On Text and Perspective in Salvatore Sciarrino's *Morte di Borromini*

Nick Virzi, June 2016 – Stanford University

Dedicato ai miei insegnanti, Anna Cellinese, Alessandra McCarty, Giorgio Alberti e Marta Baldocchi, senza i quali questo articolo non avrebbe potuto possibile.

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"In contrast to that of composers, the music I write seems hyper-real because it is especially close to noise (…) It requires of the listener an openness and sensitivity to the noises of the world." –Salvatore Sciarrino

In the music of Salvatore Sciarrino, which often takes shape through anthropomorphic representation and mimetic realization of character(s), text and perspective undoubtedly play a crucial role in determining not only the characteristic and behavioral tendencies of anthropomorphized musical material, but also new and imaginative dramatic forms made possible by the composer's apparent ability to empathize with his chosen subjects and follow their characteristic profiles to often fantastic ends. This relationship between text and perspective and musical effect is perhaps best exemplified in Sciarrino's melodrama for orchestra and narrator, *Morte di Borromini* (1988).

In the liner notes to the 2008 CD, *Orchestral Works, Morte di Borromini* is described as follows:

"The text for this orchestral work with reader is based on a dictate of the Baroque architect Francesco Borromini, whose work in Rome included St. Peter's Cathedral and the Church of San Giovanni in Laterano. Plagued by depression, he took his own life in 1667. Shortly before his death a physician described the night in which he sought to write his testament and then fell upon a sword, killing himself. Sciarrino's music does not seek to describe the events but rather reflect the emotions and madness of that night." –Liner Notes, Orchestral Works (2008)

While it is correct Sciarrino based his text for *Morte di Borromini* on accounts of the suicide of the renowned architect Francesco Borromini, I believe this interpretation of the piece to be only partially true. By analyzing the text and its relationship to the music, I will attempt to show that *Morte di Borromini* is both a literal account of these events as well as an anthropomorphic embodiment of Borromini's perspective, therefore allowing us to experience the night of his death through his own eyes.

For our purposes, I have provided on the following pages a copy of Sciarrino's original text from the score, as well as an English translation.

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Morte di Borromini – Text (S. Sciarrino)

Morte di Borromini
per orchestra con lettore

Io mi ritrovo così ferito da questa mattina dall'otto ore e mezzo in qua in circa sul modo che dirò a Vostra Signoria et è che ritrovandomi io ammalato dal giorno della Maddalena in qua; che non sono più uscito eccetto lo sabato e domenica che andai a San Giovanni a pigliar il Giubileo, stante detta mia indisposizione, ier sera mi venne in pensiero di far testamento e scriverlo di mia propria mano, e lo cominciai a scriverlo che mi ci trattenni da un'ora incirca dopo che ebbi cenato e trattenendomi così scrivendo col toccalapis sino alle tre ore di notte in circa.

Mastro Francesco Massari, che è un giovane che mi serve in casa et è capomastro della fabbrica di Santo Giovanni de' Fiorentini, della quale io sono architetto, che se ne stava a dormire in questa altra stanza per mia custodia, che già si era andato a letto, sentendo che io ancora stava scrivendo et avendo veduto che io non avevo smorzato lo lume, mi chiamò con dire: "Signor Cavaliere: è meglio che Vostra Signoria smorzi il lume e se riposi perché è tardi e il medico vuole che Vostra Signoria riposi". Io gli risposi come io avrei fatto a riaccendere il lume per quando mi fussi svegliato et esso me replicò: "Lei lo smorze, perché io l'accenderò quando Vostra Signoria si sarà risvegliato", e così cessai di scrivere; messi da parte la carta scritta un ppco et il toccalapis col quale scriveva; smorzai il lume e mi messi a riposare.

Verso le cinque in sei ore incirca, essendomi risvegliato, ho chiamato il suddetto Francesco e gli ho detto: "E' ora di riaccendere il lume", et mi ha risposto: "Signor no". Et io avendo sentita la risposta mi è entrata addosso l'impazienza subito ho cominciato a pensare se come potevo fare a farmi alla mia persona qualche male, stante che il detto Francesco mi aveva negato di accendermi il lume et in questa opinione sono stato sino all'otto ore e mezzo incirca,

finalmente essendomi ricordato che avevo la spada qui in camera a capo al letto et appesa a queste candele benedette, essendomi anche accresciuta l'impazienza di non avere il lume, disperato ho preso la detta spada, quale avendola sfoderata, il manico di essa l'ho appuntato nel letto e la punta nel mio fianco e poi mi sono buttato sopra di essa spada dalla quale con la forza che ho fatta acciò che entrasse nel mio corpo sono stato passato da una parte all'altra e nel buttarmi sopra la spada sono caduto con essa spada col corpo quaggiù nel mattonato e feritomi come sopra ho cominciato a strillare; et allora è corso qua il detto Francesco et ha aperto la finestra che già si vedeva lume me ha trovato colco in questo mattonato che da lui e certi altri che lui ha chiamati mi è stata levata la spada dal fianco

e poi sono stato rimesso a letto et in questa conformità è successo il caso della mia ferita.

