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MICHIKO HIRAYAMA

GIACINTO SCELSI: *CANTI DEL CAPRICORNO*

APRIL 2, 2010 | 8:30 PM

presented by

REDCAT

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater

California Institute of the Arts

MICHIKO HIRAYAMA

GIACINTO SCELSI: *CANTI DEL CAPRICORNO*

FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 2010 | 8:30PM

PROGRAM

Canti del Capricorno (1962–1972)

Giacinto Scelsi (1905–1988)

Michiko Hirayama: voice, gong, recorder

Ulrich Krieger: saxophone

Aniela Perry: contrabass

Amy Knoles and Lydia Martín: percussion

ABOUT THE WORK, AND AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHIKO HIRAYAMA

A mild spring evening in Ulm on the Danube in early May 2006; a small figure with a fur coat and a medical face mask exits the hotel: eighty-two year old Michiko Hirayama, one of the great singers of new music and a “muse” of Giacinto Scelsi, a man surrounded by legend. In the interview in the restaurant I was then seated opposite a very friendly elderly woman. She had arrived from Rome, with a score in her pocket that she protected like a sacred relic: Scelsi’s *Canti del Capricorno*.

Michiko Hirayama inspired the composer to write this twenty-part cycle between 1962 and 1972. To this day the Japanese singer is a unique performer of this spiritual yet energy-filled work for solo voice, with instrumental accompaniment for certain songs: Scelsi’s notes are in his own hand in the score; that is her treasure.

Scelsi, who died in 1988, the great mystery man of new music, was no theory-bound composer but thought of himself as a “medium for the flow of sound”; he never commented on his own works. Scholars have a difficult time analyzing his *Canti*, which represents a break from all the systematic rules of art, in part because of the difficult circumstances of the sources. Its original interpreters are still accessible for the purposes of an oral history, if only for a limited time. If authenticity is a category in musical performance practice, then Scelsi’s world can be revealed through Michiko Hirayama. Moreover, the memories she revealed in response to questions provided highly personal contexts (see the interview that follows).

The singer did not just come to Ulm to give a concert in the series *neue musik im stadthaus* that was recorded for broadcast by Deutschlandfunk. *Canti* was being released on CD for a second time by WERGO in a new recording. It is to be her legacy, she says openly. Matthias Osterwold invited Michiko Hirayama to MaerzMusik in Berlin in 2005 and put together an ensemble for *Canti*: Matthias Bauer (contrabass), Jürgen Grözinger and Roland Neffe (percussion), and Ulrich Krieger (saxophone). An additional concert as part of Wien Modern was also a success. Then Grözinger invited the soprano to his festival in Ulm. *Canti* had been released on CD (WER 60127-50) in the late 1980s, in “private recordings” dating from 1969 and 1981–82; it

composition and experimental sound practice at the California Institute for the Arts. He studied classical saxophone, composition, electronic music and musicology at the Manhattan School of Music (NYC), the Universität der Künste (Berlin) and the Freie Universität (Berlin), as well as pursuing independent studies and research in the didjeridu and Australian aboriginal music and culture.

Krieger has worked with Lou Reed, Lee Ranaldo, Phill Niblock, David First, Thomas Köner, Alan Licht, Michiko Hirayama, Witold Szalonek, Mario Bertoncini, Miriam Marbe, Seth Josel, Zbigniew Karkowski, Merzbow, zeitkratzer and many others, performing in Europe, North-America, Asia and Australia. His works have been performed by the California E.A.R. Unit, zeitkratzer, KontraTrio, Soldier String Quartet, Wandelweiser Ensemble, and many others.

Krieger has received grants from the German DAAD program, the Darmstadter Summer Courses for New Music, the city of Berlin and many others and was a Composer-In-Residence at Villa Aurora (Los Angeles), Villa Serpentara (Rome), German Research Centre Venice (Italy), University of East Anglia (England), the City of Bologna (Italy) and the Music Centre North Queensland (Australia). He has released over 50 CDs of his original compositions, improvisations, with his groups and as a collaborator with many musicians.

