

# Alessio Elia

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A CERTAIN GLANCE, by ELENA ABBADO

BUDAPEST

Imagine being in your early twenties and winning a prestigious scholarship to one of the best music schools in the world, the Liszt Academy in Budapest. And then, suddenly, realizing you have to share your own grant with another person from your homeland, Italy. This is how I first met Alessio Elia ten years ago in Hungary. A fearlessly talented student then, a rising star composer now, it is, as it was in Elia immediately clear, a particularly remarkable form of intellectual talent. That is why it is no surprise to already interview him about his works and life.

Born in 1979 in Italy, Elia's training was outstandingly international from the beginning, a distinctive feature for an Italian composer of his generation, in his case significantly amplified. After a degree in composition at S. Cecilia Conservatory in Rome, three years at the Liszt Academy with Zoltán Jeney and a residency at the Norwegian Academy of Music with Lasse Thoresen, Alessio Elia earned not one but two PhDs. The first one in Musicology in Italy and the second in composition in Germany with composer Sidney Corbett, Ligeti's pupil. But the turning point in his career was again in Hungary, the right place for him to settle down and create his own artistic dimension. Today his compositions are internationally performed in many European countries, among them Germany, Italy, Hungary, Norway, mainly the countries where he got his musical training.

**ELENA ABBADO:** *Alessio, you studied many years abroad in many different contexts. Which experiences do you consider crucial in your artistic evolution so far?*

**ALESSIO ELIA:** I had the fortune to study in different "foreign" countries, Hungary, Norway and Germany, as well as working in Denmark, Switzerland and France. Each of these experiences gave me some different point of view about life and music. I think the most important was the year I spent in Norway at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, where I worked as a researcher and where I was invited to teach composition during the second semester of the academic year 2009/2010. I had long conversations about music, especially composition, with the composer Lasse Thoresen, who teaches composition there. I remember I was showing him some compositions of mine and explaining the relationships about pitches and harmony. He was looking at me saying "Why are you talking about pitches? This is the last thing in a composition". Naturally pitches are important for those composers who take into account melodies and harmonies, and I definitely belong to this group, but what he wanted to say to me was that the way the music material transforms through time is crucial for giving a phenomenonic approach to the listener. Then each listener has their own way to make sense of music, something that Thoresen named *Listening intentions*.



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**Can you explain to us in a nutshell what is Thoresen's Listening intentions theory?**

I would first introduce what sound is in terms of a phenomenonic approach to listening.

Everything connected with sounds and noises is a construction of the mind, through the organs of hearing in presence of a physical phenomenon, that is, the pressure wave propagated through the air or another medium.

The signals of this vibration are codified by the ears as sound, which in turn is interpreted according to the perception and conception of music brought to it by the listener. This means that listeners construct and assemble together different sound objects in their own proper way.

Aural Sonology, that is properly the name of the Aural Analysis developed basically by Thoresen, adopts the idea of *listener behaviours* developed by Francois Delalande, researcher at INA/GRM from 1970 till 2006. Each of them includes different *listening intentions* which lead to the several, different possibilities to construct and interpret the musical objects.

**Alessio, your last work, written for the Hungarian National Radio is the Voynich Lied - Ai Prigionieri, for voice, trumpet and piano, a "research" in music inspired by the mysterious 15<sup>th</sup>-century codex written in an unknown writing system. How did the project start?**

I was asked to write a piece for the contemporary music concert series ArTRIUM of the National Hungarian Radio, a piece which had to be scored for soprano, trumpet and piano. I was always attracted by mysterious stories and some years ago I

“discovered” the Voynich Manuscript, a codex carbon-dated to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century (1404–1438), and probably composed in Northern Italy during the Italian Renaissance. The manuscript is named after Wilfrid Voynich, a Polish book dealer who purchased it in 1912 from the Jesuits of Villa Mondragone, Frascati, a large country palace near Rome.

The uniqueness of this manuscript lies in the fact that it is written in an unknown script.

Till now nobody has been able to decrypt it, so that the exact content of the book is unknown.

Because of the presence of illustrations it is possible to subdivide the codex into 6 sections:

herbal, astronomical, biological, cosmological, pharmaceutical, recipes.

