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HARMONIA

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The membership of GAM*u*T would like to extend sincere appreciation to Dr. Brian Anderson, Dr. Justin Lavacek, Dr. Rebecca Geoffroy-Schwinden, and Dr. Benjamin Graf for their service as faculty reviewers for this volume.

Congratulations to Charlotte MacDonald, whose paper "The Performer as Creator in the Clarinet Compositions of Giacinto Scelsi" was the winner of the 2024–2025 Graham H. Phipps Paper Award.

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The Performer as Creator in the Clarinet Compositions of Giacinto Scelsi

CHARLOTTE MACDONALD

Introduction

"Siete i fiegle e i genitori di voi stessi non dimenticatelo"; "You are children and parents of yourselves; don't forget it."[1] This direction, from Giacinto Scelsi's (1905—1988) 1987 manifesto *Octólogo*, is one of eight meditations rooted in contradicting artistic philosophies written to guide those who perform his works. While abstract, yet characteristic of Scelsi's writing, the statement is unusually direct; indeed, the idea of a composer publishing separate texts to instruct his performers is itself unusual in the clarinet repertoire. While composers often collaborate closely with performers in their lives, within many Western classical traditions their understanding of their role often does not extend beyond that which is on the page.[2] Within this convention, the composer's corresponding expectation is often that performers, informed by objective analysis, will faithfully reproduce the composer's intention. Composer and Scelsi expert Marco Fusi, reflecting on this historical standard of performance, observes that "The interpreter's rebellion against the [composer's] commands is the original sin preventing the audience from fully receiving the composer's message, and, foremost, a lack of respect for the written score."[3] Scelsi's desire to publish, notably in the year before his death, a document detailing his guidelines for performing his works is not only unusual in its specificity but also raises questions about how he engaged with his performers. If one of his rules is to "self-parent," why would performers need to follow his rules; is a performer who defies the score a rebellious child, or faithfully reflecting the composer's philosophy? This paradox, a mandate to be free, is at the philosophical core of Scelsi's compositions.

Scelsi's compositional philosophy was complex and iconoclastic, rooted in transcendental meditation and improvisation and the timbral and microtonal development of the singular note, dubbed by Scelsi as *una nota sola*.[4] The scores produced by this process are not

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[1] Giacinto Scelsi, *Octólogo* (Rome: Edizioni Le Parole Gelate, 1987).

[2] These composer/performer partnerships are particularly notable in the development of clarinet repertoire; pairings such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Anton Stadler, Johannes Brahms and Richard Mühlfeld, and Carl Maria von Weber and Heinrich Baermann, have resulted in both some of the instrument's most fundamental works and critical developments to the instrument's technical capabilities.

[3] Marco Fusi, "The Creative Performer and Giacinto Scelsi" (DA dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2022): 25.

[4] These ideas were summarized by Scelsi himself in a series of interviews in 1953 and 1954, eventually published in a single text, *Son et musique*.

only notationally dense but philosophically complex and often "[resistant to]… traditional study methodologies"[5] He stressed the significance of the performer's liberation from the score, often encouraging improvisation as a component of performance preparation to help performers achieve the transcendental, meditative state he felt was required to interpret this music accurately. This belief in the importance of the performer's individual mentality and voice in the final performance of the work led Scelsi to eschew the title of composer entirely, as he felt that the performer played an equal role in the final form of the work. This freedom exists in sharp contrast to the restriction often imposed on classical performers, prompting, as I argue, not only a greater need for interpretative care but also for a reconsideration of what interpretative avenues are available altogether.

The compositions of Italian contemporary composer Giacinto Scelsi (1905—1988) have increased steadily in popularity and visibility since his death in 1988, coinciding with increased scholarly interest in composer-performer dynamics and issues of performer agency in contemporary music[6] and participant agency in performance art in general.[7] Scelsi is particularly notable for his unique attitude towards the performers of his works; spurning the label of "composer," Scelsi believed that the performer was the ultimate creator of his compositions and afforded them a great deal of interpretative freedom. This belief, however, conflicts with his highly detailed and complex notational system, which is characterized by intricate rhythms, microtonality, and extreme technical difficulty.[8] In this paper, I consider how performer agency manifests in Scelsi's clarinet writing and the tension that can result when exacting composer intent and performer freedom collide. I propose that the appropriate method of resolving this conflict between philosophical performer freedom and the practical reality of complex notation is both to determine where choice exists and to examine how the performer's interpretative experience influences the ultimate performed product.

I argue that the clarinetist has a degree of influence in the final effect of Scelsi's compositions, but that this influence is often limited to the interpretative effect created by the chosen solutions to practical problems and the sounds the clarinetist's body creates separate from

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[5] Angela Carone, "Nuovi Strumenti-Antiche Strategy. Alcune Osservazioni sul Processo Compositivo di Giacinto Scelsi." *Revue Filigrane: Musique, Esthétique, Sciences, Société* 15 (May 2012): 1.

[6] Liam James Hockley, "Performing Complexity: Theorizing Performer Agency in Complexist Music." PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2018.

[7] Astrid Breel, "Audience Agency in Participatory Performance: A Methodology for Examining Aesthetic Experience," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 368—387.

[8] David Smeyers, "The Open-Minded Clarinetist," *The Clarinet* 61, no. 1 (1988): 19.

direct engagement with the instrument. As I position, Scelsi's compositions regard the clarinetist as a collaborator, but the technical demands of his notation limit traditional interpretation and force the performer to seek other avenues for actively influencing the character of the work, such as through control of breath placement, register contrast, and timbral alteration Building upon the work of Pierre Albert Castanet, Susan Laverne Fancher, Ellen Waterman, Jean-Charles François, and Peter Hill, I analyze two Scelsi works for clarinet, *Ixor* (1956) and *Preghiera per un'ombra* (1954).[9]

Ultimately, in my analysis I demonstrate that the performer is an active co-creator in Scelsi's clarinet compositions, but that the score's intense complexity necessitates that the performer reconsiders their influence on the composition, focusing on technical aspects of performance such as breathing and registral control instead of traditional interpretative elements. I argue that the "active" performer not only influences the performed work through conventional interpretative avenues, such as pacing or phrasing; but also, influences all aspects of the performer experience, particularly those of the physical body and instrument navigating the work. These elements together play a critical role in the ultimate performed effect of the work. Understanding the efforts of the clarinetist as an active creator, with their instrument and body not only the means of producing the composition but as the creator of the composition themselves, provides a method of analysis and performance preparation that considers both Scelsi's scores and his compositional philosophy.