Morte di Borromini/Death of Borromini – Text Translation (N. Virzi)

I find myself here, wounded on this morning since about half past eight. How this happened, I will tell you, *Vostra Signoria*. I had found myself ill since the day of the *Maddalena*; I no longer went outside, except on Saturday and Sunday to go to San Giovanni for the *Giubileo.* Given my illness, I resolved last night to make a will, writing it with my own hand. I began to write after refraining for an hour after eating dinner, and continued writing as such, with *toccalapis* in hand, until almost three in the morning.

Maestro Francesco Massari, a young man that serves me in residence, who is headmaster of the studio of San Giovanni of Fiorentini of which I am the architect, and sleeps in another room of my house, had already gone to bed. He had seen that I was still working and had not put out the candle. He called to me to say, "*Signore Cavaliere*: it is better that you put out the candle now as it is late, and the doctor has told you to rest." I retorted that I would have to relight the candle anyway when I woke up. To this he replied, "I will turn it on for you when you get up again." And so I ceased writing, put aside the pages I had written and the *toccalapis* with which I wrote, put out the candle, and went to sleep.

At around five or six, having woken up again, I called out to the aforementioned Francesco and said to him, "It is time to relight the candle." He responded, "*Signor*, no." Having heard his response, I grew impatient and quickly began to think of how I could do myself harm, given that Francesco had refused to light the candle. In this state I remained until about half past eight.

Finally, I remembered that I had a sword here in my room, hanging at the head of the bed among the blessed candles. Growing more impatient in the absence of light, I took the sword in despair and unsheathed it, leaning it up against the bed and pressing the point to my side. Then I threw myself on the sword with such force that it ran through my body, passing from one side to the other. Falling to the floor with the blade inside me, I screamed from the pain of my wound. And so Francesco ran in, opened the window through which one could already see light, and found me lying on the bricks. Then by him, and certainly by others who he had called, the sword was raised from my side.

I was then replaced upon the bed accordingly. This is how I came to be wounded.

* * *

As my claims depend on an analysis of both Sciarrino's text and music, I will first point to a few key aspects of the text.

To begin with, there are two main characters: the architect, Francesco Borromini, and his live-in aid, friend, and colleague, Francesco Massari. The text is written from the first-person perspective of Borromini, with Francesco (as he is referred to by Borromini) playing the only supporting role.

The first and final paragraphs are delivered from a distinctly removed perspective, especially when contrasted with the middle three paragraphs [p. 2-4], which are linear and describe the events surrounding Borromini's suicide as an autobiographical narrative.

The intention to distinguish these two types of temporal perspectives is illustrated by Sciarrino's use of contrasting Italian verb tenses. The removed perspective makes significant use of the *passato remoto* tense, typically reserved for telling stories in the past, while the inner three paragraphs use a mix of tenses typically used in conversation to discuss the past, present, or future (*presente, imperfetto, passato prossimo, futuro,* etc.).

Furthermore, the text is written in an old form of Italian, very close to Latin, which Borromini would have used to speak and write with. Examples of this can be found in Sciarrino's use of "*et*" rather than "*e,*" for the word "and", the use of the pronouns *Vostra Signoria* and *Signor Cavaliere* as titles of respect, and Borromini's use of a *toccalapis*, a type of writing implement.

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It is also interesting to note that Sciarrino's aesthetic, with regards to diction and sentence structure, is also characteristically Italian – extremely long sentences, sometimes spanning the majority of a paragraph, closely juxtaposed with concise addendums of charming brevity.

Shifting focus now to content, the narrative [p. 2-4] is prefaced by and reinforced with insights into Borromini's depression [p. 1], and how this affects his perspective – Borromini becomes a shut in, obsessed with death, and shows little regard for his own well being [p. 2-3].

