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# Interview with composer Jacopo Baboni-Schilingi

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Interview with composer Jacopo Baboni-Schilingi on the world of contemporary music.

On the occasion of this interview we found in his salon the contemporary composer Jacopo Baboni-Schilingi to discuss his journey, the transitions between France and Italy, and the evolution of his aesthetic practices and designs. Born in Milan in 1971, he began his musical training very early, under the auspices of Ivan Fedele. In 1993, he moved to France to continue his studies at IRCAM. Once this course was completed, at the request of Luciano Berio he went back to Italy to found a department of pedagogy in the Tempo Reale centre in Florence. Beyond composition, his activity extends to the creation of interactive sound installations. In this area he has collaborated with artists such as Miguel Chevalier, Elias Crespin or Arman. In our discussions, the collaborations he leads with other artists appear as a way of escaping from the "small milieu" of contemporary music. Through these exchanges we have also talked about the creative constraints associated with these collaborative relationships and his sometimes complicated relationship to institutions.

## When you arrived in France in 1993, at the age of 22, you joined the music composition and computer science curriculum of IRCAM. Can you tell us about your arrival in Paris and your entry into this institution?

Yes I arrived in 1993, definitely it's going to be said. I had had some contacts with France before. The importance of IRCAM was major and landing in this institution was an incredible chance. But, to tell the truth, I didn't really know what IRCAM was. I had applied for many competitions with the aim of starting my career, but I didn't know that it was actually a study program. I thought it was a kind of competition where we won a prize, a scholarship or the opportunity to give a concert. When I understood what the IRCAM was, my life turned, that's where I decided to leave Italy for France. Going to France at that time was for me like going to the United States today. Now it may seem ridiculous to talk about France and Italy in terms of great distances and great differences, but at that time France was for me unknown.

Until you entered IRCAM you had a rather classical musical training. How did the course you took at IRCAM influence, change your relationship to sound and music? You have spoken to us several times about a period when you had to "break your ear".

My musical learning led me to acquire the "absolute ear", to always have it at 440 hertz in the ear. I had to be able to spot piano-plated chords, transcribe them and see them while hearing them. But the absolute ear training is an absolute nonsense. Today, for Mozart's ear, it would be practically a floor.It is a question of tuning. Before IRCAM I had attended some Milanese production studios. I had therefore developed skills in sound and musical computing. But there are the skills on one side and the experience and maturity on the other, these are two things to distinguish. And at IRCAM

there was a huge pool of people who had not only the skills but also a great maturity accompanying them. When I entered IRCAM, I realized that electronic music did not have equal temperament. Temperately composing with electronic music would amount to quantifying a world that is not quantifiable. Tristan Murail and Stephen McAdams did me a test. They made me listen to Brahms Symphony No. 1 with two different tunes. Each time, I was sure of myself, I was answering "do minor, do minor, no doubt." But in fact the one was at 440 hertz and the other at 435 hertz, and what I was calling do minor was in such a minor case. It was from this experience which had greatly disturbed me that I started to do exercises of de-temperament of the ear, that is to say to learn to adjust my ear. It was all a great shock. So the IRCAM helped me to de-temperate and open my ear which, due to my learning, was too quantified. It was like breaking down a wall, with the curiosity to explore what's on the other side. I discovered a much more diverse world and that's where I started to really get interested in ancient and contemporary music. Ancient music dates before the equal temperament, and therefore exists independently of the tune. Contemporary music uses so many games that this landmark is no longer at all indispensable. When I understood this, I began to compose music that satisfied me as much in terms of writing as in terms of sound. Before, in some way I composed temperate electronics. From IRCAM, it expanded.

## In this French landscape of research centres, can we spot different considerations of sound at the same time?

When I arrived in Paris, there were the GRM, the IRCAM and the UPIC Workshops by Iannis Xenakis. This means that inside the device there were three research centres for so-called "savory" electronic music. While I arrived from Italy, once again with a rather small experience, I was able to attend these three centres and to attend extraordinary concerts. There were three centres, three masters, three schools. I was in the one that was most interested, most related to writing. The UPIC Workshops were, of course, also linked to writing but favoured a very technological approach. The GRM had a completely different vision, another form of writing based on concrete sound, on the very nature of the sound, from which I was a little distant at that time.