Lydia Martín is currently a BFA-4 percussionist at CalArts. There she has studied a large array of percussion including jazz vibraphone, Balinese gamelan, and hand drums from around the world. In 2005 she was a guest artist on the NPR radio show “From the Top”, which highlights student musicians. After graduation Lydia plans to study for her Masters degree in composition. For more information check out her website jazzlyd.com

Aniela Perry has been performing and teaching as a cross-genre multi-instrumentalist in the Los Angeles area for 9 years. In addition to being a classically trained cellist, Ms. Perry has extensive experience as an improviser, touring rock cellist and bassist. Her diverse repertoire has allowed her the opportunity to work with and learn from a fascinating and likewise diverse group of musicians and composers such as Vinny Golia, John Zorn, Carol Kaye, Morton Subotnick, James Tenney, rock groups Cursive and Silversun Pickups, Ulrich Krieger, Rohan de Saram, Lawrence Lesser, members of the California E.A.R. Unit, the Robin Cox Ensemble and more. Aniela has also had the great pleasure of being a featured performer in such famous locations as the Fillmore in San Francisco, Disney Hall in Los Angeles, the Lollapalooza festival in Chicago’s Grant Park and Webster Hall in New York City, among others. Recently Aniela has begun to work the ideas that have fueled her improvisations and collaborations into compositions which explore extreme ranges and highly personal exploration.

Thanks to the Istituto Italiano di Cultura (IIC) Los Angeles, and Giovanni Di Simone for providing translations.

Hirayama was her contact with the composer Fumio Hayasaka, who was Toru Takemitsu's teacher and a leading Japanese composer. After studying music she moved to Rome in the early 1950s. As luck would have it, she met Giacinto Scelsi, who was interested in the high value she placed on microtonality in her interpretations. Hirayama in turn was fascinated by the freedom of his improvisation and its undeniable philosophic background. The collaboration between Hirayama and Scelsi began in 1959, and in 1961 she performed her first vocal work by him at the Festival Nuova Consonanza: *Ho* for solo voice. Numerous pieces for solo voice or voice and instruments would follow. The works Giacinto Scelsi wrote for Michiko Hirayama include: *Ho* (1960), Cinque melodie per soprano solo; *Taiagarit* (1962), Cinque invocazioni per soprano solo; *Khoom* (1962), Sette episodi di una storia d'amore e di morte non scritta, in un paese lontano per soprano e 6 strumenti; *Pranam I* (1972) Alia memoria di Jani e Sia Christou per voce, 12 strumenti e nastro; *Sauh I, II* (1973) Due liturgie per due voci femminili o una voce con nastro; *Sauh III, IV* (1973) per quattro voci femminili (o multipli); *Three Latin Prayers* (1970: Ave Maria, Pater noster, Alleluja) per voce virile o femminile sola o con coro all'unisono / *Canti del Capricorno* (1962–72) Venti canti per voce femminile o voce con strumento(i).

Amy Knoles is a composer/percussionist who tours globally performing computer-assisted live electronic music with percussion controllers and linear/interactive video. Amy is the recipient of a 2006 Meet The Composer Commissioning Music Award to create the piece *Sacred Cow* with Butoh dancer Michael Sakamoto; the 2005 American Composers Forum Subito Grant, 2007 and 2005; the Durfee Grant, 2003; UNESCO International Prize for the Performing Arts, 2000; the 1999–2000 Individual Artist Fellowship Award from C.O.L.A., the 2001 Lester Horton Award for Outstanding Achievement in Original Music for Dance, and she was the 1996 ASCAP Foundation Composer-in-Residence at the Music Center of Los Angeles. Ms. Knoles is the Executive Director of the California E.A.R. Unit. She has also worked with the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, Kronos Quartet, Pierre Boulez, Rachel Rosenthal, LA Master Chorale, NatPlast, Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt, The Bang On A Can All Stars, The Paul Dresher Ensemble, Collage Dance Theater, Basso Bongo, Squint, John Cage, Elliott Carter, Morton Feldman, Alison Knowles, Louis Andriessen, Mauricio Kagel, Charles Wourinen, Julia Wolfe, Don Preston, Frank Zappa, Mort Subotnick, Steve Reich, Tod Machover, Flea, Quincy Jones, and many others. Amy has recorded nearly 30 CDs of new music and is proud to announce the release of her solo recordings "Men in the Cities" and "2 x 10 x 10 x 10 + 1", on the Echograph Label.

Ulrich Krieger is a composer, performer, improviser and experimental rock musician. His main instruments are saxophones, clarinets, didjeridu and electronics. He calls his style of playing "acoustic electronics", using sounds that appear to be electronic, but are produced on acoustic instruments and then sometimes electronically treated, blurring the borders between the fields. Krieger transcribed Lou Reed's (in)famous *Metal Machine Music* for chamber ensemble and works with groups like Text of Light (with Lee Ranaldo) and zerfall-gebiete (with Thomas Köner) in the nirvana between experimental rock, ambient and contemporary composition.