His aversion to the outer world hints at his obsession with various forms of light, including its absence. In fact, there is significant and various use of light imagery throughout the text. For example, the argument between Borromini and Francesco is over a the lighting of a candle [p. 2-3], the sword he uses to stab himself hangs among the "*candele benedette*/blessed candles" [p. 4], Borromini grows impatient in the absence of light [p. 4], and Francesco finds the wounded Borromini lying on the floor of his room after opening the window, "*...che già si vedeva lume.../* ...through which one could already see light." [p. 4].

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1 http://wissensgeschichte.biblhertz.it:8080/Glossario/Glossario_Italiano/coltellino/Thumbnail

Finally, Sciarrino provides us with a very clear sense of the passage time, giving specific points such as 8:30 AM, 3 AM, and 5 or 6 AM, alongside relative points of reference, such as "*...lo cominciai a scriverlo che mi trattenni da un'ora dopo che ebbi cenato.../*...I began to write after refraining for an hour after eating dinner..."

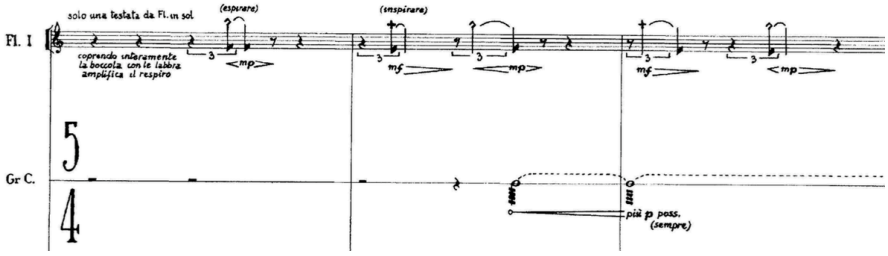
These types of indications serve also to define Borromini's specific conscious states, such as "*...e mi mesi a riposare. Verso le cinque in sei ore.../* ...and I went to sleep. At around five or six…", showing larger spans of time during which the protagonist is asleep.

Each of these defining indications of time will prove crucial in determining our perspective experience of *Morte di Borromini*, and will be discussed further in my interpretive analysis of the score.

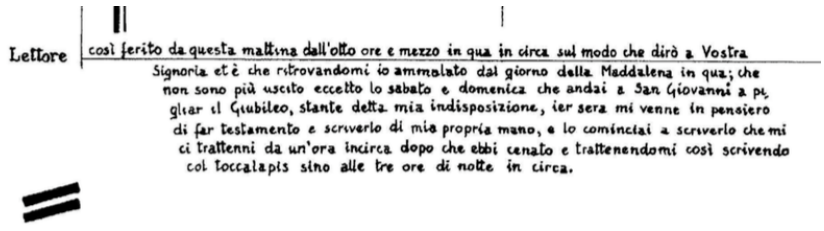
* * *

To understand how these and other aspects of the text are represented in Sciarrino's music, it will be necessary to first define the musical materials he uses as part of his relatively small sonic palette. These distinct sonic entities and their defining traits are listed here in order of appearance in the score.

- *Sonic Entity 1*: Instrumental breathing – inhalation and exhalation, typically performed by the alto flute and paired with a quiet rolling bass drum [first appearance, pg. 1 of the score].

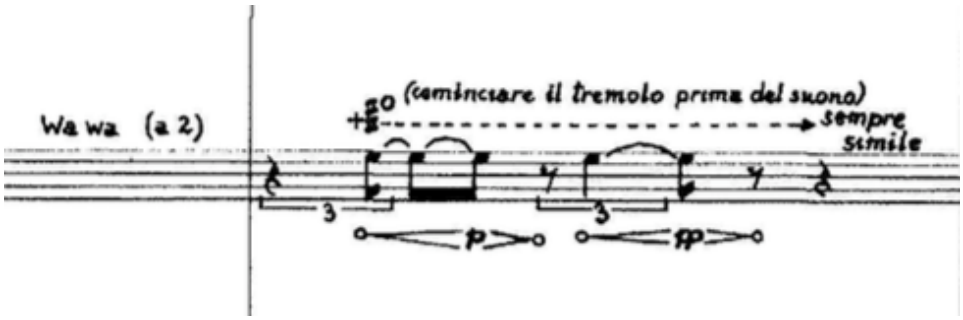


- *Sonic Entity 2*: Narration of the text – read in full paragraphs at four points in the piece [pg. 1, 2, 15, 41] by an older man, in a dramatic, distinguished manner (as performed on the *Orchestral Works* CD, 2008).

