

Giuliano Bracci

Childhood and new music

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Giuliano Bracci – Childhood and new music

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Amsterdam, 16th February 2012

Giuliano Bracci

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Score of 1st Rehearsal: 11.01.2011

Score of 2nd Rehearsal: 15.02.2011

Score of 3rd Rehearsal: 01.03.2011

Score of *Sempre hai occhi segreti*

Introduction

Teaching experiences

During my studies in Italy at university and in conservatory I worked as a teacher in a kindergarten and in a music school: I worked in a kindergarten for five years, from 1999 to 2004, my work there was not related with music but for one year. After that I become a music teacher in the Scuola Popolare di Musica di Testaccio, a music school in Rome.

I worked in the children's department for four years, from 2004 to 2008. During my years of teaching at the Scuola Popolare di Musica di Testaccio, I worked as a guitar teacher. I gave individual lessons and I taught a course of guitar with a group of four children from 4 to 7 years old.

This course was meant to be a first approach to an instrument after preparatory courses, and before the choice for an instrument to study in individual classes. After this year the students had to decide if they would keep going with studying the guitar, or choose another instrument. So this was a first step towards a technical approach on the instrument, in a context in which the student starts to feel the technique as a need to produce sounds, to play together, to coordinate and interact with others.

In these classes I focused especially on music games centred on the exploration of reciprocal listening, the discovery of the instrument, improvisation, instant composition practices and in different ways of relating to each other through sound. Listening, intended not in a merely physical meaning, is a central faculty in music and in human relationships. I think about music pedagogy as the education of listening.

During those years I was used to write pieces for my students, to challenge them together during the lessons, to ask them to create small pieces at home, trying also to notate them. This was also a good way for the student to explore the instrument following his own desires and tastes and to learn how to write and read, to face new musical matters, to discover through the use of an invented notation the conventional way of reading and writing music.

At that time my own studies and activity as a composer were not related with this experience if not in a very indirect way. I had the tendency to keep separated the activity of composing and the one of music teacher. All the games I invented for (and with) the students focused on interaction and listening were also for me a discovery and a way of learning but they didn't become the subject of any work of contemporary music for adult and professional performers that I was writing.

Zazie

In the summer of 2009 I took part in a workshop with the composer Stefano Gervasoni in Monterubbiano, a small town on the east coast of Italy. There was the possibility of writing for the students of an instrument, and some of them were children. I wrote a piece for an eleven years old girl who played the violin. The title *Zazie* refers to the young girl, of the same age of my violinist, in the novel by Raymond Queneau who visits Paris for the first time. That was the first occasion that I had to write for children in the shoes of composer of contemporary music. It was an important experience for me, and was an opportunity to start thinking about the role of childhood in my music.

The score of *Zazie* is written in open notation, non-traditional techniques and sounds are used. Every gesture is chosen following the technical abilities and the technical wishes of the young interpreter.

Tra gli alberi

In the summer of 2010, just before I moved to the Netherlands, I participated again in the workshop of Stefano Gervasoni, and that was the occasion to keep going on the same direction of the previous year. I worked with Beatrice Gamba and Silvia Vendrame, two violinists who were nine and eleven years old and at the beginning of their studies. For and with them I compose *Tra gli alberi*.

I spent the first meetings with the children choosing the sounds, and finding ways for them to interact and pass from one sound situation to an-

other. There was no score. What I wrote on the paper was only to help me to remember what we had found out, to build the form of the piece and to teach them the succession of the musical actions.

Picture No. 1: two pages of *Tra gli alberi*

Handwritten musical score for "L'Espresso" by Luigi Nono. The score is written on three systems of staves. The first system has two staves: the top staff is for Soprano (S) and the bottom for Bass (B). The second system also has two staves: the top for Soprano (S) and the bottom for Bass (B). The third system has two staves: the top for Soprano (S) and the bottom for Bass (B). The music is in 4/4 time. The first system shows a vocal melody with lyrics "op (gelli)" and a bass line with lyrics "fiume sulla lava". The second system shows a vocal melody with lyrics "etc (libero)" and a bass line with lyrics "etc (libero)". The third system shows a vocal melody with lyrics "etc (libero)" and a bass line with lyrics "etc (libero)".

