

From: *Sipario / staged art: Balla, De Chirico, Savinio, Picasso, Paolini, Cucchi*, curated by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco and I. Gianelli, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 20 February – 25 May 1997), Charta, Milan 1997, pp. 109-113.

## ***Savinio, Theater, Music***

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We might almost say that Savinio "thinks" in theatrical fashion. His initiation occurred in childhood, and the anecdote was narrated in the Lanarà puppet theater episode in *La tragedia dell'infanzia (Tragedy of childhood)*. However in the beginning his relationship with theater was filtered through music, which Savinio called "the madwoman," and from which he would never be able to distance himself.

In the Autumn of 1906 Gemma de Chirico and her two sons, Giorgio and Andrea, moved to Munich. There Andrea composed music and wrote the libretto for *Carmela*, a romantic opera. "Despite the approval of Mascagni, who had been approached by the young Andrea while he made the rounds of the Bavarian city, and some early interest from the Ricordi publishing house, the opera, now lost, remained unpublished" (A. Tinterri, *Savinio e lo spettacolo*, Il Mulino, 1993, p. 19). Later he went to Milan specifically to follow up with Ricordi about *Carmela*, and also to meet Mascagni who, while having encouraged him in Munich, was now unavailable. He returned to Munich, where he performed the music from *Carmela*. "I left with Mama; the music was performed in the same hall in Türkenstrasse where, some years before, a delirious public had applauded Mascagni. My brother was not applauded by a delirious public, but nor do I think the concert was what you would call a fiasco" (Giorgio de Chirico). From his studies in Munich at the conservatory and with Max Reger, music was a guiding thread throughout Savinio's life.

On May 24, 1914 Savinio gave a concert of "sincerist" music at the premises of Apollinaire's magazine. Breton reprinted in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir* the review that appeared in *Les soirées de Paris*: "We cannot remain silent," the music critic wrote, "about how Savinio interprets his works on the piano. A performer of incomparable ability and power, this young composer, who hates to wear a jacket, stands before the instrument in his shirtsleeves, and it is a singular spectacle to see him fidget, howl, shatter the pedals, describe vertiginous whirlwinds, pound his fists in an unleashed tumult of passions, desperation, joy... After each piece he had to clean the bloodstained keys." (from André Breton, *Antologia dello humour nero*, edited by P. Decina Lombardi, Einaudi, Turin 1996). "There is music for the piano, but also a ballet (*Deux amours dans la nuit* by Calvocoressi), a comic opera (*Danses du Trésor de Ramsésnit*, with the libretto also by Calvocoressi), another ballet (*Persée*, where Michel Fokine's choreography calls for a dragon procession, a dance of the archers, a dance of Andromeda, a petrification) and finally a ballet-drama (*Niobe* by Calvocoressi)." (M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Coscienza plastica*, exhibition catalogue, *Alberto Savinio pittore di teatro*, Aosta 1991, p. 23). During Savinio's first sojourn in Paris he was very close to the critic and composer Michael Dimitri Calvocoressi, who was of Greek origin. His concert activity continued at the most unexpected moments and places. "He returned, eventfully, to music; on October 27 he performed his compositions in the 'Halls of the soldier' (the concert was reviewed by *La rivista di Ferrara*)" (M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Savinio*, Fabbri, Milan 1989, p. 48). On December 4, 1919, in the auditorium of the Giuseppe Verdi conservatory in he performed a piano

concert with music from *Persée* (mime action by the abridged version for piano appeared in the *Raccolta nazionale delle musiche italiane*) and *Niobe*.

Ideas and projects accumulated in the lively Parisian climate. Some of them - a production of Apollinaire's pantomime, *A quelle heure un train partira-t-il pour Paris?*, with direction and sets by Picabia and music by Savinio; the impresario Marius de Zayas wanted to produce Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, with music by Savinio - were shattered by the outbreak of war.