Giacinto Scelsi and his Compositional Style

Giacinto Scelsi, Count D'Alaya Valva, was an Italian composer and poet associated with the contemporary movement of the mid-twentieth century. Born to a southern Italian aristocratic family in La Spezia in 1905, Scelsi had little formal musical training as a child but excelled at improvisation at the piano.[10] His later compositional education included studies in Rome with Giacinto Sallustio, in Geneva

[9] Pierre Albert Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR: à propos d'une partition de Giacinto Scelsi pour clarinette en Si b ou tout autre instrument à anche" *Revue Filigrane: Musique, Esthétique, Sciences, Société* 15 (May 2012); Susan Laverne Fancher, "The Saxophone in the Music of Giacinto Scelsi," DM dissertation, Northwestern University, 2002; Ellen Waterman, "Cassandra's Dream Song: a Literary/Feminist Perspective," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (1994); Jean-Charles François, "Writing without Representation, and Unreadable Notation," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1992); Peter Hill, "'Authenticity' in Contemporary Music," *Tempo* no. 159 (December 1986).

[10] Christopher Fox and David Osmond-Smith, "Scelsi, Giacinto," in *Grove Music Online*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001).

with Egon Koehler, and in Vienna with Walter Klein.[11] Some of his earliest works written in private study with these teachers employ twelve-tone technique, most notably the fourth movement of his *Four Poems for Piano* (1936).[12] He enjoyed modest success in the late 1930s as an early figure in the compositional avant-garde, but suffered a mental breakdown in the late 1940s, prompting a permanent change in his compositional style and philosophy. He attributed this breakdown to the strains of composing in the twelve-tone style, writing that "[twelve-tone] caused me a sterility that was to last four years—a sterility not only in the creative sense, but that also had pathological consequences… so much so that I ended up in three psychiatric clinics."[13]

During his recovery, Scelsi became fixated on the possibilities of the singular note; he would pass time in the psychiatric hospital by striking a single key at the piano and listening to the sound. Scelsi described this process himself in an interview:

> Reiterating a note for a long time, it grows large, so large that you even hear harmony growing inside it… When you enter into a sound, the sound envelops you and you become part of the sound. Gradually, you are consumed by it and you need no other sound… All possible sounds are contained in it.[14]

This fixation on a single note, later dubbed "*una nota sola"* by Scelsi, became definitive of his second compositional period, focused on exploring the sonic potential contained within a single note through "timbral, dynamic, and microtonal explorations."[15]

Rejecting his prior twelve-tone study, he was no longer interested in exploring the tension that existed *between* notes, only within the notes themselves; this led to him discarding conventional Western form, thematic material, harmony, and counterpoint.[16]

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[11] Gregory N. Reish, "*Una Nota Sola*: Giacinto Scelsi and the Genesis of Music on a Single Note," *Journal of Musicological Research* 25 (2006): 149—189.

[12] Fancher "The Saxophone," 8. Twelve-tone technique, or dodecaphony, is a twentieth century compositional technique based upon the development of a single twelve-tone "row" through inversion and retrograde.

[13] Marco Fusi, "The Creative Performer and Giacinto Scelsi" (DA dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2022).

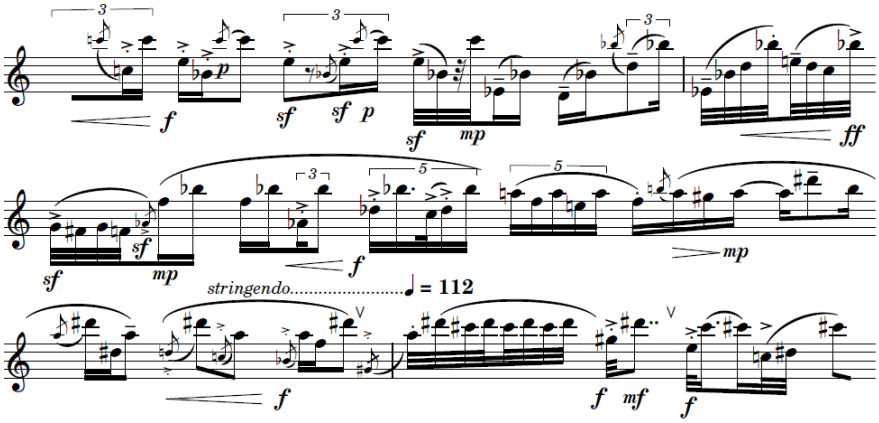
[14] Reish, "*Una Nota Sola,"* 157.

[15] Reish, "*Una Nota Sola,"* 157.

[16] It is interesting to note the philosophical relationship between twelve-tone and Scelsi's later style. Twelve-tone style is rooted primarily in the exploration and development of the row to reveal a unified idea; the exploration and development of a single note to reveal an idea is easily seen as philosophically related, with both philosophies anchoring the composition to a singular "truth." Scelsi acknowledged this connection himself later in his life, stating that twelve-tone "still [made] some sense… in the spirit of the

Equally characteristic of Scelsi's second period compositional style was his use of the transcription of his free improvisations as a method of pre-composition.[17] The improvisations were typically rooted in *una nota sola,* meditating on and eventually transforming out of a single note. These improvisations would be recorded on tape and later transcribed into "traditional notation" by assistants, serving as the raw material for many of his later published compositions. The erratic and irregular nature of improvisation is reflected in the notation as extremely dense, difficult-to-parse rhythms, and complex microtonality; the variations in rhythm and pitch that can occur naturally in free improvisation can be challenging to accurately inscribe in traditional notation, requiring precise subdivisions and polyrhythms. The importance of improvisation in Scelsi's compositional process reflects a greater focus on meditation and liberation, a belief that was extended to those who perform his works.

Figure 1: Scelsi's complex notation (Scelsi, *Preghiera,* p. 5, lines 7—9).[18]



Another hallmark of Scelsi's compositional philosophy was his belief in performer autonomy. Scelsi rejected the label of composer, as he felt that he played only a partial role in the final artistic product of his work. He therefore ceded significant levels of interpretative

single note not depending on tonality, as a form of music within a single note… That which goes towards unity is the most interesting" (Fancher 10).

[17] He improvised on several instruments but particularly favored the *ondiola*, an electronic keyboard considered a precursor to the synthesizer, due to its flexibility which allowed for the free use of microtones.