Born 1962, in Freiburg, Germany, he lived in Berlin 1983–2007 with longer residencies in the USA and Italy 1991–97. In September 2007 he moved to California, where he is professor for

was an impressive recording, which immediately made the quarterly list for the German record critics' award "Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik". But the recording did not include all twenty songs. Now, with Jürgen Grözinger's ensemble, Michiko Hirayama has not only found the "right," valid path of interpretation, as she says, but she is also singing the complete cycle. At eighty-two? "I try to do it better than I can," she says modestly.

This woman has enormous strength. Even on the morning of the concert she spent hours in the hall of the Stadthaus rehearsing in front of the microphone, spreading out her music and giving her all—with no one listening but the sound engineer. "My voice is too dirty," Michiko Hirayama says apologetically, climbing up and down over four octaves. Sometimes her tone is brittle as well, and her vibrato wavers. But those are not the standards of quality for the *Canti*; they are not traditional songs but rather the sounds produced by a feeling human being. They are songs that explode classical conventions: their vocal expressionism is ignited by the phonemes, not by any semantic content. Language seems to be atomized for all time. Then an electrifying flow of sound is heard again, almost an archaic rite of evocation. Perhaps the ego finding itself. Primal screams, courting cooing, a gurgling and wheezing, ecstatic stammering, enticingly beautiful tone. Expressions of pain and pleasure. Microtonal fields of timbre and vexations. An endless search for in-between worlds. A listening one's way into the soul. Song number 16, which employs live electronics and is augmented by artificial echo, suggests in turn an uncanny encounter with the cosmos. And when contrabass, saxophone, or percussion join in for certain songs, Scelsi's work is up-to-date even for modern world music. "The rhythm comes from the gut; it is the pulse of the earth!" marvels percussionist Grözinger: "Scelsi grooves."

After two hours of rehearsal, a deep sigh. "I survived," says Michiko Hirayama with a mixture of relief and mischievousness. But that evening for the concert she has recharged her battery, and this unbelievable artist transforms again: now she appears as a performer in platform shoes, with a Thai gong around her neck. She strikes it at the beginning like a call to prayer; later she swings her hips, almost dancing. Her entire body is a vocal power station. Michiko Hirayama is once again very young. On tape, on the CD, it has been recorded: a document of lived, immediate music.

—Jürgen Kanold, English translation by Steven Lindberg

Jürgen Kanold: Ms. Hirayama, when you sing Giacinto Scelsi's *Canti del Capricorno* in such an archaic way, you evoke associations with traditional Japanese music. Did you grow up with it?

Michiko Hirayama: No, I come from a Christian, Protestant family. We sang chorales and listened to European music. And studying in the 1940s in Tokyo, my native city, the repertoire was made up of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. Traditional Japanese music did not come up. I regretted that very much; I did not know my own cultural roots. I wanted to go to Europe to find myself.

JK: And then you, the exotic Japanese, ended up, of all things, singing the appropriate role of Cio-Cio-San in the Italian provinces ...

MH: I sang Puccini's *Butterfly* hundreds of times. In the 1950s in Italy there was no television yet; people went to the opera; every little city had a theater. But I hated this *Butterfly*. The whole story is a lie. But no matter, I had to earn my daily bread to survive.

JK: What did contemporary music mean to you?

MH: I do not come from a family of musicians, but one of my mother’s cousins was a composer. He wrote film music for Kurosawa and other famous directors; he also taught Takemitsu. So, I was used to hearing modern sounds from early on. He sharpened my awareness of the need not to repeat old works endlessly but to explore new things.

JK: When did you meet Scelsi the first time?

MH: It was 1957. I was friends with a very wealthy woman who had an apartment at via San Teodoro 8 that was directly under Scelsi’s apartment. She had a concert in her home and told me a great deal about music and that Giacinto Scelsi had been living on the floor above her for years. I had never heard the name before. This man, she said, would improvise on a strange instrument from eleven at night to five in the morning. Every night! Yes, in musical circles in Rome, Scelsi was considered crazy. He was invited to my friend’s place, and when he heard me sing Japanese folk-songs, he was very interested in the microtonal sounds. At the end of the concert this little gentleman came up to me and asked whether I would be interested in his music.