As a game they discovered the sounds that after we wanted to use and we also tried out different ways of interacting. In the piece the succession of musical gestures is fixed, but the timing is free and it is completely by the choice of the players. They learned the piece as a musical story, with episodes named with sounds produced by the nature or animals, as the

wind through the leaves, or the sound of crickets and wild boars; the title *tra gli alberi* means *among the trees*.

The video recording of the concert was filmed by Massimo Gamba (Beatrice's dad) at the Auditorium San Francesco in Monterubbiano. As I previously explained, the score is not properly a score, and I prefer to present it as it is instead of writing it in a different way.

Tra gli alberi was a step forward for me. My previous experience as a music teacher and the role of composer were here melted and happily confused. The young players had an important role as authors of the piece, and I felt they were playing without the usual distance between the player and the score. This distance, and how to get rid of it, has always had an important role in my musical thoughts. I found out that it is often related to a text and to a defined authorship.

This two works were an opportunity to reflect on the role of the composer, and his relation with the interpreters. I didn't want to consider *Zazie* and *Tra gli alberi* islands in my compositional experience, but rather as a starting point for personal research. I wanted to find out if these two works could be considered as models in completely different contexts.

Music for children and new ways of listening

Music for children has a long tradition. Composers as Bach, Schumann, Bartók, Kurtág, Lachenmann and Gubaidulina wrote music dedicated to childhood. The first goal of this literature is to teach an instrument and its technique, but with and beyond this an idea of music is transmitted. New music needs new ears: musicians (and listeners) who can face new ways of listening, sounds that are still unknown and not understood.

In late 18th Century Friedrich Schiller, as many philosophers and poets before him, thought that art had a central role in society. In his epistolary series, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that can be read as responses to Kant's moral philosophy, he writes that the main role of art was the education of the taste.¹ Taste here is to be intended as *a sense that we have in common*, and that we use *to think from the standpoint of everyone else*.² Taste is what we use when we face somebody or something that we don't understand. In the situations in which we don't have rules to judge because the rules don't fix with the new reality, with what is stranger. It is the sense that allow us to have new encounters.³

Luigi Nono in an essay of 1983 titled “The error as necessity” wrote about the difficulty of listening what is different and unknown:

«It is very difficult to listen, in the silence, *to the others*.

To other thoughts, other noises, other sonorities, other ideas.

When we listen often we try to find ourselves in the others. To find again our mechanisms, system, rationalism, in the other. [...]

Instead of listening to the silence, instead of listening to the others, we

1 Schiller 1795.

2 Kant 1790. In particular read § 40, titled “Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*”: «[...] However, by the name *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a *public sense*, i.e., a critical faculty which in its reflective act *takes account* (a priori) *of the mode of representation of everyone else*, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement. This is accomplished by weighing the judgement, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate». (Italic in the text is mine).

3 Cfr. Arendt 1982. In these lectures Hanna Arendt applies Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment within the sphere of political philosophy.

hope to listen once more to ourselves. It is a wall against the thoughts, against everything that is not possible, not yet, to explain. [...]

Listening to music. It is very difficult.»⁴

New music and music for children under this perspective are strictly related. Experimental pedagogy and contemporary art share a goal: to achieve a new sight on reality, to learn new ways of listening. Schiller's point of view on art and aesthetic education as a basis for the society of tomorrow is especially valid on art dedicated to children.

The music for children of composers such as Béla Bartók and György Kurtág is strongly connected with their primary activity as composers, and looking there we can find their idea of the musician of tomorrow, and many of their reasons of making art in general. In the foreword of the first four volumes of his *Játékok*, pedagogical pieces for piano (two and four hands), György Kurtág writes:

«The idea of composing Játékok was suggested by children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano still means a toy. They experiment with it, caress it, attack it and run their fingers over it. They pile up seemingly disconnected sounds, and if this happens to arouse their musical instinct they look consciously for some of the harmonies found by chance and keep repeating them. Thus, this series does not provide a tutor, nor does it simply stand as a collection of pieces. It is possibly for experimenting and not for learning “to play the piano”. Pleasure in playing. [...] Playing is just playing. It