[18] The engravings of score excerpts in this article are based on the hand-written scores published by Salabert. Due to the hyper-specificity of the notation, the engraver has retained certain non-standard formatting including (but not limited to) beaming, stem direction, and accidentals.

control to his performers (for this reason referred to by William Colangelo as "musical creators").[19] He worked closely with many performers of his works, providing interpretative insight while encouraging them to shape their own performances. Much of his commentary has been documented by these performers, providing valuable records of Scelsi's views both on particular works and on performance in general.[20] Scelsi encouraged his performers to embrace improvisation as a means of interpreting his works, prompting them to liberate themselves from the score completely as a method of discovering its inner meaning.[21] Cellist Frances-Marie Uitti emphasized the role of improvisation in her coaching sessions with Scelsi: "…sometimes [Scelsi] was almost as happy if you went off a bit, off the score, and you got that feeling I think that [sic] was most important to him [sic] than actually being precise at the risk of losing the sound world and the impetus and all that."[22] Pianist and musicologist Angela Carone summarizes this liberation from the score more concisely: "It is the 'I play' that matters."[23] This liberation from the score provides performers with an unusual opportunity to enmesh their identities and sensibilities into the score, as much a component of the work as the written notation. Granted this freedom, the performer may more carefully consider how their actions shape the composition beyond traditional interpretative avenues, including the physical reality of their body and instrument interfacing with the work.

Scelsi's desire for the performer to liberate themselves from his scores and embrace his sound world, documented extensively by his collaborators, presents an overt conflict with his written notation.[24] It is difficult to reconcile this theoretical performative freedom with the reality of his highly detailed, complex notation; if the score is truly of secondary importance, why devote this level of effort to precisely directing performers? Performers have grappled with this conflict and come to their own conclusions. Some, such as bassist Joelle

[19] Fusi, "The Creative Performer," 69.

[20] While outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note Scelsi's strong preference for female performers of his works. Most of the available accounts of performer collaboration with Scelsi come from women (David Smeyers, a clarinetist who is cited frequently in this paper, is a notable exception). This is particularly surprising due to the marginalization of women in classical music, even more so in the mid-20th century. Carol Robinson notes of her own experiences with Scelsi that he preferred women to perform his works due to "the more feminine qualities of receptivity and conscientiousness" that he felt were necessary to perform his music.

[21] Fusi, "The Creative Performer," 71.

[22] William Colangelo, "The Composer-Performer Paradigm in Giacinto Scelsi's Solo Works," PhD dissertation, New York University, 1996, 51.

[23] Carone, "Nuovi Strumenti."

[24] Fusi, "The Creative Performer," 71.

Leandre, argue that in Scelsian performance sincerity of interpretation supersedes the score,[25] even to the point of ignoring the score entirely.[26] While understandable, I believe that such an approach is overly restrictive, particularly when considering Scelsi's belief in performer independence. Clarinetist Carol Robinson's collaborative work with Scelsi led her to emphasize the importance of both composer and performer: "In addition to playing the text accurately, the performer must produce vibrations, which take on another dimension."[27] While emphasizing the necessary value of the composer, Robinson still highlights the importance of "accurate" performance, acknowledging the same inherent limitation that guides my analysis.

Additionally, saxophonist Claude Delangle acknowledges the value of improvisation as a method of understanding Scelsi's compositions but asserts that the performer must not discard the score completely. He instead stresses that the performer's interpretative role is to resolve the "questions and paradoxes" presented by the score to achieve a "great apparent liberty."[28] This view is echoed by Fancher: "…the performer's energy as he or she works to faithfully interpret the score breathes life into the music."[29] I agree most closely with these performers. The performer is not only the executor of Scelsi's work; instead, their efforts and experiences are what give the work its essence, what the composition "is." Even among performers who collaborated with Scelsi directly, the idea of interpretative independence in the face of complex notation is at best nebulous and varied in execution. This tension between philosophy and practical reality is central to my analysis.

The Role of the Performer in Composition Scholarship

The subjects of performer agency and the nature of the performer-composer dynamic have received substantial scholarly attention, particularly regarding how this dynamic manifests in contemporary idioms. Composer Charles Wuorinen asserts that it is the job of the performer to accurately reflect the intention of the composer, but that it is the duty of the composer to "guide" the performer through the notation and that the performer cannot be "blamed" for performing inaccurately if the work is not notated clearly.[30] This philosophy ascribes tremendous responsibility to the composer, contrasting

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[25] Colangelo, "The Composer-Performer Paradigm," 60.

[26] For example, Leandre's performance of *Maknongan* features a scream that is not notated in the score, which she claims Scelsi approved of.

[27] Carol Robinson, Liner notes for *Giacinto Scelsi: Music for High Winds 3*, Carol Robinson, Clara Novakova, and Cathy Milliken, compact disc: 2.

[28] Colangelo, "The Composer-Performer Paradigm," 63.

[29] Fancher, "The Saxophone," 144.

[30] Charles Wuorinen, "Notes on the Performance of Contemporary Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 3, no. 1 (1964): 10—21.

Scelsi's treatment of the performer as an equal in the creative process. Pianist and musicologist Peter Hill takes a slightly more flexible approach, expressing skepticism that strict accuracy to the score limits both composer and performer, discouraging expressivity and, counterintuitively, authenticity.[31]

This belief is on its face like that expressed by Scelsi; however, I believe that the detail of Scelsi's scores limits the freedom Hill proposes. Pianist, composer, and conductor Jean-Charles François argues similarly that the composer has a duty to communicate the intent of the work accurately to the performer, but that there are aspects of the work—namely timbre—that cannot be depicted by musical notation. Therefore, he argues, those undepictable aspects of performance are where the performer has agency and may influence the performance of the work.[32] I argue that these "undepictable aspects" extend even beyond those outlined by François, particularly in the manner that the performer's body experiences the performance and interfaces with the instrument. Similarly, Arthur Weisberg asserts that the performer must not only strive to reflect the composer's intent but also make changes to how the work is performed to resolve technical challenges and reflect this intention more accurately, expanding the idea of "undepictable aspects" beyond aesthetic elements such as timbre or phrasing and into technical interpretation itself.[33]

Several scholars have also written specifically about performer agency in the works of contemporary composers. Ellen Waterman writes extensively about her experience performing *Cassandra's Dream Song* by Brian Ferneyhough; her discussion of the technical aspects of the performer experience as one fully under performer control, beyond that of the composer, informs my analysis of Scelsi's works.[34] In contrast, Irvine Arditti discusses the Arditti Quartet's work with Iannis Xenakis, stating throughout that Xenakis was unconcerned with *how* performers navigated the (often unplayable) technical challenges his music presented but insisted that they did so, trusting performers' command of their instruments but ultimately wielding close control over the final performance.[35] This approach to performer control is an interesting contrast to Scelsi; both composers entrusted performers to resolve technical problems, though Xenakis

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[31] Peter Hill, "'Authenticity' in Contemporary Music," *Tempo* no. 159 (December 1986): 2—8.