JK: How did you get to know his work?

MH: One day he sent me several solo pieces for horn, trombone, or trumpet that he had arranged for soprano. I opened the first page: a single note that lasted more than two minutes. What was that supposed to be? There were no written indications about altering the timbre. Nothing about crescendo or decrescendo.

JK: Did you not doubt whether this mysterious count was a serious artist?

MH: Yes, I wanted to find out. A couple of times I left dinner early and closed the door, but then snuck back upstairs and sat on the steps in front of Scelsi’s apartment. I would listen to him improvise for two or three hours. He always played just one note, but suddenly, perhaps after half an hour, this note would develop, move, become music. “Wow!” I thought, this man has a soul and can express his feelings in music.

JK: Scelsi, who would listen to notes so spiritually, first learned about the possibilities of the human voice through you; he wrote vocal music for you; you were an “instrument” for him—is this music also part of you?

MH: It was the other way around: Scelsi liberated me in my head so that I could produce any sound with my voice. He pushed me to explore my vocal possibilities to work in ways that any classical vocal school had forbidden (though I never put much stock in academic training anyway). And Scelsi knew I could do it. So, I gave Scelsi a lot, but he was the one who inspired me to do so.

JK: *Canti del Capricorno* was written between 1962 and 1972; the cycle is the magnum opus of your long collaboration. What do these “songs of the Capricorn” mean, apart from the fact that the title alludes to Scelsi’s own sign, as he was born on January 8, so that the work at least suggests an astrological connection?

MH: Scelsi never explained his works. He never said a single word about them. We felt this music inside us. I can only give you my interpretation: the “songs” are a story about the creation of the earth. Air and water become matter. A state of peace. Then animals populate the earth; people take possession of the earth; spiritual leaders and kings emerge; political relationships form, contented societies, but then the individual feels sad. But Scelsi leads us into a new dimension, showing us that a better world exists. The last song is a farewell.

JK: These songs without words are not boundless meditations but rather have many percussive elements as well...

MH: Scelsi was a born percussionist. When we went into a restaurant and he was waiting for his food, he would drum constantly with his fingers...

JK: You worked with Scelsi for ten years on *Canti del Capricorno*, how should we imagine that process?

MH: We began by improvising one or two pieces. He would record the result; an assistant then transcribed the singing in notation. Later Scelsi no longer cared how precisely it was notated. That was a laborious method; it progressed very slowly, and when Scelsi had his first great successes with orchestral pieces, he lost interest in *Canti*. In the meanwhile I had begun to sing other contemporary music, such as Nono and Berio, but I wanted to complete the cycle. I had to fill in a lot myself what he had conceived musically. Scelsi authorized me to do that.

JK: You have recorded *Canti* once before, decades ago. What has changed?

MH: People change every day, for better or for worse. I am no longer the same person I was thirty or forty years ago. Before every concert I start anew with Scelsi’s music, studying it from the beginning again. And I always discover new things.

JK: Scelsi attributed his life crisis of the 1940s to his work with twelve-tone music and then he withdrew and explored his own world of sound. What did he think of the avant-garde later?

MH: Scelsi was highly attentive to what was happening in music and knew exactly what was going on. Morton Feldman and John Cage visited him in Rome. Cage always called me first by the way, asking where to find a store with macrobiotic food, then he went to Scelsi’s house.

JK: Scelsi followed closely what his colleagues were doing?

MH: Yes, but I never saw him read a score.

JK: How can that be?

MH: Many aspects of his life remain mysteries.

JK: Can you describe this mysterious man?

MH: Scelsi was of small stature but had large eyes; he was vain, quite proud of his appearance. A typical Italian. But I admired him not as a man but as an artist of immense imagination. He knew so much about Eastern religions and meditation; he always wanted to be my yoga teacher.

JK: It is said that Scelsi needed muses.

MH: Certainly. But I was not one of those girls who sunned themselves on his terrace, completely nude. Women worshipped him like an angel, as he did women. And listen: the seventeenth song of the *Canti* is highly erotic. Scelsi knew a lot about angels, including fallen ones.

—English translation by Steven Lindberg

From the liner notes to *Giacinto Scelsi: Canti del Capricorno*, Michiko Hirayama, Wergo WER 6686 2, 2007

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Michiko Hirayama was born in Tokyo in 1923; her parents were lawyers, and she grew up surrounded by scientists and university professors. Another decisive influence on Michiko