

Morricone/Nicolai: The sound dimensions of a mysterious synergy*

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Placing the stylus in the groove and allowing the music in this box set to unleash its sonic vehemence, is like throwing a beam of light on that fuzzy phenomenon known as Italian library music. Over the last thirty years, library music has been surrounded by some sort of initiatic aura, thanks to the noteworthy work of "crate digging" and rediscovery done by labels, enthusiasts and collectors. In spite of all this, however, it is safe to say that very little is known about this practice from a historical standpoint, to the extent that researching it feels somewhat like deep diving into a "dark well"¹ — to borrow a fitting expression by Valerio Mattioli, who is among the few authors that have attempted to scratch the surface of this subject.

1. The context

The term library music (also stock, cue or production music) stands for incidental music composed and recorded for generic functional uses. This music is catalogued on the basis of recommendations for use or mood-setting features, and licensed for the most diverse tasks, usually in the fields of film, radio, advertising and videogaming. The prehistory of library music dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, at the dawn of mass society: music broadcast via telephone lines, collections of background music (Satie's famous "musique d'ameublement"), compiled scores for the silent cinema and so on. The relationship with the world of celluloid, and with the very origins of film music, soon became symbiotic: the first repertoires of ready-to-use cues (photoplay music) for the live accompaniment of silent films began to be available in the 1910s. With the transition to sound film, library music consolidated itself as an uninterrupted and somehow out-of-the-spotlight practice that continues to exist in the present day. If there was ever a thriving era for library music, it is precisely today: more than ever, licensed music is the daily bread and butter for TV sitcoms and reality shows, commercials, video games, apps, trailers, jingles, web series and for much of low budget cinema. The revival of "vintage" music libraries started around the end of last century. In the general "retromaniac" attitude well described by the critic Simon Reynolds,² US filmmakers who were passionate about genre cinema of the 1960s and 1970s rediscovered entire catalogues and included some of that music in their soundtracks, shining a new light on library music. The relaunch was also enhanced by well-known US TV series: one example among many is the very successful series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, by comedian Larry David (11 seasons broadcast from 2000 to today), which lines up a large number of tracks from Italian soundtracks and libraries, including the theme song "Frolic," that is none other than the track "Il barone rosso," composed by Luciano Michelini for Sergio Martino's film *La bellissima estate* ([The beautiful summer] 1974).

In the 1970s, Italy's was one of the liveliest scenes in the field of *musica per sonorizzazioni*, the native term for library music. But the history of Italian libraries, which can be traced back as early as the 1920s, is yet to be written. At its core there was a key interest group: music publishers, that is to say, the link between musicians, film productions, radio, television and the record industry. Aiming to make the highest profits from the film music they had under contract, music publishers began to target the record market since the 1960s. In the decade of the so-called golden age of Italian cinema, film music became a genre of its own, able to tag along and at times even outdo the popular music hits at the top of the charts. The breakthrough date was 1964, with the global success achieved by Sergio Leone's movie *A Fistful of Dollars* and its soundtrack, composed of course by Ennio Morricone.

¹ Valerio Mattioli, *Superonda. Storia segreta della musica italiana*, Baldini&Castoldi, Milano 2016, p. 498.

² Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop's Culture Addiction to Its Own Past*, Faber&Faber, London 2011.

A few years earlier, fuelled by the economic boom, the record industry had skyrocketed in Italy, eventually prevailing over solid field of sheet music publishing. Some of the music publishers who had been leading the previous film music production, set up record labels specialized in soundtrack albums. Bixio Edizioni Musicali, founded in the 1920s by Cesare Andrea Bixio — he himself an author of countless Italian evergreens of the first half of the century (above all "Parlami d'amore Mariù", released in 1932 by Mario Camerini's film *What Scoundrels Men Are!*) — started the Cinevox label in 1960. In 1959 the Campi brothers launched CAM (Creazioni Artistiche Musicali),³ which in 1971 branched out to form the sub-brand CmL, specialized in library music.⁴ In the meantime, RCA Italiana — which had merely imported the catalogue of its North America-based parent company throughout the 1950s — opened its own publishing branch in 1962 and soon established itself as the leading brand for Italian popular music.⁵ By 1968, Original Cast, RCA's sublabel devoted to film and library music — the very same to which we owe the publication of *Dimensioni sonore* — put out an impressive series of long-play hits. A similar, if less known path was followed by RCA's competitors Dischi Ricordi, which distributed the series Musicorama devoted to library music, and Fonit, which created Usignolo in 1970.⁶ Between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the following decade, labels specialized in library music proliferated, such as Canopo (later Flipper Music) founded by Romano Di Bari, Armando Sciascia's Phase 6 Super Stereo, Sermi Film (with the SR Records label), Cenacolo, Jump (with the sub-labels Jump Records and Music Scene), Leonardi (Dischi Montecarlo, Grand Prix, Leo, Lupus Records), Cometa, Beat Records and many others.⁷

