

## **Remembering Vincenzo Vitale**

### **An Honest Relationship with the Keyboard**

To write about Vincenzo Vitale without falling into the trap of what he himself would have defined an "apologia" is not a simple task. Who should I address in remembering him? Those who knew him or those who are just now learning of his existence? I am certain that the pupils who were close to him for many years will be dissatisfied with a portrait that attempts to depict such a complex personality. For those, instead, who never knew Vitale and who would like to discover the secret of this personality, perhaps for them, need I take on the burden of what is destined to fail. In an interview with Laura Padellaro in 1979 Vitale states profoundly significant words as regards his musical parable: "I have never in any review I have read found reservations as to my students' pianismog I have always found the observation of pianistic virtuosizjv, of the method: and I must confess that I dislike this...because alongside method is a vision of music that I have always tried to respect in the most linear mamier possible. . ." It is perhaps from this point that we may begin to understand the causes of this sorrow and the reasons for which the outcome of his work has often only in part been acknowledged. During the course of his very long career as a teacher, Vitale increasingly convinced himself that his job could be defined that of a "Schoolteacher." Accompanied by a good dose of flirtatiousness, the meaning of the tenn resides in its delimitation: not an artist, not a theoretician, but simply a craftsman of the pianoforte.

In the last years of his life, Vitale polemically refused public confrontations on "interpretation" surrounded by every sort of technical and instrumental element. He would with irony say that perhaps not even Beethoven knew what the true interpretation of opus 110 was. This scepticism reflected his personal experience: a "near catastrophe" was how Vitale defined an execution of Ravel's Sonatina by the author himself, for whom the Maestro had turned the pages of the piano music. He believed that his role was to teach how to correctly sit at the piano, how to best use the muscles and tendons required to play the piano, rather than how to compete, along with thousands of other more or less "musical" teachers, in solving the puzzles of interpreting music worn by centuries of assault. As a teacher of pianoforte (in the most limited sense of the term) he too often allowed himself opinions that were deliberately and ridiculously misunderstood. His history of the pianoforte began not before Mendelssohn and Weber, it reached a high point in Liszt, Chopin, Schumamr, and through Brahms (and Saint-Saens), and it ended with Debussy and Ravel. But it was the history of the pianoforte and not of the keyboard, it was certainly not the history of music for a keyboard. Vitale, in his search for the best approach to the instrument, recognized in the piano music of the aforementioned authors supreme instrumental results, that do not always I coincide with supreme musical results (see Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert). He believed, courageously affirming so, that the history of the pianoforte ended with the work of Ravel, who he considered to be the last explorer of the most secret resources of the instrument. We are therefore not surprised at his admiration for the founder of pianismo, Muzio Clementi.

This concentration of interests towards the highest expressions of nineteenth century pianismo, a historical period of perfect agreement between the instrument and artistic creation, is something of recent times; if we go back in time, we find that his repertory as interpreter included a I surprising panorama of artists: Bartok, Hindemith, Britten, Busoni, Reger, Strauss, Ghedini, Bloch, Casella, alongside the great classics from Bach to Scarlatti, from Mozart to Beethoven, from Schubert to Schumann, from Brahms to his beloved Martucci. Thus, he earned his fame as a retrograde traditionalist after having come a long way. Moreover, some of his risky afiirmations were supported by disarming irony, and thus must be leit intact.

The enthusiasm and respect for Vitale's technical definitions, for his theories on muscle function, and,

above all, for their immediate application, were nearly universal. Finally, there existed a method that was conceptually elementary, available to pianists of all levels, that allowed for the rational and functional use of the groups of muscles involved in playing the piano. His analysis of the activity of the flexor tendons, the extensors, the deep y flexor is known and appreciated even by those who are puzzled as regards Vitale the musician (1). It cannot be denied that in the last years of his life there was a constant pilgrimage of young and less young pianists to his door, on which they knocked to ask more questions concerning method than music. Paradoxically, the success that Vitale earned as "healer" of tendinites took away from his public image much of his original and penetrating ability to transmit a musical vision. The Maestro was carried away by the events to become a personality, something that he found very curious, given the self-irony and ferocious critical spirit with which he assessed his every public step (a record or an article on the cultural page of a daily newspaper). He wanted to demonstrate how a great teacher can make all of his pupils play brilliantly, even those who with their talent would not have gone far (2): like in a sort of Faustian laboratory, he proved to himself that he had fully answered the painful questions of his youth (3). Smiling with wisdom, he had fun giving brief suggestions that quickly solved technical problems judged to be inaccessible. At times he would say "Don't you see how easy it is to play!" His relationship with the instrument was of live interest, of untiring curiosity, of eternal attraction.