[32] Jean-Charles François, "Writing without Representation, and Unreadable Notation," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 6—20.

[33] Arthur Weisberg, *Performing Twentieth-Century Music: A Handbook for Conductors and Instrumentalists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 97—107.

[34] Waterman, "Cassandra's Dream Song."

[35] Irvine Arditti, "Reflections on Performing the String Music of Iannis Xenakis," *Contemporary Music Review* 21, no. 3 (2002): 85—89.

felt the performers' control must be subjugated to the demands of the score, rather than exist as a coequal part.

Furthermore, multiple scholars have explored the performance practice issues presented by Scelsi's compositions specifically, including Susan Laverne Fancher, William Colangelo, and Marco Fusi.[36] Fancher discusses Scelsi's saxophone writing; her interview data are valuable primary sources indicating varying philosophies surrounding performer autonomy.[37] These perspectives provide a guide in developing my interpretative philosophy. Colangelo discusses the dynamic role of the performer in Scelsi's compositions more generally, engaging the idea of the "musical creator," his term for the performer as an active shaper of the work; I agree with his belief in the performer as an equal partner with Scelsi.[38] Fusi reverse-engineers Scelsi's compositional processes to construct his own performance practice; his process provides a valuable perspective of the negotiation of score and performance reality while indicating that adherence to the Scelsian philosophy supersedes adherence to the score.[39]

Despite this interest in Scelsian performance studies, there is little scholarship addressing Scelsi's clarinet compositions and the performer agency questions they present. Composer and musicologist Pierre Albert Castanet explores the unique character of the clarinet and its suitability to interpret *Ixor*.[40] While other scholarship, such as Fancher's dissertation, discusses works that are often performed on clarinet, Castanet's article is the only work that seeks to apply ideas of Scelsian performance to the composer's clarinet works specifically. Given the high volume of clarinet works by Scelsi and the interest in his compositions, this is surprising. *Preghiera per un'ombra*, arguably Scelsi's most significant work for clarinet, has received no scholarly attention whatsoever.

In this paper, I examine both *Ixor* (1956) and *Preghiera per un'ombra* (1954) and expand the ideas of Scelsian performance studies to Scelsi's clarinet repertoire. I analyze both works through lenses similar to those used by previous Scelsian performance scholars, considering where conventional interpretative freedom is possible. I argue that due to the complex nature of Scelsi's notation, it is necessary for the performer to carefully consider where independence and free-

[36] Fancher, "The Saxophone;" Colangelo, "The Composer-Performer Paradigm;" Fusi, "The Creative Performer."
[37] Fancher, "The Saxophone."
[38] Colangelo, "The Composer-Performer Paradigm."
[39] Fusi, "The Creative Performer."
[40] Pierre Albert Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR: à propos d'une partition de Giacinto Scelsi pour clarinette en Si b ou tout autre instrument à anche" *Revue Filigrane: Musique, Esthétique, Sciences, Société* 15 (May 2012).

dom can be explored beyond the conventional understanding of interpretation. I promote an understanding of the "active" performer as being beyond conscious choice, examining how the tendencies of the instrument and the performer's body influence the overall effect of the work. Through understanding the "collaborative performer" as not only an artistic interpreter, but as a sound-producing body and instrument working with its own biases and limitations, it is possible to understand better where performer choice can be exercised and how clarinetists can embody Scelsi's desired "agency" while faithfully observing his nuanced notation.

Ixor (1956)

Ixor is one of Scelsi's most well-known and commonly performed works for solo woodwind. Scelsi described the work as "a creation of pure fantasy" and instructed his performers to imagine a faun pursuing a nymph when interpreting it.[41] The piece has a duration of approximately four minutes and is through-composed, as is characteristic of Scelsi's writing. It exemplifies Scelsi's second-period style: pronounced *una nota sola*, instances of microtonality, and frenetic, hyper-complex rhythm.[42] The work is specified for "*Clarinette sib ou autre instrument à anche*" —or, "Bb clarinet or other reed instrument."[43] This flexibility of instrumentation is common in Scelsi's second period writing, with many compositions designating its forces by instrument family or voice type instead of specifying particular instruments. *Ixor* is most commonly performed on Bb soprano clarinet and soprano saxophone, but it has also been performed on alto saxophone, bass clarinet, and oboe.[44] This broad range of instrumentation possibilities has likely contributed to its prominence within Scelsi's oeuvre, as a greater number of musicians are able to perform it.[45] This flexibility of instrumentation is one of the purest examples of performer independence; it is hard to imagine a more impactful choice a performer

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[41] Wolfgang Thein, trans. Susan Marie Praeder, liner notes for *Giacinto Scelsi: The Complete Works for Clarinet*, David Smeyers, Susanne Mohr, ensemble avance, CPO 999266-2, 1997, compact disc: 15.

[42] This period is considered to have begun in 1952, when Scelsi resumed composing following his breakdown, and ended in approximately 1959, when Scelsi's work adopted a more microtonal focus.

[43] Giacinto Scelsi, *Ixor: clarinette si♭ ou autre instrument à anche*, Paris: Editions Salabert, 1984.

[44] Fancher, "The Saxophone," 155.

[45] It is necessary to note that there are three further *Ixor* works by Scelsi that have been recorded, titled *Ixor II, Ixor III,* and *Ixor IV*. Each of these works is to be performed specifically on Bb clarinet or bass clarinet. These works have never been published and are not considered part of Scelsi's oeuvre and therefore will not be discussed within this paper. However, they have been recorded by clarinetist David Smeyers; due to Smeyers' close work with Scelsi in recording the album, it can be assumed that the later *Ixor* works are authentic.

can make than that of the instrumental voice that performs the work. For the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on the choices and effects created by a clarinetist performing *Ixor*; however; the variable instrumentation is revealing of Scelsi's intent and is therefore noteworthy as well.