Alongside this trend, one must mention the interesting case of film composers who decided to carve out an entrepreneurial niche, aiming in some way to control both the production and the economic facets of their own music. The leading name in this field was Piero Umiliani, who set up his own Soundworkshop studio in Rome and created a range of labels specializing in library music and easy listening, all under his direct responsibility.⁸ Umiliani's 1968 tune "Ma-nah Ma-nah" can be read as an emblematic example of the "life cycles" of a library music track: the piece was included in the soundtrack of Luigi Scattini's mondo-movie *Sweden: Heaven and Hell* (1968), migrated to a great deal of American TV shows and went on to become the very famous theme song of *The Muppet Show*. However, it is less known that various other film musicians took an interest in this trend towards "entrepreneurship," including the two artists to whom this box set is dedicated: Ennio Morricone and Bruno Nicolai. The latter was one of the founders of Gemelli, one of the most legendary labels in the field of library music,⁹ and of Edi-Pan, which is still active today. For his part Morricone, together with colleagues and friends Luis Bacalov, Piero Piccioni and Armando Trovajoli, and with the manager Enrico De Melis, founded Studio Ortophonic (today's Forum Music Village) in 1969 and General Music,¹⁰ a label specialized in soundtrack albums, which unsurprisingly would produce many of the titles of these composers until the acquisition of EMI. This synergetic and collaborative milieu

³ Vito Vita, *Musica solida. Storia dell'industria del vinile in Italia*, Miraggi Edizioni, Torino 2019, pp. 195-198.

⁴ David Hollander, *Unusual Sounds: The Hidden History of Library Music*, Anthology Editions, New York 2018, pp. 222-227. Roberto Calabretto, *Creazioni Artistiche Musicali and Italian Cinema after World War II*, in *The Soundtrack Album: Listening to Media*, ed. by Paul N. Reinsch and Laurel Westrup, Routledge, London/New York 2020, pp. 107-120.

⁵ Vita, *Musica solida*, p. 179. Ennio Melis, *Storia della RCA. La grande pentola*, Editrice Zona, Lavagna 2016.

⁶ Hollander, *Unusual Sounds*, p. 249.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-274.

⁸ Gianluca Tosi, *Mr. Mah-Na' Mah-Na'. Piero Umiliani e la sua musica*, Bloodbuster Edizioni, Milano 2016. Mattioli, *Superonda*, pp. 515-516. Hollander, *Unusual Sounds*, pp. 237-238.

⁹ Hollander, *Unusual Sounds*, p. 250.

¹⁰ Alessandro De Rosa, Ennio Morricone, *Ennio Morricone: In His Own Words*, translated by Maurizio Corbella, Oxford University Press, New York 2019, p. 101. Federico Biella, *Una famiglia e l'Ottava Arte. Interview to Paolo and Gianni Dell'Orso*, «Colonnese.it», 21 December 2009. At the same time Morricone and Bacalov also took part in the foundation of Parade label, with Vincenzo Micocci, Carlo Rossi, Nico Fidenco and Edoardo Vianello. See Vita, *Musica solida*, pp. 209-210.

brought forth one of the most stable and productive partnerships in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s that continues to be veiled in an aura of mystery: the partnership between Morricone and Nicolai.

