

Tangata Manu

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In 2016, the Italian artist Marco Agostinelli, dear friend, invited me to compose a musical piece for his exhibition *The Birdman and New Generation* during the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Marco and I'd met in the 1990s - when he directed three movies about Joseph Beuys, for which I made three musical concerts.

We continued in contact over the years, and collaborated in other occasions.

Now it is about an installation and a sculpture that have absorbed him more than two years of intense work: Birdman.

Birdman is a direct reference to the celebrated myth of Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean. Tangata Manu - Birdman in the local language - was the title given to the winner of an annual competition on Easter Island. It was held every September, early spring. At that time, the terns laid their eggs on the Motu Nui islet. Each Tangata Manu that had won the competition ruled the island for one year.

It is believed that this ritual competition has begun in the period of destruction of Easter Island's ecological resources.

Each one of the contestants should jump off from a cliff in the area of the island called Orongo, at the edge of the crater of the Rano Kau volcano, about one thousand feet high. They should plunge into the sea, swim to Motu Nui, and gather the first egg of the season.

Several of the competitors died on the course, eaten by sharks, drowned or crushed by the waves against the hillside.

The quest for the first egg contained a vital question: the ecological destruction of that world that should end, and the search for a rebirth.

This was the essential question to Agostinelli, bundled in two key elements, as it always is the case in concrete existence: destruction and rebirth; birth and death.

It does not take much effort to realize that the world today seems to plunge into a self-destruction path. If we have in mind the pace of

demographic expansion - as it happened at the end of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first century - the human being will be able to survive only if he will brutally reduce his consumption of energy, that is, if we submerge into a new medieval period. The other possibility of survival is an intensive and general high quality education, but which would require a global political determination for at least some generations without interruption. And it doesn't seem that it can happen.

Thus, Agostinelli's work doesn't provide answers, but raises essential questions. It is made of woods fragments of endangered trees, from the mountains, used to make the gondolas.

Marco Agostinelli invited me to compose a concert-installation for his magnificent work.

At first, intentionally, I did not want to know all that information about his work.

When he invited me to compose the concert, we immediately agreed the engagement that characterized my work with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and of them with people like Bob Rauschenberg, David Tudor, Andy Warhol, William Anastasi or Dove Bradshaw, all inspired by Antonin Artaud and the principle of the *independence of the arts*. A work must never imitate other one. So, the only thing I knew was the key ideas: the Bird Man and the Easter Island.

Of course, when he told me this, Marco Agostinelli did not have to say anything else. I knew the myth, the competition and immediately I established an association with the world of today.

The musical composition took months of work in 2016 and 2017. I determined, since the beginning, that it should last for forty minutes and that it could be played indefinitely in loops.

In 2014, I published my book *Music: A Brief History of Western Musical Thought*. In it, I included the image of what is considered the first known musical score. Of Mesopotamian origin, dated circa 2000 BC, the piece belonged to Martin Schøyen.

Martin Schøyen is one of those unique characters in the world - historian, paleographer, businessman and book collector. He started his collection in 1955, when he was only fifteen years old. Today, it has more than thirteen thousand manuscripts and the oldest book is about five thousand years old.

I immediately contacted him. He kindly gave me the authorization to publish the photograph of that old musical score in my book. We kept an electronic correspondence over some months. In one of his messages, he said it would be interesting to make a contemporary composition based on

that old Mesopotamian score.

He already knew my work, also on Virtual Reality.

I replied promising that I would make a composition using that old score, and that it would be dedicated to him. But it was not possible to work on such a project immediately. I had to complete the opera *Metamorphosis* with René Berger, compositions such as *Dark Matter*, *Voyager66*, *Un Coup de Dés*, *Adamastor*, and *Decameron* among others, concerts with the the Merce Cunningham Company, with the Ballet de Lorraine, lectures, books, architectural projects... It was an extremely dense period.

Then, in 2016, I received Marco Agostinelli's invitation.

The Mesopotamian universe represented - especially with the symbiotic articulation between Sumeria and Acadia - the beginning of what we might call Western civilization. Now, we are living the end of this history, with the emergence of a fully connected planet and the explosion of an electronic civilization.