Ixor is the Scelsi clarinet work that has received the most scholarly attention, due both to its clear reflection of *una nota sola* and its open instrumentation inviting a broader sample of musicians to perform and analyze it. Saxophonist Susanne Laverne Fancher examined the work as it is performed on saxophone. Her analysis of the work is in two parts, conducting a formal analysis focused on phrase structure and the evolution of *una nota sola* and performance analysis that explores the use of vibrato, rapid dynamic changes, and the practicality of key clicks.[46] Her *una nota sola* analysis is particularly relevant. Pierre Albert Castanet concerns himself particularly with *Ixor* as it is performed on Bb clarinet, arguing that clarinet is the most appropriate instrument to perform the work.[47] Castanet cites particular aspects of the composition, such as the variability in timbre, the rapid dynamic changes, and the flexibility required of microtonality, as uniquely able to be accomplished by the clarinet.[48] While I do not discuss Castanet's assertion that the clarinet is the *best* instrument to perform *Ixor*, his discussion of the clarinetist's control over various compositional details is relevant. One of the primary areas both Fancher and Castanet address in their analysis of *Ixor* is the intersection of pitch and timbre throughout the work, as well as how this interaction shapes the overall form. Fancher discusses the influence of rapid dynamic shifts on timbre, stating that the rapid dynamic changes produce a wide variety of timbres, even on a repeated note.[49] Castanet discusses the timbre of the clarinet in-depth, arguing that its variety of possible characters uniquely suits it to the variable timbral demands of *Ixor*.[50] However, I believe the discussion of timbre extends beyond general trends in Scelsi's writing and provides an opportunity for the clarinetist themself to exploit the character of their instrument to achieve an interpretative effect.

Ixor's overall form is defined by *una nota sola* transformation. The piece is centered around C and explores the relationship between C and F. C is further explored and developed by B, Db/C#, and C quarter flat and F is developed by E and Gb/F# (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). In characteristic *una nota sola* style, tension is created by the slow transition from one pitch to the other and the repeated oscillation between the

[46] Fancher, "The Saxophone," 80, 147, 150.
[47] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR," 16.
[48] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR," 17.
[49] Fancher, "The Saxophone," 146.
[50] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR," 14.

core pitch and its neighbors. The final moment of the piece summarizes the overall shape of the piece into a single statement, reinforcing the shape (Fig. 4).

Figure 2: C developed by Db /C# and B (Scelsi, *Ixor* p. 2 line 2).

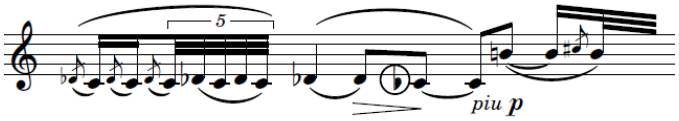


Figure 3: F developed by E and F# (Scelsi, *Ixor*, p. 2 line 7).

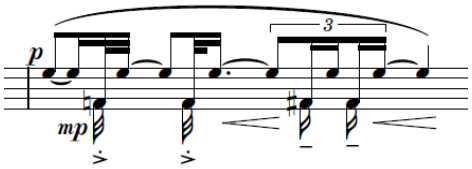
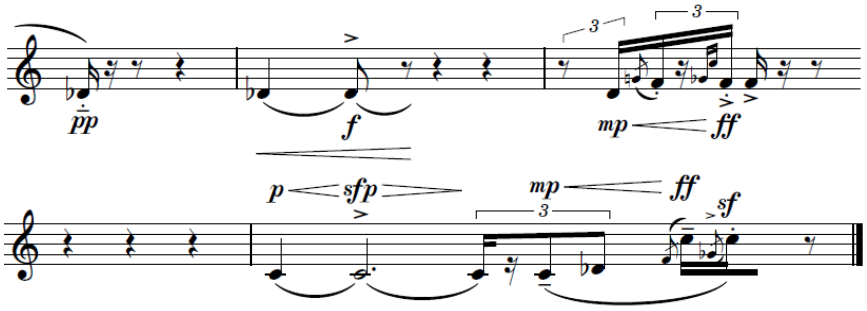
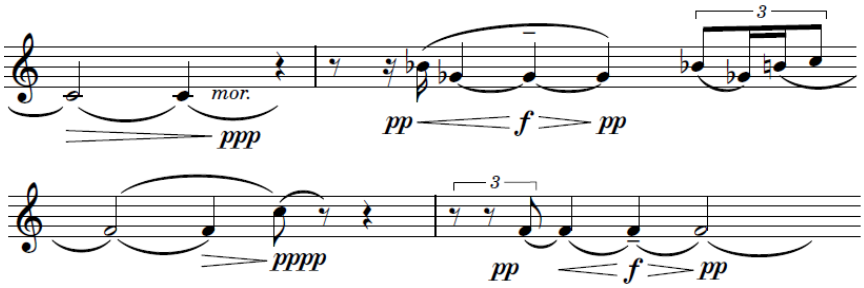


Figure 4: Final summary of *una nota sola* development (Scelsi, *Ixor,* p. 2 lines 6—7).



Though the *una nota sola* structure is clear—and has been discussed extensively by prior scholars—the structure of this transformation contains further implications for the clarinetist. While the core pitches are predictably developed by their immediate chromatic neighbors, these neighbors are often displaced upwards by an octave—a distance of a minor ninth instead of a minor second. The difference in effect of these two intervals is notable on any instrument but is particularly worthy of note for the clarinetist. The "home" C and F pitches, the most fundamental pitches in this work, are written as C4 and F4. This is clarified by the sustained length of these pitches in lines 4 and 5, some of the only sustained pitches in the piece (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Sustained durations on C4 and F4 (Scelsi, *Ixor*, p. 1 lines 4–5).



These pitches are in the upper chalumeau register on the clarinet, a register defined by its dullness and limited projection.[51] Therefore, undulations from C to Db4—also located in the upper chalumeau—and from F to Gb4—located in the throat register, the only register weaker in color and projection than the upper chalumeau—provide minimal change in character, instead creating a murmuring, muffled sound that serves to obscure the transformation. Indeed, marked changes in color or dynamic would be difficult to execute between two notes in this register. This is strongly contrasted against the minor ninth intervals; C4 frequently undulates upwards to B4 and F4 undulates up to E5. B4 and E5 are in the lower clarion, a register defined by its full color and bright timbre. This is a marked contrast in sound to the muted color of the C4 and F4; this contrast in color not only provides musical interest and an increase in tension, but provides the performer an opportunity for timbral control, shaping the impression of the work.