II. Morricone/Nicolai partnership

The paths of Morricone and Nicolai first crossed while they were still students at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome. Nicolai is even credited for having played the piano in the piece Morricone composed for the final assignment of the Composition Class, the *Sonata for brass, timpani and pianoforte* (1953).¹¹ After graduation, they were both hired first at RAI (Italy's national broadcasting network), then at RCA, more or less covertly from their Maestro Goffredo Petrassi.

A skilled organist, pianist and harpsichord player, Nicolai worked as a session player at RCA Italiana, exactly in the same period when Morricone and Bacalov revolutionised the sound of Italian popular music as leading arrangers at the same label: it is thus easy to imagine Nicolai playing keyboards for songs arranged by Morricone. While Morricone's name gained recognition in the field of film music, Nicolai took a parallel path, combining the start of his activity as film composer with that of studio conductor, admired as he was for his ability to work in sync with the images.¹² Soon after the success of *A Fistful of Dollars* Morricone asked Nicolai to conduct his music in the recording studio,¹³ a role that Nicolai maintained, with very few exceptions, until 1974, when the two composers parted for good.

During those ten years their collaboration consolidated to such an extent that they even co-signed the scores of some films by Alberto De Martino between 1967 and 1974.¹⁴ *Dimensioni sonore*, released in 1972, fits perfectly within this synergic scenario. Although the records featured in *Dimensioni sonore* are credited alternatively to one and the other composer, the fact that each and every one of the 103 tracks in this box set are registered under both names in SIAE (the Italian copyright society) confirms that the bond between the two was decidedly solid. The same type of copyright registration was used for the two records that some consider the ideal follow-up of this box set (in other words, the unofficial volumes 11 and 12), namely Morricone's *Controfase* and Nicolai's *Espressioni*, both published by the label Gemelli in 1972-73.

Does this mean that they used to compose together? Morricone's categorical denial seems to leave no room for misinterpretation. His firmness should nonetheless be read against the backdrop of rumours regarding possible conflicts that arose between the two composers during the final stages of their collaboration. Morricone indignantly reacted against these allegations: "The author of an article I recently read claims that our friendship deteriorated because of those collaborations. Others wrote that we went through legal issues to ascertain the paternity of some stylistic solutions we had in common... some depicted Nicolai as my secret 'aid,' the one who ghostwrote some of my scores. Those are all unfounded claims, journalistic inventions!"¹⁵

My theory is that, at least for the tracks included in this box set and for the two albums published by Gemelli, not only did the decision to share their authorship spring from an established practice for their collaborations, but it also derived from the unusual working method at the basis of their composition of at least some of the tracks in this box set — an approach we could define as "organized (or pre-composed) improvisation."

III. Between composition and improvisation

¹¹ Sergio Miceli, *Morricone: la musica, il cinema*, Ricordi/Mucchi, Milano/Modena 1994, p. 356.

¹² See the conversation with Giorgio Carnini included in this booklet.

¹³ Morricone recounted the amusing anecdote behind this decision in De Rosa, *Morricone, Ennio Morricone: In His Own Words*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82-83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 82.

During the years of his collaboration with Nicolai, Morricone experimented with a compositional system which he described as "multiple scores" or "multipla," consisting of a sort of Thesaurus of brief non-thematic modular fragments, ready to fit into each other in different combinations to be decided by the composer (or indeed the conductor!) directly in the recording studio.¹⁶ This system, which in other words accounts for an improvised, performative choice of pre-composed material, allowed to concoct countless tone-colour solutions, iridescent mixtures, dissonant and suspended, atonal, modal, polytonal, polyrhythmic textures. This approach can be seen as representing a crucial step toward Morricone's definition of the philosophical and compositional principle of "dynamic immobility," which characterizes his aesthetic at large.¹⁷