During the centuries scholars have constructed hypotheses about the content and the author.

Some of them believe it is a text preserving particular secret medical or magical formulas.

The text I selected belongs to the section of recipes. In folio 99v, the one I used, the author made a series of illustrations showing roots of different plants, most of them not recognizable, as well as unidentified instruments, supposedly medical, for mixing and transforming the essences of those roots.

The illustrations are “explained” by a text, written in the undecipherable script of the codex.

The piece received a very enthusiastic review by Szabolcs Molnár, one of the most important critics of Bartók Radio, it is possible to read it on the press section of my website translated into English.

#### ***And what about the text’s transliteration?***

The sounds of the text come from the transliteration in Latin characters based on the study of Stephen Bax, Professor of Modern Languages and Linguistics at the Open University, UK, and former Professor of Applied Linguistics at CRELLA, the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. Prof. Bax assumed he had identified 10 words within the manuscript, from which he obtained 14 possible phonemes of those characters that compose them. I chose a text which includes all these phonemes.

#### ***Your approach to composition and to a multidimensional way to shape sound has a strong relation with the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian composers’ tradition such as Béla Bartók and György Ligeti. Is this deeply related with your stay and training in Hungary?***

Well, I think that the multidimensional way to shape sound is connected more with Quantum Physics rather than Bartók and Ligeti, even if in their music you can sometimes find an idea of music structures which could be associated with multidimensional form of sound, I would say more layer-structures actually. The multidimensional way to shape sound, which has become an important aspect of my music since 10 years, is an attempt to give the listener a simultaneous approach to different acoustical phenomena. This way, by simultaneously identifying different phenomena through listening it is possible to enjoy a larger amount of stimuli making the space sound around the listener much larger.

In my music, since *Luminescences* (2005), I have experimented the integration of different tuning systems in a process I named *Polysystemism*.

#### ***Tell us about Polysystemism, the musical extra-dimension approach through quantum physics.***

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to explain this way of composing at a number of conferences and interviews around Europe, the most important of them were at La Cité de la Musique in Paris in 2014, at Filarmonica Romana also in 2014, and recently at the Hungarian Academy of Arts in October 2016, just to mention some. Since 2005, I am interested in the exploration of the simultaneous employment of different tuning systems and the acoustic phenomena resulting from their interactions.

Music employing only 12-Equal Temperament (ET), can produce only a little number of sonic manifestations, but the combination of many different tuning systems increases the palette of acoustic phenomena enormously. This is due to the fact that 12-ET has only its own frequencies and that the smallest step between two consecutive degrees, the half-tone, is always 100 cents. By employing different tuning systems, we have a larger number of frequencies to be used and many different relationships between sounds.

By employing different tuning systems it is possible to considerably vary the result of an acoustic phenomenon.

Polysystemism includes 8 tuning systems: 12-ET, 24-ET, Just Intonation (JI), Werckmeister I, II, IV, Meantone, Pythagorean.

By creating different sound phenomena, complex beats, ghost fundamentals, differential sounds etc., we forge a typology of music strictly connected with the physical aspects of the sound.

There is then a strict connection between the Polysystemism and String and M-Theory, which are the most recent theories in the field of modern Physics. It could be too long to explain this in the present context. In a very short way I can say that in String Theory the strings, the littlest parts of matter, through vibration create different elementary particles, in a similar way I transformed the musical material and the colors of the instruments through the simultaneous vibrations of different tuning systems.

The aim of my Polysystemism is to create a typology of music deeply connected with the idea of the phenomenal reality of sound. We make an experience out of the world through our senses and we construct the reality through them.

A central aspect of my music investigation is the perception of sound and its aural phenomena, and the ways with which it is possible to catch the attention of the listener through a formal construction that takes into account the way human beings perceive transformations through time.

#### ***A great contemporary composer and conductor, Péter Eötvös said about you: “Alessio Elia makes truly interesting music, one that is complex in the writing and in its conception, and at the same time works very well for listening. And this is what matters” (La Repubblica, Italian newspaper). As a composer do you consciously look for this balance between experimental research and accessible results?***

It was an enormous honor for me to receive the appreciation of a composer such as Péter Eötvös.

The sentence you quoted was released to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* and it refers to the occasion when Eötvös awarded me the first prize in the composition competition UMZF 2013 in Hungary.