The most wonderful moments for him, according to his words, were those in which the telephone didn't ring and he could freely study an hour of method, repeating the marvelous intellectual pleasure of experiencing, observing, and commanding even the most imperceptible movement of his fingers (it is necessary to recall that his fingers were anatomically weak and thus unsuited to intense exercise).

He transmitted to us his honest relationship with the keyboard in the choice of colors, in his refusal of any swooning, as he himself called it, and of any sentimentalism; of all that "rubbish" that romanticism chewed by generations of dilettantes had deposited on every page of music. Ravel's lesson and that of the Gruppo dei Sei-music as sublime intellectual game-Toscanini's example, are without a doubt at the basis of his vision of music, avant-garde in the 30s and 40s; ten years ago, he instead ran up against a taste that, amidst the many contrasting interpretative options, caressed the chimera of neo-romanticism swollen with excesses. With his severe and extremely acute way of listening, Vitale would not even allow a "famous name" to influence him. When the notes were just hinted at instead of played his refusal was categorical; when the technical problem had not been seriously dealt with and was bragged about as having been solved, a fail was inevitable. His rational conception of how one was supposed to sit at the piano made him detest any physical contortion on the stage. "Anyone who believes this gesticulation to be the consequence of an inward tension is wrong. It is only an outward show, pernicious to the ends of interpretation" (from *Prospettive Musicali*, Pescara, October 1983). The obvious consequence of this thought was perfect composure at the keyboard and the tendency to compress any of the adolescent excesses in his most volcanic students. To mistake this control, that in many cases is the natural result of a rationalization of the means of expression and thus the economizing of energy and movement, for coldness and interpretative indifference, is one of the most banal and wretched observations that can be made against this type of teaching (4). Vitale had found in all of its implications an indisputable truth for every pianist that had the gift of listening to himself.

At the piano every *pressure* that is impressed on the key produces a flat, hard tone, enough to exalt the percussive features of the instrument. On the contrary, a cantabile fortissimo is obtained when the muscles of the forearm are as inactive as possible, and when its weight is used (5). In short: weight is the inertia of the arm that is sustained on the strength of the fingers, pressure is the muscle strength produced by the arm itself.

The ethos of *classical* music-by *classical* I mean music from the Baroque to the end of tonality-in Vitale's opinion did not accept aggressive, rigid *fortissimi*, like those that are obtained with pressure: the Maestro educated all of his pupils to filter the greatest emotions (such as that, for example, which

provokes a crescendo), so that they could be expressed in the presence of "cold" muscles. It is evident that in the presence of a "cold" arm the fingers take on a greater physical and psychological importance, and that emotion will be unloaded therewith. The implications of this affirmation are complex: in truth, there are very few pianists who can produce a pleasant fortissimo while at the other extreme we must remember that the pianissimo requested by Vitale was never empty, because the finger had to at any rate reach the bottom of the key. Only in this fashion, for Vitale, could classical music assume the features characterizing it. But that classical music must be expressed with propriety of sound and that these sounds must at any rate have priority over the need for the artistic recreation, in other words, that style must prevail over instinct, is a hypothesis that naturally leads to several reservations.