4 Nono 1983. «Molto difficile ascoltare, nel silenzio, *gli altri*. Altri pensieri, altri rumori, altre sonorità, altre idee. Quando si ascolta si cerca spesso di ritrovare se stesso negli altri. Ritrovare i propri meccanismi, sistema, razionalismo, nell'altro. [...] Invece di ascoltare il silenzio, invece di ascoltare gli altri, si spera di ascoltare ancora una volta se stessi. È un muro contro i pensieri, contro ciò che non è possibile, oggi ancora, spiegare. [...] Ascoltare la musica. È molto difficile.»

requires a great deal of freedom and initiative from the performer. [...] Let us tackle bravely even the most difficult task without being afraid of making mistakes: we should try to create valid proportions, unity and continuity out of the long and short values - just for our own pleasure!»⁵

5 Kurtág 1973-2010. (Italic in the text is mine).

New music and childhood

I write

Erase

Rewrite

Erase again

And then a poppy blooms ⁶

The Nieuw Ensemble Composers' Practicum

In September 2010 I moved to Amsterdam to study with Richard Ayres at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam. He supported the idea of thinking of these previous experiences as a subject to develop and not to let them be isolated in my writing experience. I wanted to know if and how it was possible for me to integrate my experience of writing and working with children in my writing practice as a composer for professional musicians. So this is the theme of my Masters Research and I dedicated to this goal my participation to the Practicum for Composers of Nieuw Ensemble in my first year at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam.

⁶ One of the last haikus by Katsushika Hokusai.

The Nieuw Ensemble Composers' Practicum is a one year project for nine students of composition. Every composer had three rehearsals to try out sketches and to experiment with the musicians of the ensemble. These appointments took place between January and March 2011. They were long before the final concert, so we could use them as opportunities for real experiments, without being tense for an imminent public performance, or in a hurry to meet a deadline. After these workshops we had more time to write a piece to be performed in June 2011. The instrumentation of the ensemble is: flute, oboe, clarinet, mandolin, guitar, harp, violin, viola, cello, double-bass.

It was for me the occasion to go deeper into the link between my compositional research *for concert halls* and my research in music for childhood. Experimental pedagogy and contemporary art are two faces of a work on the education of listening, in a wide sense. The conditions of possibility for a new music literature for children are deeply related to the condition of possibility of art: the disposition to encounter something new and unknown.

Working the whole academic year, under the supervision of Richard Ayres, firstly on the sketches, and then on the piece for the Nieuw Ensemble, has also been the occasion to reflect on an aspect of my music that were hidden to my eyes and to which this experience gave rise.

11.01.2011 As a game of childhood

The rehearsals with the Nieuw Ensemble start on January, the first step of my experiments is to ask the musician to play a transcription of *Tra gli alberi* and find out how and why it is different, I want to observe the piece

in this new context.

Here the musicians are not children, they have explored and they know their instruments very well. They are not two but twelve plus a conductor and to play new music is their job. The main elements that made *Tra gli alberi* a special experience for two children are not here, so I expect this experiment to be in a way a failure, but what is important here is to define what can be saved and what doesn't work at all.

In this first rehearsal I want to try out different kind of relations and interactions between the musicians and between the musicians and the conductor. I want to see if (and how) it is possible to mix moments with a game attitude in which musicians of the ensemble react one to one another with or without conductor following the score with moments in which the piece is normally conducted and the musicians read their own part.

In the Sketch No.1, from page 1 to 3, the musicians play without conductor, react to signals and read from the score. The signals are highlighted in the score by a square that I have coloured in the version that I have brought to the rehearsal. Events start and stop following the signal of one musician who at that moment leads the game. Page 4 is conducted and it is traditionally notated. This sketch has a second version with the few bars in $\frac{3}{4}$ on page 3 conducted; here the conductor takes the tempo from the harp, so he is in fact just meant to be another player.

In Sketch No. 2 everything is notated and conducted. The music of the first pages is the same of Sketch No.1, but there is no longer the attitude of playing a game, and no space for free interaction. Score and parts are traditionally notated.

The following pictures are an example of the same music notated in different ways.