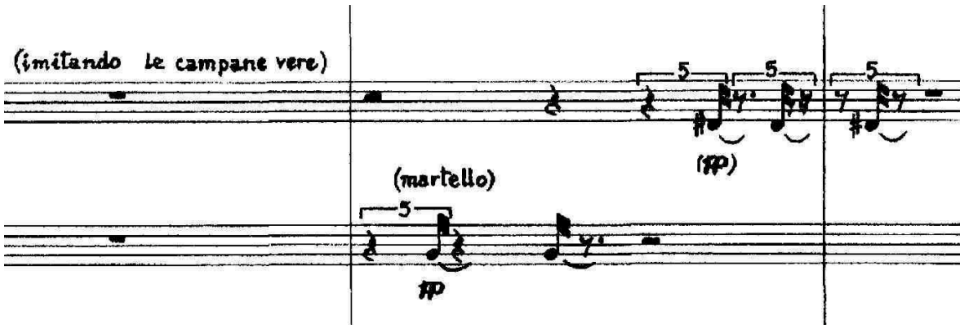


- *Sonic Entity 3:* Drone – In the strings, beginning on D [first appearance, pg. 1], later moving to C# [pg. 10], and then back to D [pg. 15].

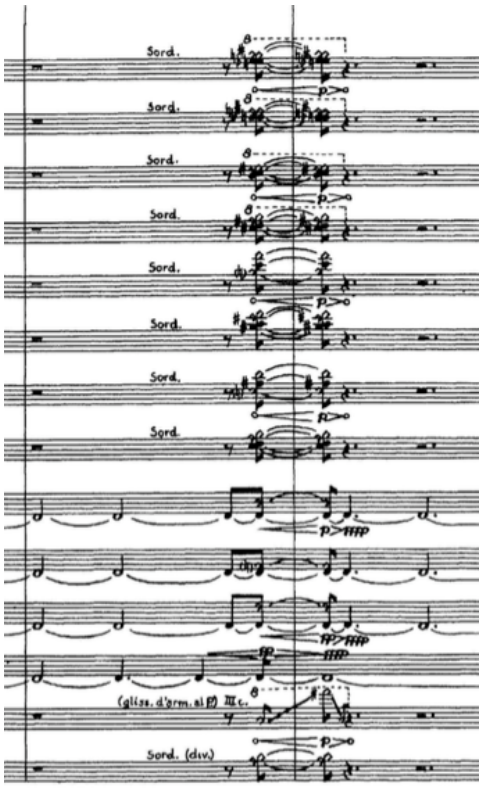
- *Sonic Entity 4*: Brass with "wa-wa" vibrato – introduced in the trombones [pg. 1] and later expanded to the remaining members of the brass choir, using the following pitch collection (listed in order of prominence): D, C, F, G, E, C#



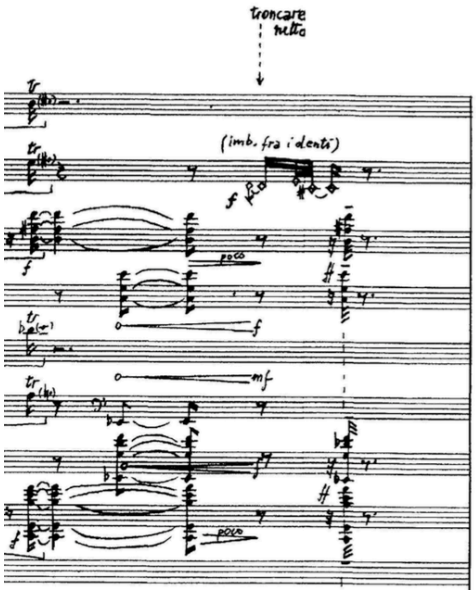
- *Sonic Entity 5*: Bells, on B and D# – "*imitando le campane vere*/imitating real bells", used to indicate specific points in time (from the text) at three moments in the piece [pg. 2, 16, 42].



- *Sonic Entity 6*: Sustained string harmonics – typically with a brilliant, consonant sonority [pg. 4].



- *Sonic Entity 7*: Oboe multiphonic – alternating, with masked entrances, giving the illusion of an unbroken force of sound [pg. 25].



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Having now identified several key aspects of the text as well as all the elemental incarnations of the piece's primary musical materials, it will now be possible to see how through various forms of mimetic text painting and anthropomorphic development, Sciarrino (1) creates the illusion of perspective, (2) represents specific events in the narrative, and (3) presents these to us in a perceived real time.