This seemed me to reveal curious relations with the Birdman myth. As the myth tells us, we are also condemning our planet; and the search for the egg, for the origin, or rather, of what can feed an existence, seemed me perfectly consistent with the great and mysterious question established by Agostinelli's work.

So I started working on that old Mesopotamian score - the first one known all over the world!

One of the most fascinating facts revealed by it is that it is about a representation of the *Cycle of Fifths* - which it was believed to have been discovered only in ancient Greece.

Of course, there would make no sense in reproducing the musical notes in the score - but rather use its drawing, that dimension the author "did not think", as the basis of a virtual score elaborated in a four-dimensional environment.

That was the first step. The visual elements of the carved stone were transferred to a three dimensional virtual environment.

So I established the structural principle of composition: three distinct elements, three structures in parallel, three voices, following the principles of *ten, chi, jin* - of Zen aesthetics - as I have been made for about forty years.

The ancient Mesopotamian traces determined the position of sound events in terms of space and interrelationship.

I drew a first sphere which, divided into slides, determined the relation

between the events of one of the voices, following the principle of the Cycle of the Fifths.

I determined the nature of the voices: the first one would operate the universe of poetry, of the poets - because they are something like Bird Man in permanent search of the roots, of the origins - even if they may be in the future - of civilizational nourishment.

Thus I studied the work of one hundred poets from thirty countries: Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, China, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Morocco, Mexico, Mozambique, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tibet and the United States. What was most interested me was about the musicality of the different languages. All poems were spoken by robots, by artificial voices. The poems of the one hundred poets were distributed, through the use of chance operations, according to the design of the ancient Mesopotamian score. Then, the sphere that surrounds these drawings, was divided into seven blades, determining seven musical notes according to the progression of the Cycle of Fifths, starting from the C note. The poems were divided into seven groups and the robotic voices were adjusted to the corresponding musical note.

The sound of the artificial voices of the robots were restricted to about three to five thousand cycles per second, similar to what happens when we hear through our telephones.

Then, these sets of artificially spoken poems were grouped and divided into three large sets, each of which was "placed" inside a different virtual space, with very different acoustic characteristics: a large hall with walls, floor and ceiling built in cement; a medium size room, like a sleeping room, built of stones; and a room lined with books, curtains and carpets. All these acoustic characteristics were elaborated virtually in laboratory.

The poems constituted a complex fabric of sonorities.

The second voice of the composition was composed of sounds of birds, from Europe, North America, Central America, Brazil - especially from the Atlantic Forest, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Thirty recordings formed three large ensembles of birds. The first set consisted of twenty-eight recordings, distributed in time according to the design of the ancient Mesopotamian music score. The second and third sets consisted of two continuums operating in parallel.

Finally, the third voice was based on the musical piece *Nunc Dimittis*, which means "now dismiss". It is a fragment of the New Testament, also known as the Canticum of Simeon, where it is said: "Lord, now you let your servant go in peace / Your word has been fulfilled. / My eyes have seen the salvation / You have prepared in the sight of every people, / A light to reveal

you to the nations and the glory of your people, Israel".

Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon, is often performed at the end of a religious service. It is also the traditional canticle of nocturnal prayers.

We are at the end of a civilizational universe, in some sense at the end of a "religious service"; and the ancient musical religious piece, especially in conceptual terms, seemed me perfect as the basis for Birdman's third voice.

So I took a version attributed to Josquin des Prés, who lived between 1440 and 1521. I distributed his hundred and forty bars over the forty minutes of the composition, with synthetically generated sounds and operated with a feedback system, constituting a great continuum.

The conception of the musical composition Birdman is, like Agostinelli's work, a questioning: the poems, the nonhuman voice - but that looks to be human to us, the languages in a new Babel, the thirty countries, the thirty sets of birds, the different Continents, the world that walks fast to the suicide, the change of human values, and the reference to a religious piece, for the end of a religious service, but also a composition that was made in the transition between the last medieval period and Renaissance.

Beyond this conceptual dimension, all notes interact, like a classical musical composition, but now with other sound universes.

All artists, poets, musicians, architects, scientists, thinkers are Bird Men!

The concert-installation Birdman is dedicated to Marco Agostinelli and to Martin Schøyen.