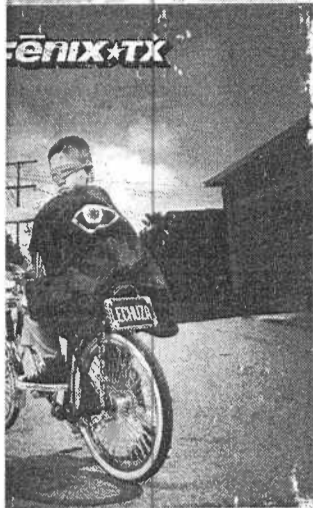


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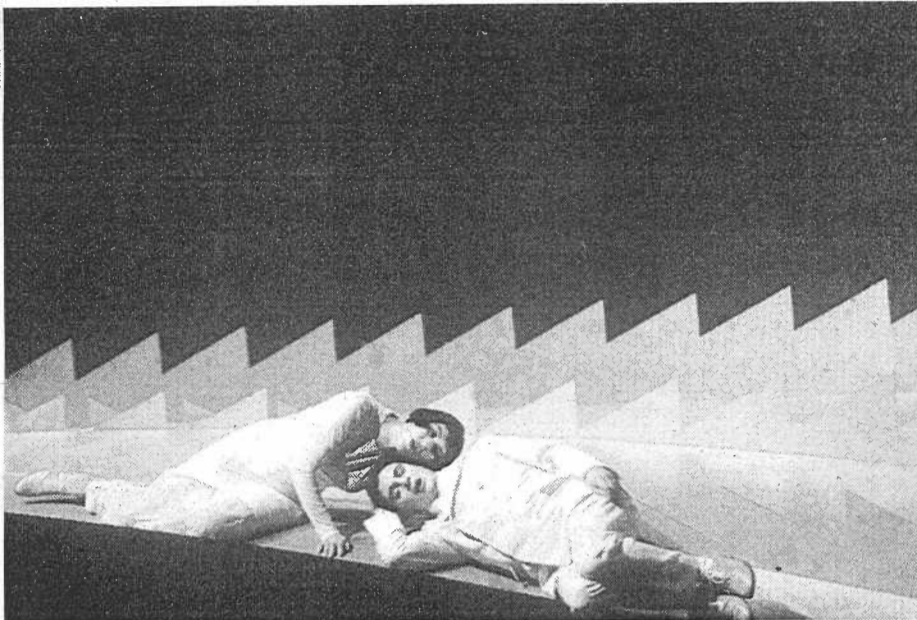
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## MUSIC

Lincoln Center Offers an Elegant Enigma

# MUSIC AFRAID TO BE HEARD

BY KYLE GANN



ANNETTE STRICKER (LEFT) AND PAUL ARMIN EDELMANN IN *LUCI MIE TRADITRICI*

Of all the composers in Europe, few would have been more interesting for the Lincoln Center Festival to bring in than Salvatore Sciarrino. He was certainly a relief from the aging Boulez-Stockhausen-Kagel crowd, who even today still dominate that continent's stagnant musical discourse. Absent were the technical display, the grand pronouncements, the pretense of historical inevitability that have long accompanied serialist music and its offshoots. Instead we had a composer modest in his aims yet not self-effacing, highly expert yet whimsical, accessible in a certain way, yet also an enigma.

With Sciarrino one immediately speaks not of techniques but of a sound world, for his aesthetic of evanescent gestures and noises has remained consistent since the late 1970s. (He was born in Palermo in 1947, and is self-taught.) His is a quiet yet hardly tranquil music of the almost-heard, a music endlessly elegant and yet seemingly nervous about coming into existence, as though any statement too plainly made will automatically be false. In both his *Aspern Suite*, performed by Joel Sachs's New Juilliard Ensemble on July 11, and his opera *Luci Mie Traditrici*, presented by the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie the rest of the week, the instrumentalists were often nearly inaudible. Flutists made whooshing breath sounds, violinists flitted through chords in the lightest of tremolos, and ominous hums that gradually crept into consciousness turned out to be the percussionist softly drumming a cymbal on a timpani-head. What you thought was subway bleed-through would turn out to be part of the music.

Yet Sciarrino is no Italian George Crumb, despite their shared fondness for an insectual sound world. *Luci Mie Traditrici* was, in its subject matter at least, a typically tortured Italian love story—a duke, sung by Paul Armin Edelmann, stabs and kills his wife, the duchess, sung by Annette Stricker, after eventually uncovering evidence of her infidelities. The libretto was based on a mid-17th-century drama in turn inspired by the bizarre life of the murderer-composer Don Carlo Gesualdo. Yet just as Sciarrino's music seems to consist of fragments of some other, more manifest music, the libretto was reduced and abstracted to lines and parts of lines that sometimes splintered into absurdity: "Noble soul!" "Inexpressible affection!" "What evidence?" "Myself!"

The charming thing was the infinite expressivity of the vocal lines, wispy, nonrepetitive, and exact in their postserialist detail, which Stricker, Edelmann, and the other singers pulled off in a beautiful and impressive feat of nuance and memory. They performed all in white on a curved stage intersected by large saw-toothed dividers, which rose and fell as the psychological turns of the plot became more or less menacing. Between scenes the almost quiescent orchestra would tentatively elicit your attention, sometimes hinting at Baroque Italian music played in disappearing tremolos. Everything was abstracted to its barest archetypes, yet for Sciarrino, even having the protagonists appear and act was a bold move: In his earlier opera *Lohengrin* (available on a Ricordi CD), the singers remain invisible.

Even though written some 19 years earlier, in 1979, *Aspern Suite*—based on phrases from Henry James's story *The Aspern Papers*—was remarkably similar in style. Soprano Wonjung Kim spoke phrases and occasionally sang entire Italian arias as Sachs's ensemble articulated little flurries of arpeggios and barely voiced flute melodies that sometimes turned minimalist in their repetitions. My favorite music of Sciarrino's, however, has long been his piano music, of which Eric Huebner gave us the Second Sonata, from 1983. The work's playful dialogue of recurring sonorities depended on an ability to differentiate several distinct dynamic levels, a feat in which Huebner was masterfully precise.

Exquisitely written music, all of it, and yet—like so much recent music from that continent where composers are well funded whether they reach an audience or not—obstinately uncommunicative. Like a Thomas Mann character, Sciarrino has made his life's output a supremely poetic gesture, a disembodied music unsure whether it wants to be heard; a novel about such a composer could be fascinating, but listening was like watching some madman's obsessive private game. In the short span of the piano sonata, that was pleasure enough, but the 70-minute span of the opera was deadly in its monochromatic wealth of indistinguishable detail. It is curious but ultimately wearying to listen at length to someone who obviously speaks elegantly—but is coyly unsure whether he wants to tell you anything at all. ▮