Beyond the obvious difference in pitch that these register changes create, this variance in interval emphasizes the experience of the clarinetist and instrument in the performance. When navigating a difficult-to-control register change, the clarinetist must carefully control the air and embouchure to ensure a traditional desirable homogenous sound. However, when alternating between registers as quickly as *Ixor* demands, it becomes impossible for the clarinetist to regulate in this way. This will create a "mismatch" in sound, with the upper notes emerging brightly from the texture and the lower notes darker and more difficult to discern. The clarinetist can embrace this mismatch, allowing the upper notes to pop and create a sense of building intensity. They can also choose to emphasize the lower notes, reinforcing the *una nota sola* core note and minimizing the "pop" of the upper note. Either choice is not simply a resolution of a technical dilemma, but also calls upon the clarinetist to actively decide which solution best suits their interpretative goal and ultimately shapes the final outcome of the work. As François identifies, timbre is the most

[51] The chalumeau register is the clarinet's lowest register, beginning at the instrument's lowest pitch, written E3, and ending at written F#4.

fundamental aspect of performance solely within the performer's control, and decisions regarding its manifestation are hugely impactful.[52]

Within the density of *Ixor*, the timbral variations presented by the mechanics of the performer's body and instrument navigating the work provide a reflection of the performer's identity and interpretation in the performed work. The lived experience of the performer's body navigating the work provides another critical avenue for creative expression; the auditory and physical sensations of breathing, straining the body, and physically interfacing with the instrument. These physical experiences are not extraneous to musical expression; they are as much a component of interpretation as pitch, rhythm, or timbre. The physical body's role in musical expression has been explored by ethnomusicologist Matthew Rahaim in his writing on Hindustani vocal music, utilizing the term "musicking body" to describe this integration of body and melody in musical performance.

For Rahaim, the musicking body encompasses not only the material experience of the performer's physical body navigating the performance, but the component of musical expression the body itself provides, alongside and inextricable from the melody itself. As he states, "An arm may carry a gestural form, as the air in a room may carry sound, but the essence of the musicking body is not flesh any more than the essence of sound is air."[53] To consider the experience of the body as "outside" of melodic performance is to consider both incompletely; the material experience of the body *is* the music just as completely as the sound of the pitches; "To gesture spontaneously while improvising melody is to do one thing, not two… the body is fully alive in music."[54] This material experience is not limited to gesture, but instead encompasses experiences as diverse as the subconscious lifting of the chin to perform higher notes or the pain resulting from performing in a new posture.[55] In short, the body's experience navigating a performance is not extraneous, but is as much the "stuff" of a performance as the consciously created sonic material.

Ixor implicates the musicking body through the shifts in performer physicality that are created alongside the timbral diversity created by this broadening range. The undulations from C4 to Db4 and F4 to Gb4 are not only relatively muted in timbre but require minimal movement from the performer; all pitches are contained in a limited area on the instrument and require only the movement of a single finger, the left-hand pinky and the right-hand index finger, respectively. However, the undulations across the span of nearly an octave present

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[52] Jean-Charles François, "Writing without Representation, and Unreadable Notation," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 14.
[53] Matthew Rahaim, *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music*, 89.
[54] Rahaim, *Musicking Bodies*, 89.
[55] Rahaim, *Musicking Bodies*, 91.

a greater technical challenge, requiring the clarinetist to shift their entire right hand from uncovered to covered with each pitch change. This strain technique can result in greater physical tension in the hands and arms, instability to the body of the instrument due to the rocking of the hands, even unwanted tension in the embouchure in an attempt to stabilize. These changes not only impact the sonic quality of the performance, but parallel the increased tension caused by the timbral and dynamic changes, demonstrating the role of the musicking body (and therefore the role of performer identity) in the impression of the performed work.

In instrumental music, I believe the extension of the "musicking body" to the material experience of the instrument as well as that of the performer is appropriate, as the instrument functions as an extension or partner of the performer. Just as the musicking body's physical experiences, even if incidental, are unable to be separated from the musical idea, so too are the physical realities of the instrument in performance. Therefore, it is relevant that these shifts across register changes are acoustically challenging for the clarinet itself; a pivot from C4 to B4 forces the clarinet to navigate the overtone series from the fundamental register to the third partial (known colloquially as "the break"). While an experienced performer can navigate this change without difficulty, at a rapid tempo and without proper preparation, the material struggle of the instrument can result in a subtone or inferior tone quality. This potential unevenness and sense of struggle parallels the increasing tension and sense of pursuit throughout *Ixor*, demonstrating the power of the clarinet's "musicking body" alongside its performer.

Other elements of *Ixor* present more explicit opportunities for the clarinetist to make decisions and influence the performed work. Fancher comments on Scelsi's lack of specificity in the key clicks in line nine; while many composers indicate the keys the performer should activate to achieve the "click" effect, Scelsi leaves this open to the performer.[56] Key clicks provide dramatically different effects on the clarinet depending on which keys are struck. The clarinetist can exercise their interpretative freedom by choosing a milder, lighter key click—such as those created by the right-hand side keys or throat keys—or a heavy, aggressive click—such as those created by the right-hand pinky keys—based on their personal desire to either match or contrast the *molto piano* B4 (Fig. 6). The glissando in line 16 also presents a level of conscious choice for the clarinetist; the glissando is between an E and an F quarter flat (Fig. 7). This interval is less than a half step and therefore can easily be accomplished through embouchure manipulation. However, the clarinetist may also choose to accomplish this glissando by sliding the fingers from the E fingering to the F quarter flat fingering. While both choices adhere to the written

[56] Fancher, "The Saxophone," 151.

instructions, the embouchure change will produce a smoother, subtler glissando, while the fingering change will create a starker change in pitch and invites the possibility of further key and finger noise. While both choices are a valid interpretation of Scelsi's written instructions, they will produce different effects, allowing the clarinetist a moment of interpretative independence as they resolve a technical problem.

Figure 6: Key clicks at *molto piano* (Scelsi, *Ixor,* p. 1 line 9).

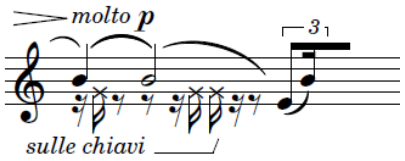
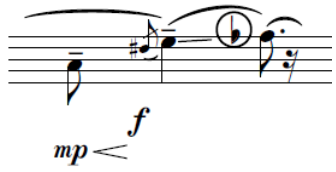


Figure 7: Quartertone glissando (Scelsi, *Ixor*, p. 2 line 7).