* * *

I will begin first with the illusion of perspective, achieved through the strategic presentation and development of *Sonic Entities 1 and 2* – instrumental breathing, and narration of the text.

"It is a question of the largest possible external silence in which we can listen to ourselves, our breath, our heartbeat, and in extreme cases, the circulation of our blood. Large stretches of Sciarrino's music reflect nothing but the noises of the body reduced to its elementary functions. The orchestra breathes, pants, wheezes, and snores, while the rhythm of the heartbeat adjusts to the respective condition. The quiet intimacy of the human body is projected into the concert hall, an imaginary giant body." –Liner Notes, Orchestral Works (2008)

Once again, this statement is only partially true. There is, in fact, no external silence in *Morte Borromini*; only music, which very rarely rests or falls to true silence. Rather, it is our perception of Sciarrino's lifelike external world that stirs our internal empathy for the familiar, human quality of that world. The quiet intimacy of the human body is projected inward, as if our consciousness were a prism, guiding the external sounds of the music into our empathically charged bodies, allowing us to perceive the music as a vivid realization of ourselves as the protagonist, Francesco Borromini.

Several aspects of Sciarrino's writing on the first page alone indicate his intention to not only engage the body of the listener, but to quite literally cast a living, breathing musical character.

For instance, the shadowy breath of the alto flute which opens the piece, is distinctly, and undoubtedly, anthropomorphic – it mimics the sonic and behavioral attributes of human breathing, alternating regularly between inhalation and exhalation, with enough variety of dynamics (*mp-mf*), duration, breath speed (a product of dynamics and duration in the flute), and spacing, so as to be perceived as characteristically human, without being behaviorally mechanical.

The shroud of harmonics that color this breath as it is passes through the alto flute, as well as the deep, penetrating low frequencies of the rolling bass drum, engage the body of the listener, allowing them to subconsciously link these sounds to their own familiar corporeal experience and sink further into the first-person perspective. This effect is continuously reinforced and deepened through non-literal repetition over long spans of time.

While each of these separate musical characteristics is complex in their own right, their aggregate effect is essentially simple – mimetically realized human breathing, which through empathetic connection, allows for the listener's conscious perception of the music as an external realization of the self.

However, it is not until the entrance of the narrator shortly afterwards that Sciarrino links this carefully prepared first-person perspective to a specific character. By layering a spoken narration over the alto flute and bass drum texture, Sciarrino draws a clear relationship between the text and the music, fusing the illusion of shared perspective with the character – Francesco Borromini.

As the text itself is written from Borromini's point of view, it is at this crucial moment that we begin to identify with him and experience the events that follow from his own perspective.

* * *

Next, I will discuss how Sciarrino uses this established perspective to represent the events of the narrative.

By beginning the piece in Borromini's perspective frame, Sciarrino creates a situation in which any developments in the music that follow must be viewed from his point of view, and can therefore serve one of two functional roles; (1) As extensions of Borromini's now-established character, indicating changes in his emotional, mental, and/or physical states, or (2) as parts of Borromini's external world that he perceives and/or engages with during the course of the narrative, providing a contrasting backdrop upon which any character developments or actions are made clearly audible.

Together, these two types of roles serve a dual, unified purpose; to reinforce the illusion of Borromini's character by allowing it the opportunity to interact with the very stage that validates its consciousness. This symbiotic relationship opens the door to dramatic interplay, and gives the character the agency needed to perform the events of the narrative.

This effect can be likened to the cinematic necessity of clouds when filming aerial dogfights, as without the visible presence of these billowy tufts of seeming insignificance, the dynamic speed and power of the planes would be impossible to perceive.

Still, how do we distinguish between these two entities in music? The ability to do so lies in the essential differences between anthropomorphism and parent form, mimesis.

While anthropomorphic writing aims to construct the human, both in physical form and behavioral tendency, mimetic writing may represent any entity (which is typically non-conscious). Therefore, while the necessity of representing a physical form remains in mimetic writing, it does not require the same type of developing behavioral complexity needed to create, and more importantly, perpetuate a consciousness; a feat which can be accomplished only through continuous behavioral evolution.

However, in the absence of behavioral development lies an equally formidable compositional challenge – to create an object whose traits are sufficiently rich in complexity that behavioral evolution is not needed to sustain interest.

To expand the behavioral bounds of an object would be to would cross the line of consciousness and lose the indifference that distinguishes an anthropomorphic character from a purely mimetic object.