The outcome of the "multiple scores" method can be appreciated, for example, in the soundtracks of Dario Argento's "Animal trilogy" (1970-71) and in various other film scores of that period. But only by listening to *Dimensioni sonore* in its entirety, can the systematic nature and the true expressive opportunities concealed in this compositional/improvisational approach manifest themselves. From the very first tracks that open Volume 1, it becomes clear that this box set offers an endless number of cases of this kind. This also enables us to frame Morricone and Nicolai's partnership under a different light. It may be that their choice of sharing the authorship on these tracks stemmed from their acknowledgement that the conductor plays a fundamental role in bringing the tracks to achieve their final configuration, as confirmed by musicians who experienced these methodologies first hand.¹⁸ At the same time, we cannot rule out that Nicolai himself may have composed some of the modules. As Bruno Battisti D'Amario recalls — himself a regular performer at these sessions, whose unmistakable guitar sound can be found in tracks like "Fasi", "Poligoni", "Anagramma" on Volume 1, "Antologia" on Volume 2 and countless others — Nicolai was no stranger to adopting these kinds of techniques in other library music records.¹⁹

Despite the lack of incontrovertible evidence, we can safely affirm that among the session players of *Dimensioni sonore*, besides the aforementioned D'Amario, were Enzo Restuccia on drums and Giorgio Carnini on organ.²⁰ That would be part of the regular rhythm section of RCA popular and film music sessions in those years, as well as at RAI and in dozens of other film music contexts. These musicians were regular collaborators of Morricone's film music as well as Nicolai's, and it is likely that Morricone, who had the authority to pick his own trusted collaborators in sessions, worked with them even on this occasion. The other undeniable presence in this box set is that of Edda Dell'Orso on vocals. In the classical orchestral roles, we can most probably find Franco Tamponi, first violin of the RCA ensembles in those years and a close collaborator of Morricone, and perhaps Dino Asciolla in the tracks that assign a central role to the viola.²¹ While Giorgio Carnini, at that time already working with Moog and Arp 2600,²² could well have been involved in playing the synthesizer, another recurring element in almost all tracks, one can recognize the machinery-like roar in the guise of a "milling cutter" or "press" which was typical of the Synket, the handcrafted synthesizer developed by Paolo Ketoff in 1964. The Synket had already been used in several soundtracks by Ennio Morricone and Egisto Macchi and the "press effect" in particular strikingly recalls the timbre used in Elio Petri's *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (1971).²³ One of the few Synket performers at the time was

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 169-170. See Miceli, *Morricone: la musica, il cinema*, pp. 293-294. See also the conversations with Bruno Battisti D'Amario and Giorgio Carnini included in this booklet.

¹⁷ De Rosa, Morricone, *Morricone: In His Own Words*, pp. 216-221.

¹⁸ The testimonies of Carnini and Battisti D'Amario that I have collected converge on this.

¹⁹ See the conversation with Bruno Battisti D'Amario included in this booklet.

²⁰ See the conversations with Battisti D'Amario and Carnini included in this booklet.

²¹ As is well known, Asciolla is the dedicatee of Morricone's composition *Suoni per Dino* (1969), recorded by the violist for General Music in 1970. Asciolla he is also credited with Franco Tamponi in the personnel of *Requiem per un destino*, included in the same General Music LP, and in various other compositions of Luis Bacalov included in *Pitturamusica* (General Music, 1971, reissued by Soave in 2020).

²² See the conversation with Carnini included in this booklet.

²³ Miceli, *Morricone: la musica, il cinema*, p. 247.

Walter Bianchi, a regular collaborator of Macchi and Morricone in this role, and of course also a member of the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza (GINC).²⁴

After all, the “multipla” processing and the collaboration between Morricone and Nicolai go hand in hand with the collective experience of GINC, not merely in chronological terms, but on a level which is deeply intertwined with the domain of library music. On the one hand, we must not forget that Morricone, Nicolai and Fiorenzo Carpi joined, albeit only briefly at the end of the 1960s,²⁵ the cooperative experience of Studio R7, founded by GINC pillars such as Branchi, Franco Evangelisti and Macchi (in addition to composers Domenico Guaccero and Gino Marinuzzi Jr., physicist Guido Guiducci and the ever present Ketoff). Later Carpi, Macchi, Morricone and Nicolai would found Studio M4. One of the programmatic aims of Studio R7, which gathered the electronic and studio equipment owned by the composers involved, was to provide external services (in the form of recording expertise as well as technical-acoustic-compositional skills) for film and TV sonorization: such an entrepreneurial approach is not unrelated, and above all it is contemporary, to what has been described in the previous paragraph.²⁶ On a different note, one should not forget that D'Amario and Restuccia themselves took part in the GINC's offshoot, launched with the project "The Feed-Back" (with the homonymous LP in 1970, not by chance produced by RCA), whose line-up was replicated almost entirely for the soundtrack of Vittorio Sindoni's film *E se per caso una mattina...* ([What if by chance one morning...] 1972). Part of this soundtrack ended up in the "apocryphal" albums *Niente* and *Eroina* (published posthumously by Cometa in 2010 and 2011). Finally, Enzo G. Castellari's film *Cold Eyes of Fear* came out in 1971, therefore essentially at the same time of the sessions for *Dimensioni sonore*: its soundtrack is officially credited to Morricone but is actually registered also in the names of Branchi, D'Amario and Nicolai (and not to GINC, as hinted in the credits of the soundtrack album published by Point Records in 1996 and its subsequent reissues). Putting all these details together, we should be able to picture the degree of permeability between all these experiences, upon which there is still much to reflect.²⁷