Picture No. 2: a page from Sketch No.1:

Strings without pedals: G# C# D# E# F# G# A#
D# C# B#

Hp. *f* on the last sound of piano

Pno. *mf* fingernails on white keys, palm up (without press them) *gliss.* *gliss.* repeat

Perc. *mf* GLOCK *mf* freely play tremolos with brushes repeat

Strings

ALL THE STRINGS
 bow on the body of the instrument (light)
 and left hand pizz over the nut (*pp* - freely choose the strings)

Picture No. 3: a page from Sketch No.2:

Gtr. *pp*

Hp. *mf*

Pno. *f* *finger tips slide on black keys, without press them*

Perc. *mf* GLOCK *brushes*

Vln. *pp* *gliss. and* *gliss. over the nut*

Vla. *pp* *gliss. over the nut* *gliss. over the nut*

Vc. *pp* *gliss. over the nut* *gliss. over the nut*

Db. *pp* *gliss. over the nut* *gliss. over the nut*

ALL THE STRINGS
 bow on the body of the instrument (dark rattle)
 and left hand pizz over the nut (*pp* - freely choose the strings)

After first rehearsal

The most interesting aspect of the rehearsal was the difference between the first pages of the two sketches, the music was the same but differently notated. So was different the timing and the musicians' attitude.

In the second and conducted version, the sound was more rich and articulated, as was the notation. Here the musicians were surer, and with the presence of the conductor could concentrate completely on their own part.

In the non-conducted version there was more tension in the perception of time, and uncertainty about what to do, or what should happen next. If I was looking for an playfulness or amusement, I didn't find it.

I thought that, for the following rehearsal, I should create a better game. But what makes of a game a game? A game, if it is interesting, has maybe to be a bit complex, so that what happens has to be unpredictable to both the players and the public. At the same time it has to be obvious to the listener that it is a game, and so it also has to be predictable. A game is never completely defined by its rules; what is not said by the rules is what makes the game a game and not a procedure.⁷

A game also has something to do with virtuosity: there should be the possibility of things going wrong, as if watching to an acrobat walking on a rope, or perhaps listening the musicians of an orchestra playing the solos of Ravel's *Bolero*.

⁷ About the question of what a game is and what does to follow a rule means cfr. Wittgenstein 1951.

15.02.2011 Ritornelli

For the second rehearsal I wrote Sketch No. 3. The first page is a game of coordination. All the cues are given by the strings players, and, every time the page is repeated new layers are added. As in the previous rehearsal the signals are highlighted in the score by squares, musicians follow the score and react to the signals of the players who lead the game at that moment. Here I want to try out a more articulated game, find out which are the differences with Sketches No. 1 and No. 2 of the previous rehearsal: see if it is more involving for the players and for the listener, listen what happens to the sound. The first page is meant to be repeated six times, every time with some differences, in the instrumentation or in the tempo. I also want to see if, with repetition, the game becomes recognizable, if it is possible for the musicians to start to play around with it.

From page 2 this sketch has conducted parts in which every musician has his own part and then there are spots that are again non-conducted. I am interested in the contrast between conducted and non-conducted parts, I want it to be one of the main ideas to explore in my piece. So while experimenting without conductor I am also trying out how the different sections could be connected, in a meaningful way and without having a gap in the music.

Picture No. 4: the first page of Sketch No. 3:

RITORNELLO (repetitions)

1. only strings, fast
2. only strings, faster
3. 5 piano and percussion (a bit slower)
4. 5 strings (faster)
5. strings 4 but faster
6. only strings - the others play pag. n. 7

notes:

- Travis start and stop following the signals of one musician that in that moment lead the game.
- Signals are highlighted by a square (in the parts the signals to follow are indicated)
- piano music to discontinue
- chimpanzee music to violin
- violin and phallic music, must to call
- (only at the very end of the page they stop with violin)

SKETCH NO. 3
NE 15.02.2011

notes for strings

- 1. in every repetition there is a different kind of left hand game
- 2. [—] means that repeated 1/2 page

left hand game

1. of repetition (very close to the ear)
2. over the bridge
3. middle of piano
4. of repetition (very close to the ear)
5. over the bridge
6. middle of piano

Sketch No. 3
Giuliano Bracci
Autumn, Autumn 2011

After second rehearsal

This rehearsal was mainly centred on the first page of the Sketch No. 3. I built a complex game but it was not so interesting to my ears.

There was a certain complexity of coordination in it but the sound didn't reflect the articulation of the score. The score is over-articulated: there is not a specific musical meaning into the coordination required among the musicians.