Although the interaction of character and object enables the character to react and evolve, without a specific associative

point of reference, these developments remain purely abstract. Therefore, any programmatic interpretation without an explicitly provided context can never surpass subjective speculation.

It is only at the intersection of the text and this interactive relationship that the representation of specific characters, objects, and narrative events is made possible.

By analyzing the mimetic traits and behavioral tendencies of Sciarrino's musical materials and finding their equivalents in the text, it is possible to ascribe the proper nominal and functional roles to any present musical entities and consider their developments as a literal musical translation of the text.

To illustrate this point, I will point to three aspects of the score, which together, achieve the total effect described above.

First, as it immediately follows the conclusion of the opening narration [pg. 1/p. 1], the liminal emergence of the drone (*morbido, come un eco*/soft, like an echo) acts as a connective thread, transferring the presence of Borromini's character from the vocal/external to the instrumental/internal, now allowing it to also embody and show his emotional and mental states (*Sonic Entity 3*).

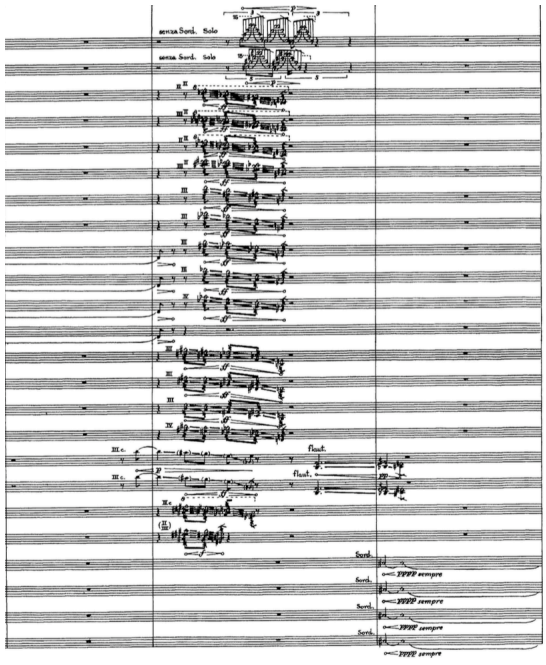
While its calm, serene presence seems to suggest an initial state of inner peace, the ubiquitous drone in fact provides a transparent, impressionable surface upon which even the subtlest impact may leave a significant imprint. Ironically, it is this placidity that Sciarrino will use to reveal the true instability of Borromini's mind.

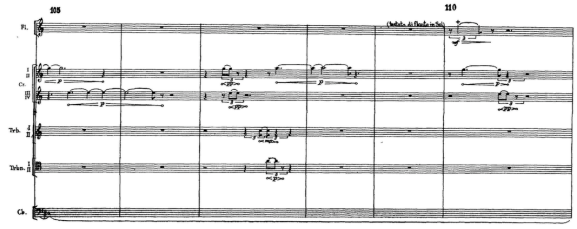
Secondly, and by contrast, Sciarrino's brass writing remains strictly mimetic, providing the perfect backdrop against which any events involving Borromini's character may be clearly heard.

Its light, consistent wavering, and faint, luminous timbre do not mimic human traits or behavioral tendencies as the alto flute does, but rather evoke the dim flickering of the candle(s) that becomes the object of Borromini's obsession and eventual undoing.

Additionally, its objective nature acts as reliable base from which character events may be further appreciated in terms of their relative affective power.

Note for example, the dramatic moment on score pages 10 and 11, where after over twelve full minutes of the drone sustaining the pitch D, it switches abruptly, and violently to C#. The brass, by contrast, remains indifferent to this monumental change, both strengthening the mimetic quality of the brass entity and indicating Borromini's internal struggle with the candle (and by extension, the external world).



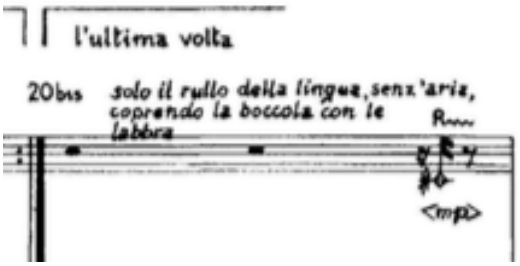


To maintain the purely mimetic role of the represented candle(s), Sciarrino is careful to limit the entity's development throughout the piece to extremely subtle variations in its superficial traits, such as the sparse use of *fluttertongue*, the extension of pitches (with and without the *wa-wa* effect), variously weighted configurations of the fixed pitch set (D, C, F, G, E, C#), and continuous changes in timbre/orchestration within the limits of the inherently monochromatic brass choir.