The classicism to which Vitale referred was nourished by a vision that embraced the figurative arts and literature. Without a doubt he preferred art intended as contemplation and harmony; an art that was the synthesis between rationality and emotion. But the risks are nonetheless high: the coldness of the arm must not be mistaken for emotional coldness. Vitale was well aware of such risks and he declined pressing invitations to leave to his musical heirs something on paper that would exemplify his theories on method. He knew perfectly well that the relationship between a teacher and his pupil does not rely on something written down: the best intentions are of vain application if they are crystallized in rigid formulas. Beyond any theoretical affirmation, what cannot be repeated in Vitale is instinct: a sensitivity that is ever malleable and ready to perceive the needs of the pupil. It is precisely this extraordinary amalgam of lucid reasoning and versatile emotion that made his personality such a fascinating one. Perhaps the main field in which Vitale applied this fundamentally Apollonian vision of art is that of the work of Franz Liszt. Considered to be an aberrant example of noisy vulgarity, Liszt was prey to pianists searching for careless consent: particularly because of the triviality of the materials he was not considered to be a serious musician. Well, Vitale for decades taught and proved that Liszt was a hyper-rational composer (this affirmation would deserve in-depth discussion), and as such he is to be read, studied, listened to. Tens (or hundreds) of pupils under Vitale's guidance, were able to play pieces that are impossible for anyone who believes that he can deal with them as proof of general strength; his teaching proved that Lisztian pianism is entirely based on a prodigious gestural rationality, which may be reproduced as long as one reacts to the text with the same amount of rationality. Vitale's lessons on Liszt not only clarified how to deal with difficulties that were discouraging at first sight, but they exploited precisely the linguistic elements, the rhetorical viewpoints of the Hungarian composer that were the scandal of right-minded music lovers. In other words, thanks to Vitale's work, Liszt today appears today to be a great musician accessible to most pianists. And from this example-perhaps the most significant one-I want to deduce a feature of his teaching that was truly decisive for anyone who wanted to understand its breadth. Vitale theoretically affirmed, and practically demonstrated, the necessary relationship between musical intention and technical means: anyone who is not capable of producing a sound suited to the different musical intonations of the author cannot "interpret." The interpretation necessarily passes from an analysis of muscle contractions and rests, from the observation of the position of the fingers, the hand, the arm, the trunk. A contraction on a specific note of the melody (I will use the simplest example) is part of the interpretative design; if in place of that contraction we use another muscle position, the accentuation or interpretation will be influenced.

The sum of all of these muscular positions (in simple words!) are the direct and unescapable expression of our musical intentions. Vitale invited us to be aware of and master that which happens at a muscular level to support our intentions (6). We may obviously believe that the supreme pianistic instinct does not require rationalizations. But Vitale did not theorize for the greatest talents alone, as much as for the vast audience of possible performers. We very often meet pupils who rather than closely study tendinous function in order to use it in the best possible manner, allow themselves to go where their hand takes them, often very far from the needs of the music. Vitale was not a theoretician who applied his theorems to his pupils, he was a craftsman who drew his syntheses from daily observation.