IV. (Not only) Music for imagination

As for the recording concept of this box set, the details about the making of *Dimensioni sonore* are bound to remain lost in the mist of time, at least until when (if ever) documentary evidence will emerge to dispel doubts. In a flourishing time for library music production, as was the one described here, it seems rather bizarre that ten records of such quality, linked to names of utmost importance on the international scene, were not intended to reach a wide commercial audience. My hypothesis is that the collection was initially designed for sale, but for some reason (perhaps contractual?) it was not marketed and remained confined to the libraries of TV networks. Two details would support this theory. The first, and in my opinion the most crucial one, is that in lieu of liner notes, a series of *unpublished* texts were commissioned to leading filmmakers, such as Leone, Montaldo, Pasolini, Petri and Pontecorvo.²⁸ An enterprise of such cultural ambition would be difficult to understand except for the desire to appeal to a potentially larger audience. The second detail is to have intentionally based

²⁴ Maurizio Corbella, *Paolo Ketoff e le origini cinematografiche della musica elettronica romana*, «AAA-TAC» 6, 2009, pp. 65-75.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.* and Luigino Pizzaleo, *Musica elettroacustica a Roma. Gli anni Sessanta*, Edizioni Accademiche Italiane, Saarbrücken 2014.

²⁶ The involvement of Studio R7 is corroborated by the track “Credo” of the album *Improvisationen*, by Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza (Deutsche Grammophon, 1969) and by the TV drama *Jekyll* by Giorgio Albertazzi, presented at the Prix Italia in 1969 and broadcast in RAI, with music by Marinuzzi Jr. See Maurizio Corbella, *Gino Marinuzzi Jr: Electronics and Early Multimedia Mentality in Italy*, «Musica/Tecnologia» 8-9 (2015), pp. 95-133.

²⁷ I wish to thank Maurizio Farina for the invaluable exchanges we've had around this subject.

²⁸ It was Morricone himself who asked the filmmakers to write a contribution for the collection, as he himself reported. See Ennio Morricone, Sergio Miceli, *Composing for the cinema: The Theory and Praxis of Film Music*, translated by Gillian B. Anderson, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham 2013, pp. 90-91.

the editorial concept on the idea, made explicit in the subtitle, of "Music for images and imagination" — therefore not tracks accompanied by pragmatic usage suggestions for musical consultants, but one-word titles evoking abstract concepts, to encourage associative processes in the listener, anticipating by a few years cult records of ambient music, such as *Music for Films* by Brian Eno (1978). Mattioli rightly points out that, "The moment when library music becomes even more interesting is [...] when it forgoes any descriptive intent and decides to refer to nothing but itself: a sort of metamusic or 'music on music,' a sort of imaginary soundtrack for the nothingness».²⁹ Cases like this one are far from rare in the Italian discography of the time, and that is exactly why it stands to reason that *Dimensioni sonore* aspired to the role of crown jewel of this genre.