Meanwhile he was writing his dramatic poem, *Les chants de la mi-mort*, which was published in August in *Les soirées de Paris*. He also designed sketches and costumes, leading Apollinaire to write in *Mercure de France*: "M. Savinio, qui est poète, peintre et dramaturge, ressemble en cela aux génies multiformes de la Renaissance toscana." In a well-known autobiography Savinio recalled: "The sketches for sets and characters for these dramatic scenes were painted by the author in 1914. The sketches of the characters (the bald man and the yellow man) are the origin of the mannequins of so-called 'metaphysical' painting."

Savinio's true arrival at theater occurred with Pirandello's Teatro d'Arte in Rome, in 1925. In addition to his two adventures with *La morte di Niobe* and *Capitano Ulisse*, Savinio also played more secondary roles: he translated the libretto for Charles Ramuz's *La storia del soldato* (April 28, 1925); on April 29 he played piano accompaniment to Nikolaj Evreinov's harlequinade for *La gaia morte*. "At the sound of some infernal music pounded on the piano by the recognizable hands of Alberto Savinio, Death, in the meantime, began to dance obscenely around Harlequin's bed," wrote Vincenzo Cardarelli.

In a letter of November 7, 1925 to Lamberto Picasso, he wrote: "I am about to finish a novel with which I'm satisfied. At the same time I am working on an *Agamemnon* and on another play, *La notte della mano morta*." The novel is *Angelica o la notte di maggio*; only a trace remains of the second theater piece mentioned, in the form of a typescript from the 'Forties of a cinematographic subject of the same title. The protagonist is a poet, Bellasperanza, who tempts fate in the "city of publishers," Milan (subject published in A. Savinio, *Il sogno meccanico*, edited by Vanni Scheiwiller, introduction by Mario Verdone, "Quaderni della Fondazione Primo Conti," Libri Scheiwiller, Milano 1981, pp. 30-52). In a December 9, 1925 letter to Lamberto Picasso, Savinio wrote: "I am sending ahead an *Agamemnon* that will be like a big brother to Ulysses, and *La notte della mano morta*, extremely amusing in character."

However *Agamemnon* was never produced, and a study for this performance wasn't published until February 1934, in *Colonna*, preceded by a notice in defense of the rough draft, which were not meant to be judged like those of the composer or painter. Savinio's *Agamemnon* "is not a king," but, rather, describes a sort of "mercenary," continuing the sort of re-examination of mythology attempted earlier *Niobe* and *Ulysses*. The idea for the staging again centered on the stage-hall relationship, and the curtain also played a fundamental role. At the striking of a gong announces the return of *Agamemnon*, the passion of the old and bored lovers, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, is reawakened. The stage curtain closes on their embrace and the theater remains in darkness; with a blare of a trumpet, *Agamemnon* enters from the back of the hall, while a portion of the event is hidden behind the curtain, out of view for the spectators. "The stage curtain re-opens. Light. *Agamemnon* enters the stage. The stage curtain recloses. Darkness. A revolver shot. The attendant falls into the footlights, lets the suitcases fall, flees through the hall crying 'Get the assassin, get the assassin'. End of the act." (The text is reprinted in Tinterri, *op.cit.*, pp. 229-233).

In other words, even before Savinio's brilliant attempts as a set and costume designer in his later years, theater was, for him, a laboratory for metamorphoses and a blending of themes, languages and styles. Giorgio de Chirico had noted earlier, apropos a long melodrama (*Poema fantastico*) written by his brother in 1909, a combining of Hellenic mythology and the spirit of Luigi Pulci and

Rabelais. Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco has given an interesting interpretation of Savinio's painting through theatrical terms (*Coscienza plastica...* cit.); proscenium, wings, curtain, backdrop, illumination, actor, machinery. To my mind, there is a profound reason for this "theatrical thought" on Savinio's part. The theater is tied to childhood, to the play (a word used in some languages for the role of the actor) of figures, of personifications and of disguises: "A continuous childhood-wave of revolution, and systematically destroyed by the 'greats', these reactionaries [...] Only with artists-we know-is the adult life the natural continuation of childhood [...] Someone voiced the hypothesis that the forest of childhood and paradise lost were one and the same. The voice responded: 'Yes!'." (A. Savinio, *La tragedia dell'infanzia*, Einaudi, Turin 1978).