Finally, after carefully establishing the symbiotic relationship between the two aforementioned sonic entities, Sciarrino uses the second narration [pg. 2/p. 2] to first, open the narrative context in a more immediate and intimate perspective, and second, introduce via explicit text *(...e mi mesi a riposare./*...and went to sleep."), a clear shift in Borromini's conscious state – the shift to sleep.

This pivotal line of text, which concludes the second paragraph, both allows and necessitates the extension of Borromini's musical character within and beyond the drone in the section that follows, and enables Sciarrino to literally represent the shift to sleep as narrative event, using instrumental writing alone.

This representation, which culminates all of Sciarrino's lengthy and complex dramatic preparation, is finally realized by a gesture true to his characteristic Italian wit – a single, unmistakable snore (pg. 2).



Due to its relationship to *Sonic Entity 1* (which we still associate with his character), we are able to experience this moment in the alto flute not only as a snore, but also an extension of Borromini's character.

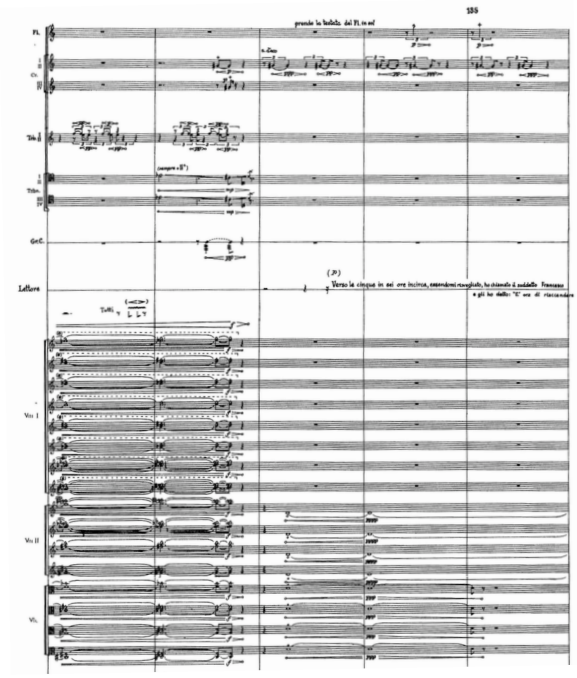
Since it retains many of the characteristics of the entity's normative form (instrumentation, extended vocal technique, general dynamic level, gestural shape, duration, relationship to the mimetic object, etc.), our association with Borromini's character is not broken with the introduction of a new trait (*R~*). Instead, it is strengthened as the trait serves the same anthropomorphic goal, thus demonstrating an isolated instance of behavioral evolution.

The snore's function as an indicator of sleep is obvious by association of common knowledge, but also further proven by Sciarrino's limited use of *Sonic Entity 6* (sustained string harmonics), which is only present in the vast musical space [pg. 2-15] between the second [pg. 2/p. 2] and the third narrations [pg. 15/p. 3].

By studying the text, we know that between these two narrations, Borromini is asleep for several hours, awakening with the second narration. This also explains the extremely long duration and dream-like quality of the inner section.

We perceive this moment on page 15 as a reawakening for several reasons; (1) The narrator re-enters, and logically, Borromini would not be able to speak coherently while asleep, (2) the alto flute and brass assume their prior character roles, and (3) the drone returns to D, elegantly shifting Borromini's perspective back into harmonic alignment with the static realm objective world.

For example, note that at the elision of these two sections, the brass' full pitch set is now revealed, with the horns' C# completing the set and acting as a connection from the C# drone.



By organizing narration and musical space in this manner, Sciarrino establishes a sequential pattern in which the text may act either as a prologue or an epilogue to an adjacent musical section, thereby allowing musical events and sections to be understood as a linear representation of that narrative text.

This leads us to the last perceptive dimension needed to experience the events of *Morte di Borromini* with a vivid, human sense of reality, and the final topic of my interpretive analysis – time.

* * *

In anthropomorphic and mimetic music, time doesn't just serve the function of clarifying narrative structure, but also provides a wider temporal context, which when paired with the illusion of perspective, more accurately mimics the way we as humans experience tangible reality.

In other words, the anthropomorphic creation of a conscious entity requires not only a reactive interplay in physical space (the relationship of the character to the object), but also the contextualization of that interplay in an illustrative temporal dimension (time).