That was the circumstance in which I started being in touch with him. Talking with him about music and culture is always very inspiring, he is a musician with a great knowledge of music, and also very wise in technical things, which comes from the vast experience he has as a conductor.

About the second half of the question I would say that I never think about a possible public when I compose. I write for no one, not even myself. I think I write for the music, in the sense that I imagine there are still unexplored resources in the field of music. My aim is to find them.

***How do you combine your relationship with the musical tradition and the continuous research in sound?***

I think that these two aspects are not separate. The composers who made the history of music thought that research is an essential part of music exploration. If it is not so, we collapse into mannerism. I think that great music was always a music of research. Sometimes for us today this is not clear because we are accustomed to many different types of styles, but we know from the chronicles of the past that most of the music that is absolutely “normal” for us was a shock to the public at the time it was composed.

***Tell us a long-term research goal that you would like to achieve in the future?***

That’s a crucial question! Well, one of the final goals of my music research is to completely abolish the idea of the musical interval, as I think in the complexity of music such as of some composers today, and surely in my music, this is merely a speculation. The same interval, especially in the harmonic domain, can have a completely different result in terms of aural perception when placed in different ranges. For me the most important factor is the result that the listener perceives. Naturally this includes also the sense of form and the way the music material transforms through time. In addition, I try in my music to establish a strong connection between the inner order of the musical matter and the way this order unfolds itself, manifests itself. This is an idea coming from the implicit order of the holographic theory of the world conceptualized mainly by David Bohm. What we perceive is the explicit order of an implicit order we do not see. In that way in my music I think it is possible to find a type of “natural” sense of development. I never force music into some pre-established constructions. I just try to imagine in advance which are the ways for the music material I selected to express itself in a “complete” form.

***Do you plan to spend all of your life in Hungary? How do you describe your relationship with Italy at the moment?***

I still have some contacts in Italy, even if I left the country at a young age, a time when I basically didn’t establish any serious professional connections. Recently the Filarmonica Romana has realized a portrait concert dedicated to my music, and last summer I held two conferences at the Chigiana Academy in Siena. But it is no secret that my music is much more frequently performed in other countries around Europe. I live in Budapest since 11 years, even if I spent long periods in other countries (one year in Oslo, one year in Odense, and long periods in Germany, especially Mannheim and Berlin). In Hungary I met many great musicians with whom I worked at a truly high professional level, and since 2014 I have started a beautiful

collaboration with the National Radio Orchestra. It has to be taken into account that Budapest has 12 Symphonic orchestras and two Opera Theatres, and the quality of the musicians is very high. Budapest has also a strategic position in Europe. In few hours you can get to many European countries.

For a composer the choice of where to live is not that important if they have already established good contacts with musicians in many different countries. Then we also have the luck to live in a world connected via internet and it is not so difficult to let people know about your music productions and your ideas. Anyways, I would be truly happy to live for a period in Germany and the US. Germany is a country I know quite well, as my music is regularly performed there. United States attracted me because I imagine a world completely different if compared to Europe. I’ve never been to America and I think it is an experience to be undertaken. Just few days ago the great American violinist Aaron Berofsky came to Budapest to perform my music at my Tenth Portrait Concert, organized by the Italian Institute of Culture directed by Gian Luca Borghese, and we talked about musical life in the US. We have a project for a violin concerto. Having him there is surely a great reason to visit the country and have the honor of working with him again.

Then, since I was a child, I had an obsession for Vienna, especially because in my childhood I read and reread the biography of Mozart. Vienna is also an interesting scene for contemporary music and definitely living there for a period would be truly exciting. In October a new piece of mine, *Traces from Nowhere*, for disklavier and ensemble will be performed in the Yamaha Vienna Concert Hall, in a concert conducted by Andreas Luca Beraldo. It is an interesting project, named “Human Machine”, in which the disklavier, through a particular computer software, will be able to “understand” the gesture of the conductor and becoming an effective member of the ensemble, being able to keep time with all the other performers. This project will take place in different countries, starting from the new Auditorium in Lugano, LAC, within the Festival “Oggimusic”, the most important festival for contemporary music in the Italian Switzerland.



Elena Abbado