As we cannot solve the enigma around the material reasons behind this box set, and even less can we summarize in a few words the musical characteristics of over a hundred tracks, it is still useful to trace some of the potential stylistic models to which these tracks seem to refer. If the predominant and surprisingly cohesive general mood of this music is that of tension, each time turning into suspense, expectation or anguish, some features typical of Morricone's style of the time emerge. Tracks such as "Proporzionale" (vol. 1), "Costante" (vol. 3), "Diagramma" (vol. 4), can be related, in terms of the treatment of strings, voice and percussion, to the atonal atmospheres of films such as Petri's *A Quiet Place in the Country* (1968) — whose soundtrack in turn took up the Darmstadt composition *Musica per undici violini* (1958) and included the improvised atmospheres of the GINC³⁰ — and Vittorio De Seta's *Un uomo a metà* ([A man in half] 1966) — whose music was reworked for the ballet *Requiem per un destino* (its recording was conducted by Nicolai in 1970). The jazz-rock dynamism in tracks such as "Antitesi" (vol. 1) recalls atmospheres found for example in Argento's trilogy, in *Cold Eyes of Fear* or in Massimo Dallamano's *What Have You Done to Solange?* (1972). In "Poligoni" and "Conseguenze" (vol. 1), "Evoluzioni" (vol. 2), "Prismatico" (vol. 4) one can hear Latin rhythms that seem to propose a tainted version of contemporary easy listening. Then there is a whole range of variations on what could be called the "Psycho model," noticeable in the strings accents that are heard in "Proporzionale" (vol. 1), "Fenomeni" (vol. 2), "Convergenze" (vol. 3), "Studio" (vol. 5, a track which, for its duration and "unusual" title, can arguably be related to a concert composition), "Segmenti" (vol. 7), "Spettro" (vol. 10).

The predominantly abstract inspiration of these tracks did not prevent some of them from being actually used for TV soundtracks: the series *Nessuno deve sapere* [No one must know], directed by Mario Landi, set in the Crotona area and broadcast in 6 episodes in 1973, features a soundtrack curated by Fernando (or Ferdinando) Tromby, credited in other projects as a musical assistant at RCA.³¹ The soundtrack draws on various music from this box set, including "Fasi" (vol. 1), "Convergenze" (vol. 3), "Spirali" (vol. 6), "Espressioni" (vol. 6), "Gravitazione" (vol. 7), "Frequenza" (vol. 7), "Molecole" (vol. 8), "Diagonali" (vol. 10); the Italian edition of the sci-fi cult series *Spazio 1999*, originating in the UK (with the title *Space: 1999* and music by Barry Gray) but co-produced by RAI, uses "Fasi" and "Proporzionale" (vol. 1), "Convergenze" e "Costante" (vol. 3), "Interposizione" and "Studio" (vol. 5), and "Parallasse" (vol. 8), alongside other music by Morricone.³² Uses of tracks from *Dimensioni sonore*, although rare, are also documented later, as is the case of "Commutativo" (vol. 9), included in the film *Only One Survived* (1991) by Folco Quilici, under the new title "Hunters of the Forecastle."³³ Now that it is possible to listen to this collection in its entirety, it is likely that further details will come up about the usage of these tracks in movies and TV series.

²⁹ Mattioli, *Superonda*, p. 512.

³⁰ See Maurizio Corbella, *Nuove Consonanze: corpo, suono e performance in "Un tranquillo posto di campagna" di Elio Petri*, in *La musica fra testo, performance e media. Forme e concetti dell'esperienza musicale*, curated by Alessandro Cecchi, NeoClassica, Roma 2019, pp. 275-306.

³¹ For example, in the record edition of Ennio Morricone's soundtrack for *Città violenta* (RCA, 1970), conducted, needless to say, by Nicolai.

³² See the double LP of the soundtrack: Ennio Morricone, *Space: 1999*, published by Penta Music in 2016.

³³ Ennio Morricone, *Cacciatori di navi*, RCA Original Cast, 1991.

Taking the opportunity of this important record release, these notes have had no other ambition than to outline the contours of a story that remains still largely obscure, especially with regard to the figure and the artistic output of Bruno Nicolai, one of the most underrated and forgotten personalities of Italian music of the late twentieth century. It is entirely plausible that these lines are not exempt from some inaccuracies, but we just have to hope that new testimonies, and with them new certainties, will emerge, perhaps stimulated by these reflections.

(translation: Daniela Travaglini)