The creation of a temporal dimension in musical composition is actually quite straightforward, as time is music's primary canvas; one which can be framed and colored according to the vision of the composer, or in the case of anthropomorphic and mimetic music, according to the traits observed in the subjects the composer seeks to represent.

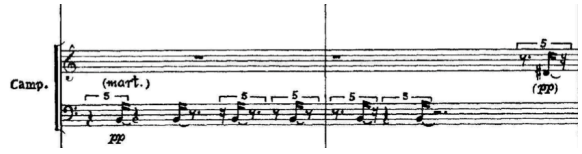
Time is an experience that exists as a non-conscious non-entity, and thus only takes shape as it is perceived. In some respects, it seems to behave like a mimetic object – passive and indifferent to changes around it. Yet it can also appear elastic, shifting quality with our emotional and mental states. In fact, time itself cannot change; only our perception of it can.

Therefore, while the concept of time is fairly simple consider in the abstract, the infinite possibilities of perception make it equally infinitely complex. In music, at least, this is a good thing. It means that time can function on many levels and can allow for the perceptive awareness of every aspect of a musical universe – from a character's personality, to the scope of the universe itself.

In *Morte di Borromini,* this multi-level treatment of time can be best exemplified by Sciarrino's use of bells (*Sonic Entity 5)*, which, as mimetic objects (*imitando le campane vere/* imitating real bells), clearly indicate each of the three specific points in time that Borromini refers to in the text.

For example, at the end of the first paragraph of the text, Borromini states, "*...e trattendomi così scrivendo col toccalapis sino alle tre ore di notte in circa./...*and continued writing as such, with *toccalapis* in hand, until almost three in the morning.*"* In the music, following the narration of this text [pg. 1], five bell tolls are heard [pg. 2]: two on B natural, and three on D#.

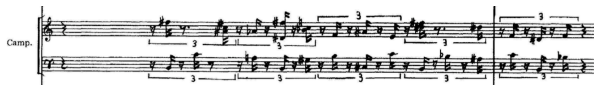
Later, when Borromini states, "*Verso le cinque in sei ore incirca, essendomi risvegliato.../*At around five or six, after having woken up again..." [p. 3/pg. 15], the bells sound for a second time [pg. 16], this time with six B naturals and one D#.



With this second iteration, Sciarrino confirms the representative function of each bell in both instances; the B natural acts as the large hand of a clock, showing the exact hour, while the D# acts like the small hand, suggesting an unspecified increment within the hour.

By drawing a literal connection between bells and time, Sciarrino opens up the possibility for time to be musically represented on both micro and macro levels.

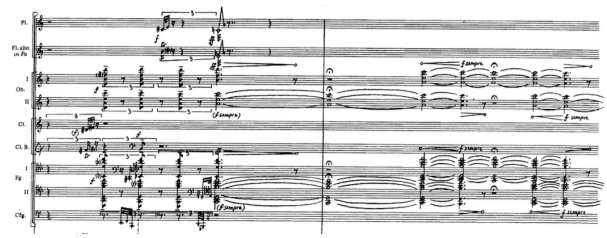
On a micro level, he uses time primarily to show character development. For instance, with Borromini's growing impatience in the absence of light [p. 4], his experience of time narrows and, and therefore so do the bells [pg. 40].



Their incessant, frantic clanging, as well as the dramatic developments in the surrounding anthropomorphic material (such as the vicious outbursts from what began as the drone), reflects Borromini's agony and desperation as he turns to violent, suicidal thoughts – represented by the only musical material yet to be introduced: the emergent, dissonant oboe multiphonic (*Sonic Entity 7*).

On a macro level, the *campane vere* serve as pillars in time, illuminating the entire temporal scope of the piece by providing structural signposts at three crucial moments in the musical narrative; (1) At the beginning of the narrative [pg. 2], setting the stage, (2) at Borromini's reawakening [pg. 16], providing a proportional relativity of time, and finally, (3) at the moment of Borromini's death, when the oboe multiphonic finally bursts forth, shining like an devastating beam of light, obliterating all other sound and

(eventually) voice [p. 5], thus releasing him from time [pg. 41-42].



As they exist outside of meter, these final bell tolls are meant to exist outside of time. Their timelessness carries the weight of their implication, by both the piece's title and by historical tradition – death; as with the loss of consciousness time ceases to exist, and we are transported back to the deathly removed perspective of the piece's opening, "*Io mi ritrovo cosi ferito da questa mattina dall'otto ore e mezzo in qua in circa.../* I find myself here, wounded on this morning since about half past eight."

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