Through analyzing *Ixor* for demonstrated instances of performer choice, it is clear that while Scelsi expected his performers to interpret his works independently and creatively, the complexity and technical demand of his work often prevents them from engaging in traditional interpretation. Therefore, the performer must engage with unconventional methods of control, such as timbral manipulation, choice of fingering, and interpretation of articulation, to manifest an authentic performance. Through deciding whether to work with or against the clarinet's natural acoustic tendencies, the performer may not only alter the character of the work but fundamentally affect the manner in which *una nota sola* is perceived. By considering and selecting key clicks and glissando technique according to their desired effect, the clarinetist may create a subtler, shaded performance, mirroring the steady transformation of pitch, or creating a harsher, more dramatic effect, adding points of energy and increasing the momentum of the work. By controlling elements of the work that the notation cannot, the clarinetist's choices serve as a vital component of the final effect of *Ixor*.[57] These elements of timbre and technique are developed further in *Preghiera per un'ombra* (1954), Scelsi's most substantial work for solo clarinet.

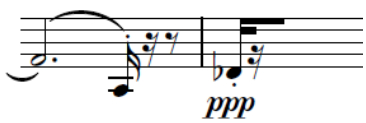
[57] François, "Writing without Representation." 14.

Preghiera per un'ombra (1954)

Preghiera per un'ombra, *Prayer for a Shadow,* (1954) is Scelsi's earliest solo work for clarinet and his only solo work written specifically for Bb soprano clarinet. The title is unusually concrete for Scelsi's compositions, evoking the image of an exposed, barren expanse without refuge from the blinding light of the sun.[58] Clarinetist Carol Robinson, in discussing her experiences working with Scelsi on the piece, states that Scelsi described the work as "the cry of pain and rage caused by the death of a loved one."[59] The piece intensifies slowly throughout, with the pitch center climbing over three octaves and the dynamic level rising to a scream in the later minutes. Notably, *Preghiera* does not feature any extended techniques or microtonality, both of which would be characteristic of Scelsi's later clarinet writing.[60]

Preghiera per un'ombra is also significantly longer than Scelsi's other clarinet works, with a duration of approximately nine minutes. The duration is notable due to the density of the notation; in the entirety of the work, there is only one notated rest longer than half a beat. The rest is a sixteenth rest followed by an eighth rest, located approximately halfway through the piece (Fig. 8). This poses a dilemma for the clarinetist; even if no space is indicated, they must breathe. While some breaths are indicated in passages without rests, there are periods of several lines without an indicated breath. The clarinetist will need to breathe in these passages; even a performer capable of circular breathing—exhaling through the mouth while inhaling through the nose—will be incapable of maintaining the intensity of air required for the duration of these passages (Fig. 9). Where the performer chooses to pause to breathe alters the pacing and rhythm of the work, allowing them a moment of control over rhythm, even in a passage of highly prescribed rhythmic notation. In a work where Scelsi is expressly willing to exact control over performer breaths—as evidenced by later breath marks—the omission of these marks cedes control to the performer, allowing them ultimate control over the pacing of the passage.

Figure 8: Longest rest in *Preghiera per un'ombra* (Scelsi, *Preghiera*, p. 8 line 3).

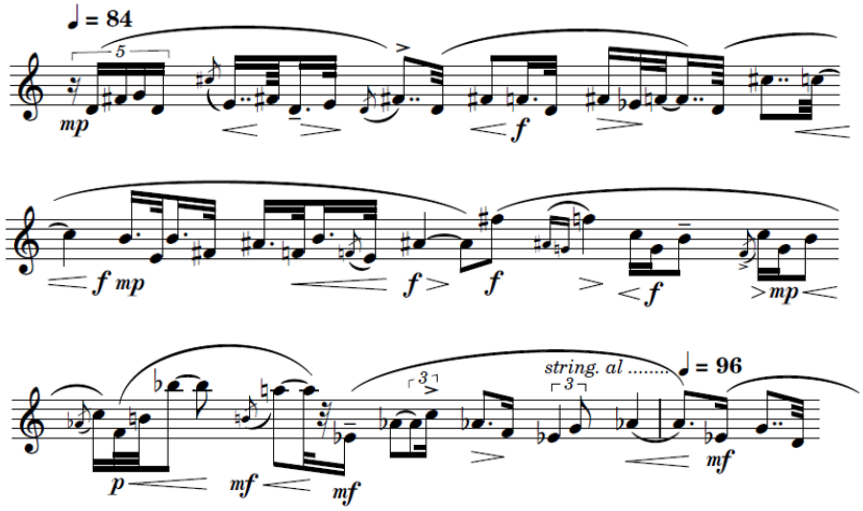


[58] Thein, trans. Praeder, *Giacinto Scelsi,* 5.

[59] Robinson, *Giacinto Scelsi,* 2.

[60] Giacinto Scelsi, *Preghiera per un'ombra: pour clarinette si♭ solo*, Paris: Editions Salabert, 1988.

Figure 9: Long stretch without indicated rests or breaths (Scelsi, *Preghiera,* p. 1 lines 1–3).



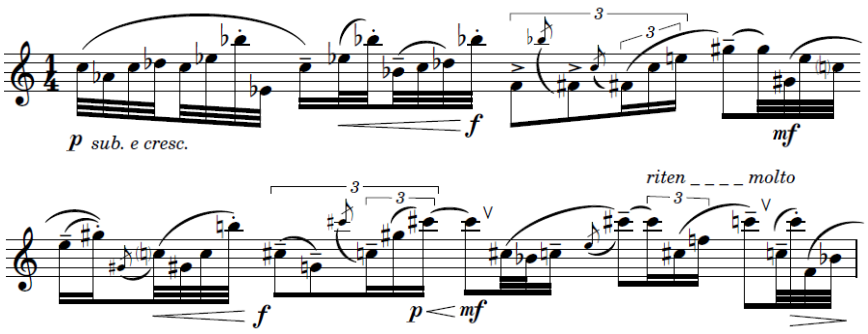
The physical demand that the composition places on the performer's body contributes to *Preghiera*'s characteristic sense of struggle. As observed by anthropologist Amanda Weidman, the identity of the "voice" (here, the shared voice of performer and instrument) is not only shaped by the intentional, even desirable sound content. Instead, the voice's significance is dictated just as much by the material effects of its production; a vocalist's physical motion, facial expression, or disposition have a critical effect on how the "voice" itself is perceived, and further how the performer's identity is received by the listener.[61] Considering these material aspects of performance as an opportunity for the transmission of identity is useful when analyzing *Preghiera* for opportunities for individual interpretation. It is physically exhausting for the clarinetist to maintain the level of intensity of air and breath support needed to perform such challenging music for an extended duration, especially with only fleeting pauses to gasp for air. This gasping and feeling of physical strain asserts the clarinetist's individuality in the performance of *Preghiera*; as in Waterman's experience with *Cassandra's Dream Song,* the listener is constantly reminded of the performer's physical body and its "struggle to wrestle [the] music under control."[62] The extreme difficulty of the written part contributes to the strained effect as well; the rapid tempo and complex finger passages push the technique to near unplayability (Fig. 10).

