn out to be the most evident – and at the same time most prejudicial – trait of his artistic personality: en extreme experimental eclecticism which, starting from an initial (and well conscious) anti-traditional classicism, already quite evident in his against-the-mainstream poem Persite et Melasia as well as in his two other early books of verse, also written in French, Horizons perdus and Caravanes – books conceived during his existentially hard but culturally fruitful ten-year stay in Paris, 1930-39 – arrives at an extreme with the merely phonic, suggestive musicality of Hudèmata – a venture, as fascinating as it is bewildering, into the realm of sheer linguistic inventiveness, made up of pure rhythmic sound and alien to any reference to rational connotations, thereby leaving the reader completely automomous in the enjoyment of the text.

Between these two extremes, there lies a variegated poetical experience, whose most meaningful apex is, undoubtedly, Lettere di una sposa demente (Letters of a Demented Bride, a lyric-narrative sequel of poems, 1952) which, together with Elegie doriche (Doric Elegies of the previous year, winner of the Etna-Taormina prize) marks the end of a “silent decade” during which Piazzolla teaches philosophy in high schools, at Avezzano (Abruzzo) and elsewhere.

At the same time he contributed essays to cultural magazines and frequented literary and artistic centers in Rome, writing about such poets and novelists as Alberto Moravia and Corrado Govoni and painters like Omiccioli and Monachesi. He enjoys the esteem and friendship of Vincenzo Cardarelli, the eminent ‘cantankerous’ poet laureate, who entrusts him with a column on “La Fiera Letteraria”, the most prestigious cultural magazine of the epoch. For La Fiera he reviews opuses of major poets such as Eugenio Montale and Sandro Penna, Saint-John Perse and T. S. Eliot.

Simultaneously, Piazzolla intensified his knowledge of and relations with outstanding representatives of contemporary visual arts, writing several appreciated monographs on Cézanne, Klee, Braque, Picasso, Rouault et alii.

The so-called “silent decade” had also been a period of intense meditation and preparation. In the 1950s and '60s then Piazzolla publishes about ten books; besides Letters of a Demented Bride and Doric Elegies, we have several collections of poems: Esilio sull’Himalaia (Exile on the Himalayas, winner of the Chianciano Prize), La favole di Dio (God’s Fairy Tales) Pietà della notte (winner of the City of Avezzano Prize), Adagio quotidiano, Poemetti, Mia figlia innamorata (My Daughter in Love), Gli occhi di Orfeo (winner of the Tarquinia-Cardarelli prize) plus a collection of proses: E l’uomo non sarà solo (And Man Will Not Be Left Alone).

The early “classical mood” of the French poems and Doric Elegies (of which André Gide praised “the Grecian and pleasant brevity of the ancient epigram”) was soon followed by avant-guard poems prompted by new experiences which foment – and act as a catalyzer of – a better articulated formal complexity and more solid contents. In sum, Piazzolla’s ars poetica becomes, from one collection to the next, ever more “orphyic” and entrancing, though grazing at times the obscurity of a dense visionary “ermetismo” or trobar clus.

Piazzolla’s production is, as already noted, quite varied. Collections of verse alternate with collections of witty aphorisms (Renato Maria Ratti’s Immemorable Sayings, 1965-6, The Ashen Angel’s Parables, 1980) with critical essays (especially interesting the one on J. P. Sartre “an intellectual of the masses” of 1973) with humorous fables (Flowers Teach Us How to Smile, illustrated by painter Omiccioli, 1974) and with a singular combination of notes and pastel-drawings (A Planet I Know Not, 1974).

Perhaps, as several observers have remarked, it was just such a gifted artist’s multi-faceted talent that disconcerted, even embarrassed, a large sector of Academia and a number of critics, determining their frankly culpable negligence. Undoubtedly, a complex and multifarious personality like Piazzolla’s inhibits a precise pigeonholing, his assignation to a pre-established category.

But, above all, confronted with so many unusual texts, a dispassioned reader would wonder about the validity of a judgement aiming to restrict – in a Procruster-like manner – any poetic artifact into a preconceived class, to include it into a given aesthetic mainstream. Such a reader wonders, indeed, about the necessity itself of having a series of labeled compartments for the works of art to be put in, whereas each single one should be seen as a unique case.

*Of course, there would be analogies, affinities, a kinship with other artistic expressions, but each oeuvre does possess an individuality which cannot suffer homologation to other forms. "Don't talk to me about gender and genre, else I go into a fit of rage!" novelist Giuseppe Marotta warned, acutely, in his preface to Piazzolla's *Ballad for a Thousand Shadows*. "This poetry is unclassifiable, original, sans hook-ups with anyone or anything."*

It is meaningful that many enthusiastic admirers – including poets and even major poets – have preliminarily renounced to label Piazzolla's poetry in any way, limiting themselves to declare their emotions as readers, without hiding – whenever they so felt – their perplexities before certain baroque images, the overly subjective association, the occasional riddle-ridden conceit, nor their disapproval of this and that attempt to emulate music's illogicality, to mimic its wordless power with words. ("My poetry – I've come to understand – is also a music. I cannot write, that is narrate myself, but giving words the same weird instability of musical notes.")