The musical world of his education, Naples in the twenties, and his Parisian experience with Alfred Cortot, had developed within him an idiosyncrasy of a psychological—literary nature for each solution to the problems arising. On the other hand, talent for him was the necessary basis of any elaboration, but it was not considered to be a justification for living on one's laurels. He warned us against the pitfalls of optimistic dilettantism, that which is entrusted to the instinct of the moment to untie knots not undone by analysis. It was precisely Vitale, an exceptional connoisseur of the piano, who felt the need to not limit view and parameters of study to the keyboard alone, and to embrace with all of his enlightening observations, the entire family of instruments, drawing also from great directors and singers the simple and universal rules of making music. His lessons were thus mostly based on his observations of a *technical* nature (in the sense of the *production of sound*), as well as on metrical, agogic, harmonic definitions related to the physical means suited to producing them. Vitale did not hold courses on "piano interpretation." But he in any event *interpreted* and his reading of the sheet of piano music was unforgettable, not so much for his words on history and style that for many schools are the only subject to be transmitted, but for the relationships between immanent strength of the text and the ever-suited technical responses that he knew how to gather. Each note thus received its structural, tone-colored and muscular definition, and acquired in the conscience of the performer its own relief. The relationship between Vitale and his pupils deserves further discussion: to avoid boring the reader with recollections that are too personal I will limit myself to just a few words: we his pupils felt reverential fear. His anger resembled a black cloud that draws closer and closer, rapid and menacing, unloading water, thunder and lightning and to then quickly leave; terrible anger often followed immediately afterwards I with repentance. At times the anger, which was aimed at the guilty action committed by the terrorized student, never at the person himself exploded to the point that the Maestro, amidst shouting and the throwing of innocent books noisily, left the room and left us consternated for a bit to ponder the gravity of the fact. And yet now I know that the unforgettable fear that we experienced taught us of the rigor that underlies any work done with the piano. Roughly speaking, one cannot *bluff* either with music or with the piano. Vitale's proverbial tantrums taught us to respect the difficulty of craftsmanship that is the irreplaceable basis of the great interpretation; he taught us that a quick reading of the page can in the hands of a pupil become superficial, dangerous: that sloppiness and negligence are the mortal enemies of an execution that requires the attention of the audience (7). This pianistic precision was not mere technical fastidiousness, it instead revealed a critical attitude where the concepts of decorum, order, beauty, measure, rigor, simplicity, clarity, honesty were all contained in the magic circle that defines art. If to return to the phrase *nom* whence we began, the technical precision of Vitale's pupils was considered on various occasions an obstacle to their achieving a high artistic level, it may at this point be said that much of the responsibility belongs to those who in interpreting the letter of his teaching were not able to understand the spirit behind it. Vitale was very close to all of those who were entrusted to him. Suffice it to recall that he was a teacher at the Conservatory for more than forty years and that as such he did not perfect or train the pupils of others; rather, he was the educator of novices, that he led to a diploma and beyond: thus the success of many of his pupils is solely his doing. We must add that Vitale was openly against the idea of "perfecting" with great interpreters, and some cases of disobedience made him suffer dearly. He did not believe in the usefulness of dismantling an insufficient technical position to reassemble it according to his principles; experience taught him that this kind of work hardly ever succeeded and when it did success was only partial. And yet it was precisely his notoriety that multiplied the occasions on which Vitale had to face similar problems. And he always did so with admirable delicacy, respect, solidarity for the suffering that the change naturally provoked. For many of us lessons were free. To speak of payment with the Maestro often put him in a bad mood. His relationship with money was inexplicable; if we presented him with a gift we ran the risk of being harshly scolded for the vanity of the gesture and for the doubtful taste that had guided the choice; this behavior seemed to be unusual

and nearly disconcerting to the point that some of his colleagues commented on it with incredulity and sarcasm. But Vitale was also in many ways a person who would throw off at times having fun doing so, those who do not accept alternatives to reassuming habits. He had an extraordinary freedom of thought accompanied by a deep compassion for his fellow man; every day he would leave the closed work environment with his pupils to observe with affection the Neapolitan people. He was certainly not the kind of person who exhausts all of his resources in his craft or in his professional environment. Anything but. Rather, he systematically kept his distance with a delightful taste for gossip that amused him and those who were lucky enough to spend time with him. They alone were, in fact, able to know the truth behind the stories about Vitale that circulated throughout Italy amongst those who instead were not so lucky. Every *performance* or participation in pianistic contests (few, very, few) on the part of his pupils made him so agitated that they culminated in long telephone calls to the few souls in which he chose to confide. The following scene is an unforgettable one: at 16 years of age, having won a national Rassegna in la Spezia, I played the *Mephisto-Walzer* at the prize concert. I was displeased with my performance, and behind the scenes I complained about it with those present. The Maestro overheard me and when the time was right he made a violent scene. The lesson that he wanted to teach me was that, despite the right, rather the duty, to be dissatisfied with oneself, communicating this dissatisfaction to others influences the fragile opinion of one's listeners to the point of compromising what little good has been done. He knew, in virtue of his so Parthenopean disenchantment, that exhibition is also based on a dose of suggestion and self-suggestion. It was precisely for this reason that he defended the portion of it that is based on flawless discipline and on devotion. From this respect for the work done together was derived his impassioned tendency to protect his pupils, even at the expense of interrupting friendships, of compromising personal relationships; and his patience in not compromising professional contacts that could eventually be useful to his pupils, even when in his heart they were unwanted. We have reached the end of our brief recollection. I have found this difficult to write because of the problem of discerning between the outcome of my time spent in Via Mergellina 2 and the outcome of my artistic journey from the years of the Conservatory to the present—so close was the relationship between teacher and pupil. My moved perception was only apparently in contrast with the marvelous wisdom—this word is so appropriate—that guided the Maestro when it was time for him and his pupil to go their separate ways. No possessiveness, no jealousy, on the contrary, respect for the artistic independence and affection that I would not hesitate to define paternal. Thus, I am not the right person to express a detached opinion on him, nor do I believe the time to have come for this opinion to be ripe. What is certain is that Vitale—in life and incredibly in death as well—divided musical Italy into "vitaliani" and "anti-vitaliani." This is certainly a sign of greatness: but I would like to complain about two aspects of this never-ending controversy. The first is that in the obituaries published ten years ago Vitale was made out to be an *éminence grise* that from Via Mergellina controlled Italian musical life. Anyone who met him knows that he did not have the character of the manipulative person and that his character, so vulnerable when far from the keyboard, certainly did not allow him to force himself onto just anyone. The second, related to the first, is that that same character made him subject to people who were not always up to par with him, who with their doubtful testimony often obfuscated his public image. Vitale was hurt by them, and he continues to be so today. I have tried to emphasize all of the extraordinary positive elements that make of Vitale the greatest Maestro of piano of the second half of the century in Italy. I have also tried to objectively trace the confines of his work. What makes me indissolubly linked to Vincenzo Vitale is precisely his desire to evaluate with marvelous clarity his limits and the limits of

