Didattica e formazione
Playing with Autism 1.1
Encountering Simona Concaro by Her Music

Edited by

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I met Simona Concaro and her music for the first time in 2005. I had just changed my job, moving from a full-time hospital duty to a mixed teaching-research-clinical one. This new position allowed me spending a couple of hours a week in a recently built farm-community devoted to young adults with autism. The former music therapist had left and I proposed myself to start playing with people there once a week. In a very brief period, a group of under- and postgraduated medical students joined this experience, creating the basis for the Orchestra Invisibile project.

While the development of a flexible and stable jazz group with all other people with autism was quite simple, Simona always maintained her peculiarities and her distinction from the orchestra. Since the beginning, she appeared little involved with the group, waiting for her own turn, alternating her performances to our own ones. Simona looked like a fairly bizarre woman in her forties, with short hair, a restless glance, and a neverending movement. She only appeared at ease when sitting at the piano.

Simona Concaro showed the first features of autism at the age of two, receiving her first diagnosis one year later. At the same time, she approached the piano keyboard spontaneously, and soon developed her own brief original pieces. She has never received a formal musical education, despite some attempts to train her were made at different ages, with no success. According to her parents, her piano compositions have shown very minor modifications over the years. From a clinical point of view, her functional outcome is poor, she has limited social interactions and her speech is absent. Vocal and motor stereotypes are frequent. Despite the apparent gloom of these features, let’s open up our ears and mind to her special music.

For the purposes of this book, I met Simona three times during summer 2011, maintaining the Orchestra Invisibile’s usual setting (Friday afternoon at 3 p.m.). Each session lasted about 45 minutes, and the end of the session was generally decided by Simona. During the session, Simona was left free to play. I reduced prompts (suggesting or asking her to play) to a minimum. In general, Simona spontaneously alternated playing the piano and walking to and from the music room. During such pauses, I played the piano for a little while; after few minutes, she would return to the piano; only sporadically she accepted to play four hands with me. I videotaped all her performances. Once at home, I cut all her music in short units. I grouped such units, giving the same number (1, 2, 3, etc.) to very similar pieces; I assigned a different letter (e.g.: 1a, 1b, 1c, etc.) to the (possible) different “takes” of the same tune.

Following this work, a total of 24 microcompositions (plus two addenda) have been identified. I would suggest they are true compositive units, that the artist put together randomly during her performance. Some of the pieces have been played several times (for example, #02 was played 16 times, with slight variations), whereas some others were performed one time only (#07, 08, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22). Simona’s compositions were then transcripted and discussed with the invaluable help of Hanna Shybayeva. I am also grateful to the warm and friendly support of Claudio Perelli.
Every time a piece of music is being transcribed (one may remember ethnomusicology or jazz solo transcriptions), something doesn’t work. Even when the transcriptor is really fond of his job. In the case of Simona Concaro, I believe that no transcription would ever be able to record her soft and uniform touch, her apparent carelessness for expressive intent, her mysterious and always diverse design in putting together the different compositive units she created.

The actual will of expressing oneself and communicating with others has been for long debated (and even denied) in subjects with autism.

We do hope this little book could help in understanding more of this peculiar human condition.

Pierluigi Politi
Abstract in Italian

Questa pubblicazione raccoglie ventiquattro brani originali per pianoforte, registrati e trascritti fedelmente in notazione musicale corrente da Pierluigi Politi e Hanna Shybayeva. L’autrice, Simona Concaro, è una giovane donna affetta da autismo a basso funzionamento, che vive presso Cascina Rossago, fattoria sociale pensata per le esigenze di persone con autismo, nell’Oltrepo pavese.


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