A second aspect that didn't satisfied my expectations is the univocal suc-

cession of the events. A complex interaction in this case doesn't produce ambiguity and surprises. Here the music is not something it is possible to play around with.

The coordination of this game is at the same time too complex and too univocal. It needs to be simpler and more open.

At this point of my research I have to rethink my goals. Is what I was looking for what I should look for in the next steps? On what should the next experiments be focused?

The problem in this rehearsal was not the difficulty of the coordination: I guess that what makes the musicians involved is the music and its quality, beyond the game, whatever *music* could mean.

A score is like a treasure map, it can be well or bad notated, it can be easy to understand or not, but if you want somebody to take time and dig up a treasure a map is not enough. Somewhere there should be a treasure and the map should be convincing first of all of its existence.

The first page of my Sketch No. 2 is a map without a treasure, so notation and coordination become a secondary aspect. I cannot ask anybody to dig more or better if nothing precious is hidden underground.

If I think of what has been special for me in *Tra gli alberi*, the starting point of my research, was not the amusement of the musical game. There the treasure was not the playfulness.

The children playing the violin were not only *having fun*, their discovery was the sound as something that emerge from a relation, from a reciprocal listening. For the next rehearsal I should have finally concentrate on the music.

01.03.2011 Non ci sono segreti

This last rehearsal is very important for me, it is the last opportunity to try out things with the ensemble without the pressure of the concert. For the previous meetings I wrote short sketches to experiment specific things, whereas for this time I wrote a long sketch of ten minutes.

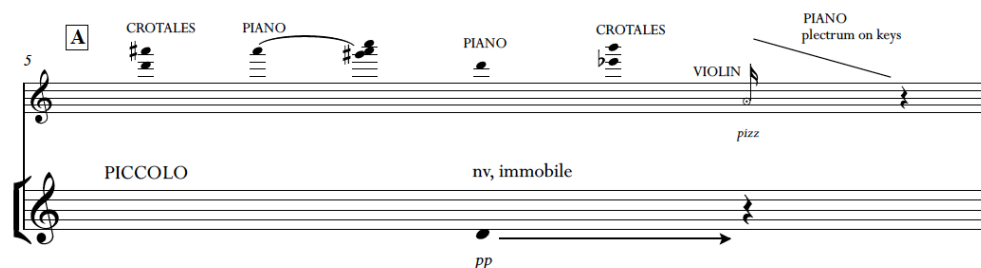
Here I need to have a larger view on the whole piece: I want to try out the coexistence of conducted and non-conducted parts, check out what is the effect of this alternation on the form of an whole piece.

I will pay attention on how me as a listener and the musicians perceive and control the timing of the music.

I want to solve the problem of the preparation of the parts for non-conducted sections: in the non-conducted parts the score is notated as in the previous rehearsals, but for what concerns the parts, I realized that moving from parts to score and vice-versa would be confusing and very unpractical for the musicians. The number of pages per performer also would become a problem in terms of page turnings.

For this rehearsal the musicians will have normal parts: in the non-conducted parts I wrote an extra staff with the succession of all the cues to be followed and the name of the instrument to be followed, so they are all clearly readable. When the musician has to give a cue in the extra staff there are indicated the instruments who react to it, their names are highlighted with a square so to distinguish it from the cues that are to be followed because given by someone else.

Picture No. 5: an example from the part of Piccolo



After third rehearsal

This last rehearsal gave me some answers: the passage from conducted to non-conducted sections was not a problem, it worked from a musical point of view and the notation was much better than in the previous meetings, and about this I felt released.

I was not happy with the general form of this sketch, but this was not the goal of the experiment. This is something important for the piece to be presented in concert in June.

I discussed a lot with Richard Ayres about the matter that conducted parts were not in strong contrast with the non-conducted ones. The question was if the nature of the music wasn't almost the same.

I feel that time flows in a different and more tensed way in the non-conducted parts, when nobody knows when the next note will come but one musician. The expectation allows the music to be more empty and silent.

But on the other hand it is true that conducted parts don't sound as

doubtless conducted. This shown me an aspect of the music I was writing and of most of my previous works: its nature of *non-conducted music*, also when played with a conductor. I felt this as an important awareness to achieve.

With this last session the experiments were finished. I had other three months to write a piece for the ensemble.