#### Notes

1) Vitale's statement that "pianistic music is two-thirds made up of the articulation of the fingers" is perhaps the crucial point that takes the Maestro away from a tradition that is strongly rooted in

interpretative practice. In practice, many musical fragments that Vitale attributed to the brilliant method are commonly defined as pertaining to "cantabilità."

2) As for the relationship between Vitale and young talents, do not judge me to be immodest if I cite an episode recounted by Marisa Somma: the Maestro had had her listen to Michele Campanella, a ten-year-old child, from behind a door as Campanella improvised on the first of Bach's *Inventios for Two Voices*, saying out loud: "Where is one to begin?" Vitale was a man of profound convictions that had matured amidst painful doubts.

3) Throughout his professional and artistic life Vitale attempted to find the most exhaustive answer to the question that he had not been able to solve in his first late approaches to the pianoforte. How should one play the pianoforte? How should one teach one to play the pianoforte? If one understands the simple greatness of this instant, all of the meaning of his work, of his apostolate, of his polemical vis appears to be clear and coherent.

4) Let us attempt to mentally list the great pianists of yesterday and today that make of composure their outside feature and let us try to think of them as cold or insensitive...

5) If the pianist who does not press and push when he sees a fortissimo is cold, whatever are harpsichord and organ players who know not what to do with pressure?

6) I repeat for the sake of clarity: this need that goes against the immediacy of instinct is precisely of the pianoforte, an instrument mediated by a complex mechanism that more than many others may rise to unimaginable peaks of sound, just as it can unpleasantly reveal its heart of steel.

7) In order to achieve this muscle control, this ability to listen to the smallest variations that intervene in the musculature of the fingers and the arm, Vitale suggests an untiring practice of the most elementary exercises: organized with practicality, this cycle of exercises is a true gymnasium of digital exercise, the final purpose of which is the independence and the strengthening of the single finger.

8) The flawless attention to the simple but essential fact that each key is to be played to the end and not lightly touched, as many small and great pianists believe that they can limit themselves to doing, has a series of surprising implications: I limit myself to observing that, by doing thus, we play inside the keyboard and not on the keyboard; that the music is not lightly touched, rather it is possessed; that the hierarchy of sounds, vertical and horizontal, reveals all of its needs; that he who lightly touches the keyboard loses many tones that, because of their marvelous complexity, make of the pianist an actual concentrator of his fingers (one need only try one of Debussy's preludes to experience this last observation).

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