As the clarinetist struggles to execute the rapid finger technique, even the most skilled player will strike the keys more harshly,

[61] Amanda Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 no. 1, (2014): 41.
[62] Waterman, "Cassandra's Dream Song," 155.

evoking Castanet's "very brief percussive counterpoint."[63] The struggle against the rapidly changing resistance of the instrument is present in these passages as well, with the increased potential for subtones and "grunts," again asserting the limitations of the performer's physical body. The musicking body is implicated again, participating in the same sense of oppression and exhausted search for relief that the form of the piece implies. It is easy to imagine that, like in Ferneyhough's composition, this struggle is to some extent by design; in a work portraying a sense of oppression and the search for a relief, Scelsi could evoke this emotion in his performer by demanding an immense physical and mental struggle without respite. In the struggle to execute the complex, demanding notation, the strain of the body and instrument actively influences the overall effect of the piece, incorporating the individual experience of the performer as a fundamental component of the interpretation of *Preghiera per un'ombra*.

Figure 10: Complex fingering passages (Scelsi, *Preghiera*, p. 5 lines 3—4).



Scelsi's treatment of register shows particular care for the tendencies of the clarinet, utilizing the contrast inherent between registers to emphasize the development of *una nota sola* throughout the work. *Preghiera* is characterized by a gradual inching upwards, increasing in dynamic intensity as pitch increases. The clarinet tone shifts naturally as it moves across its range, with each register defined by its own sound profile and tendencies. Castanet discusses the impact of this difference in timbre in other works for clarinet, emphasizing the ability of the clarinet to "[manifest] a great variety of aspects and resonances without ever ceasing to be itself."[64] This flexibility of color augments the *una nota sola* transformation of *Preghiera* in a uniquely idiosyncratic way for the instrument.

Preghiera begins in the upper chalumeau register, relatively low in the instrument's range (between written C4 and written F4). This register is characterized by a mellow, dampened color, suited to the more tranquil material. However, opposing this mellow character

[63] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR."
[64] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR."

are the brief grace notes and dotted thirty-second notes written in the lower clarion register (written B4 to written Eb5). This register is bright, strident, and resistant.[65] It is difficult to control at a soft dynamic and requires more air to produce, causing it to "leap" off the instrument without proper preparation and control. The rapid slurred alterations between these registers render that control very difficult, as the change provides the performer almost no time to prepare; this creates an uneven, "pained" sound in the intervals, contributing to the sense of struggle and "gasping" by manipulating the natural tendencies of the instrument.

Several pages later in the score, the pitch center has relocated to the clarion (written E5 to A5), defined by brightness and solidity. The grace notes are now to the altissimo (written C#6 to written G6), a light, unstable, piercing register.[66] The dynamic and tempo have increased, and Scelsi has adopted an increasingly harsh timbral language to mimic this. Fancher notes that Scelsi's "ingenious use of instrumental colors is… a major feature of his compositional style… the entire point of the composition is the constantly changing colors." She indicates that this use of color is even more effective in the *una nota sola* style as "pitch material is so very limited."[67]

Through directly engaging aspects of performer execution, such as needing to breathe and navigating awkward fingering choices, to allow for brief moments of interpretation in how they choose to navigate register changes and accentuate particular notes, Scelsi establishes the clarinetist as an active participant in *Ixor* and *Preghiera per un'ombra* and allows their choices to influence the final performed version of the works. Choices such as the placement of breaths, the technique chosen to execute glissandi, and the key chosen for a key click are as fundamental to the performed product as the gasps or shakes from an exhausted performer or the extraneous grunts or key noises created by the instrument encountering its limitations. Together, the performer and the instrument assert themselves as a co-equal creator of the work, far beyond a pure intermediary between an infallible composer and a receptive audience.

Conclusion

Giacinto Scelsi was an unconventional composer whose philosophy and style were defined largely by contradictions. Perhaps chief among these contradictions lies in his beliefs regarding the performers of his works, demanding that they both adhere to highly complex notation and exercise independent creativity and interpretation. Scholars have grappled with this contradiction; some claim that the

[65] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR."
[66] Castanet, "De l'hétérodoxie d'IXOR."
[67] Fancher, "The Saxophone," 125.

score can be rejected entirely in favor of interpretative freedom, while others argue that the technical demands of the score must first be satisfied before freedom can be explored. I believe both approaches are overly simplistic; to embrace either extreme, a performer must discard an aspect of Scelsi's work entirely—his philosophy or his physical scores. Instead, the performer must carefully examine Scelsi's scores for where freedom is implied or indicated, even if it is disguised within bars of complex notation. Timbre, breathing, fingering choices, and the technique used to achieve an effect are all elements of performance in which constant choice is exercised, even if they are often considered distinct from "interpretation." Even aspects of performance outside of performer control, including the physical tendencies of the instrument or the exhaustion experienced during a performance, are means by which performers influence the product of Scelsi's work that the audience eventually receives. It is up to the performer to understand the impact that their decisions have and to commit to making informed choices; it is only then that a performer has presented an "authentic" Scelsian performance.

Considering the performer in this capacity reenforces that the performer is a contributor in all music, not only in works where the composer explicitly encourages this independence. The performer's identity is not restricted to ideas of phrasing or pacing. The process of negotiating performer identity is present in all components of performance, whether through the navigation of particular timbral problems or through the sensation of the body navigating the work. A performer must consider their breathing in Brahms and their fingering choices in Mozart. While these choices may not be as open-ended or as encouraged in traditional repertoire, performers must consider that any decision is an interpretative decision when one considers its impact on the final performance. Scelsi's unusually direct confrontation of performer agency obviates a fundamental tension in musical expression; as Jean-Charles François states, notation is a "contract" between composer and performer, establishing the terms through which musical collaboration occurs.[68] To understand the terms of this "contract," is to understand not only the logistical circumstances of the performance but the interpretative parameters the composer has established. With this paradoxically broader and more nuanced scope of interpretation in mind, the means of authentic performance—of Giacinto Scelsi and others' repertoire—may be possible.

[68] François, "Writing without Representation," 14.

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