Sempre hai occhi segreti

*To see a landscape as it is when I am not there.*⁸

It was not easy after months of writing experiments to start finally with the real piece. I wanted my final work to be the result of all the investigations and the experiences of the project with the Nieuw Ensemble but also a self-standing piece. I felt that one of the risks was to write a kind of report of all the experiments.

I learned a lot from the whole experience of the Composers' Practicum and from all my experiments. At the end I had clear ideas about how to deal with coordination and interaction among the musicians, and I had technical solutions for the transitions between conducted and non-conducted parts. During the workshops I also prepared and defined my palette with many instrumental colours that I planned to use. But all the achieved results were a starting point, and not yet the music.

I had to reconsider all the route under a poetic light. The experiments gave many answers, and I wanted the final work not to be assertive but to maintain the interrogative character that animated my research.

⁸ Weil 1947.

I took some time to reach some distance from the music and I focused myself on the feelings of *Tra gli alberi* and on the impressions from the rehearsals, I attempted to give rise to the poetic background that was hidden behind all my experiments and tryouts.

These thoughts and feelings are mainly related to a few texts: a poem by Cesare Pavese and two aphorisms by Simone Weil and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The title of the piece, *Sempre hai occhi segreti*, is a verse from a poem that Pavese wrote in Rome in 1945⁹, it means *you have always secret eyes*. Eyes are for me related with the secret game of glimpses that is played in the piece.

The second thought comes from Friedrich Nietzsche who in *The Dawn* writes about music:

«But I call innocent music that which thinks only of itself and believes only in itself, and which on account of itself has forgotten the world at large this spontaneous expression of the most profound solitude which speaks of itself and with itself, and has entirely forgotten that there are listeners, effects, misunderstandings and failures in the world outside».¹⁰

This image of oblivion of the world outside is strongly related for me with the image of children playing among themselves, and I was fascinated by the idea of a music that can be closed among the players and that can move towards outside this circle. I thought this movement could have been realized with the transitions from non-conducted to conducted sections. I was not looking for sharp passages and contrasts but for a smooth movement of the music and for different degrees of its openness.

9 Pavese 1951.

Sempre vieni dal mare/ e ne hai la voce roca,/sempre hai occhi segreti/ d'acqua viva tra i rovi,/ e fronte bassa, come/ cielo basso di nubi./ Ogni volta rivivi/ come una cosa antica/ e selvaggia, che il cuore/ già sapeva e si serra.

10 Nietzsche 1879-81, §255.

The idea of Simone Weil: «To see a landscape as it is when I am not there», also quoted at the beginning of this paragraph¹¹ is the third image and it expresses in a way the point of view of the listeners in front of the children games.

11 Cfr. note no. 4.

Info on the workshops, concerts and recording

Concerts:

10.06.2011 - Amsterdam Composers' Festival, Haitinkzaal, Conservatorium of Amsterdam.

12.06.2011 - Korzo Theatre, Den Haag.

Nieuw Ensemble:

Harrie Starreveld, flute; Ernest Rombout, oboe; Arjan Kappers, clarinet; Hans Wesseling, mandolin; Helenus de Rijke, guitar; Ernestine Stoop, harp; John Snijders, piano; Herman Halewijn, percussion; Emi Ohi Resnick, Marijke van Kooten, violin; Frank Brakkee, viola; Jeroen den Herder, cello; Dario Calderone, double bass.

Conductor: Lucas Vis

Artistic director: Joël Bons

Guest Teachers: Willem Jeths, Yannis Kyriakides.

Organization: Caio Amon, Jasper Berben.

Audio:

Recorded live at Composers' Festival, Haitinkzaal, Conservatorium van Amsterdam, 10th June 2011.

Program note

In summer 2010 I wrote *Tra gli alberi*, a piece for two children playing violin. The piece was created working together with the children and was an exploration of their interactions through sound and a discovery of their own instruments.

Last winter, working with the Nieuw Ensemble, I tried to bring some aspects of this previous particular experience in a different context and to keep them in my writing. I am grateful for this opportunity. *Sempre hai occhi segreti* gave rise to aspects of my music that were often hidden and unvoiced and brought me new thoughts: to see a landscape as it is when I am not there; the idea of a music that doesn't know that here outside somebody is listening.

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