But, beyond all this, should we not be led to meditate and finally induced to a freer, unfettered re-reading of Piazzolla's works, on the wake of certain clear-cut opinions that an André Gide, a Paul Valéry, a Jean-Paul Sartre have expressed? or be compelled to keep in mind articulated judgements voiced by eminent Italian critics, reviewers, prefacers?

*How can one presume that these independent and seasoned cultural figures were not sincere when they uttered their binding evaluations? Would a guru like critic Emilio Cecchi expose himself and risk his reputation when he doggedly pleaded in favor of Piazzolla's candidacy at a major literary contest – albeit unsuccessfully? (It happened in 1961, at the Marzotto Prize, where Piazzolla competed with *My Daughter in Love* – a sylloge of verse edited by, hark! hark! future Nobel-prize*

winner Eugenio Montale.)

Or would the likes of Francesco Flora, Vincenzo Cardarelli, Camillo Sbarbaro and many others write forewords or extoll Piazzolla had they not really esteemed him? Giuseppe Marotta, prince of the narrators-chroniclers-singers of Naples folklore and soul, has written: “Marino Piazzolla is the poet I would have liked to be myself.”

Something to ponder about is the fact that the silence of the critics and their perplexities began to increase in the early '70s. Was this due to a decadence of Piazzolla's poetic flair, to a decline in the value of his later works? Decidedly, not so! Books like L'amata non c'è più (The Beloved Has Ceased to Be, 1980), Dolore greco (Greek Grief, 1983) and, above all, that imaginatively apocalyptic, flamboyantly accusatory masterpiece that is Il pianeta nero (The Black Planet, 1985 – a copy of which he only saw one day before he died) strongly belie such an inference.

On the contrary, Piazzolla's poetic vigor and his inventiveness seem to have acquired a visionary brightness and a linguistic audacity which handsomely redeem occasional lapses into the obnoxious obscurity of yesterday's ermetismo, some excesses in its imagerie and a tumultuous urgency to give vent to personal complaints and private worries, visceral issues.

At this point, one is tempted to agree with critic Giuseppe Aventi's diagnosis. According to Aventi, “in that deep-rooted lack of talent, wit, culture which distinguishes our literary coteries” and in the “closed circle” of the Italian publishing industry, which “ignores Piazzolla because critics ignore him, and critics are not interested in him because he is not a member of any équipe recruited by any major publishing house.”

Respected poet Corrado Govoni, in a letter to Marino Piazzolla about his Mattutino delle Tenebre (Darkness Matins) wrote: “Yours is a poemetto which, had it been written by one of these

poetasters who ride the crest of a wave, it would be hailed as a miracle. But you wrote it, and it's a miracle to me."

When he was the "favorite", sometimes in the late '70s, at the coveted Viareggio Prize, Piazzolla was black-balled in extremis by the chairmain of the jury, with the culpable connivance of its members.

If this and similar unfortunate episodes were not known, then, the outburst of anger Piazzolla gives vent to in one of his last poems (Quel muro di silenzio – That Stonewall of Silence) might be considered a self-pitiful fabrication and would appear as the mere grumbling of an arrogant vanity:

A fifty year long siege.
Too many for a poet already bled
Almost to death.

.....

As a poet – they tell me – thou art too rich,
Hoardest too many images in thy coffers,
Thou art a volcano.
This is in fact the password.
And day by day the Wall of Incomrehension
Gets taller and more tall.
But I endure, die not.
You-all love the empty *fine writing*,
The well-turned flabby verse hich delights idiots
And reeks of masturbation.

.....

For over forty years
I've been your nightmare.
By an occult decree of yours
I must remain unknown, be ignored.
Bu I *do* know
That you-all do read me, surreptitiously.

I am a real volcano,
I erupt lava and lapilli
To burn you-all out,
To see you finally defeated
By true Poetry.

More than twenty years after his departure, it's not only time to redress past partialities but also to put an end to an utterly unjustified silence and to Marino Piazzolla's no longer pardonable absence. Absent he is, in fact, from almost all literary repertoires, history textbooks, biographical dictionaries and the like – in whose often overcrowded Parnasses are instead admitted less representative personages of that artistic fervor which highlighted our violent, intriguing, volcanic, probably unrepeatable 20th Century.

Eugenio Ragni