## Why did you create Prisma?

There I can't do anything other than talk about politics and even ethics. I had married IRCAM. I had completely embraced his policy. But from the late 1990s, at the time of the cohabitation Chirac-Jospin, IRCAM was under great pressure and changed direction. So what I had married was metamorphosed. I really did not agree with the new direction taken because this was reflected in major strategic choices, especially through the killing of some very important software. This is the case with the PatchWork (PW) software, in which I had invested years of work. Among other things, interactivity and interdisciplinarity were ostracized as I had just started projects of interactive installations with Arman and Pier Luigi Copat. So I wrote a letter to all the people who had left IRCAM for these same reasons. We were a few. Very informally, I invited them to Florence where I was head of a pedagogy department at Tempo Reale. That's how PRISMA was born. In fact, it is a research group in which we meet every six months to share our new knowledge. There are composers, teachers-researchers, musicologists... a whole bunch of different professions. We make everything available between us, computer code, scores, techniques, ideas, etc., with the intention of training us to reflect on each other.

## Your activity is very diverse, it is divided between composition of course, teaching, photography, artistic collaborations, research or the production of

**software of music computing. How do you find your balance in all this? Is there a cohesive dynamic that runs your activity or do you see diversity as an end in itself?**

Both, it's sure. I'm attracted to diversity but I hate dispersion. My second master, Luciano Berio, learned one thing. He had a very diverse activity. One day I asked him how he was doing all this without abandoning the composition. He replied that it was simple because he was always doing the same thing. When he composed a piece, he talked about it at a conference, when he was running an institution, he was producing a piece. And I think I'm doing a bit the same. When I teach, I teach what I'm doing. The more theoretical research that I conduct is the basis on which my compositions develop. Photography is later, I started in 2007 and had to learn new techniques. But photography is above all a way to keep track of my calligraphic practice and I would say that it has always been part of my activity. In my activity, it is writing that gives cohesion. Writing can go through computer code, partition, audio file and also teaching. For me writing is polymorphic. Each time it is the same but in a different form.

**In collaboration with other artists, how do you articulate your practice to other mediums than sound or music? Are there other elements that influence your compositional choices?**

I have been working with different artists since I was 26 years old. I started with architect Pier Luigi Copat, with whom we made an installation combining architecture and music. Then I worked with Arman, Jean-Pierre Balpe, and I had a lot of dialogue with Yacine Ait Kaci and Grégory Chatonsky. Then I worked a lot with Miguel Chevalier. With Miguel it's a kind of beautiful encounter that has lasted for years. I wanted to start the collaborations because I had noticed that architects, poets, choreographers, painters, etc., listened to all kinds of music but very little contemporary music. Their musical tastes were varied, they ranged from jazz to pop to rock... And those who listened to contemporary music listened very little. Interest in contemporary music was generally very weak. It must be said that the contemporary music milieu is self-sustaining. Composers write for composers and not really for the public. When I met Pier Luigi, he asked me if I knew Brian Eno, that I didn't know... We were afraid of jazz because they were monsters of instruments and we had to write everything. We were afraid of pop because she was selling CD avalanches when we couldn't get one. By dating other artists, I wanted to link my music to something other than in the context of contemporary music. I was looking for collaborations. I was contacting artists and others came to me. Do collaborations lead to constraints? It depends on the collaboration. The film music I was able to do, for example, was motivated by different things. In one case, the directors asked me to make a musical creation through their films. In the other, they asked me for music that makes "puet-puet" or "ding-ding" and I was there or else it was rejected. My motivation in this case was more pecuniary. But it is certain that constraints are added when working with other artists. Sometimes these constraints allow me to deepen some of my ideas. I have often engaged in a collaboration with another artist to advance my research. With Miguel Chevalier it works very well. We have done a dozen works together. There is really a cross between us, there is a dialogue that has been established. Other artists, like Arman or Sarkis, have given me carte blanche. It may be due to the age difference. However, before composing for their works, we had huge epistolary exchanges, which engaged discussions on the concepts of funds. I don't think I have ever collaborated with an artist who was putting me a right of veto.

**You have a great interest in youth. We notice this through the educational workshops through the musical creation led by your wife Gaja and argue that you manifest it to the young artists and collectives of artists. How does it matter to you?**

If some artists hadn't shown interest in me when I was a teenager, I wouldn't be a composer today. So I lived it myself and it's important to give it back via others. My first master Ivan Fedele was interested in what I was doing because there is an honest immaturity form in the youth. It's hard to cheat on a composition when you're 12-13 years old. A second thing is that when I was young, "contemporary" music was already the music of dead composers. And what's more, composers who died at honorable ages, not early. I had a big problem with this. It pushed me to associate and promote young artists. Then relationships with younger artists allow me to locate myself, to see if what I do has become dusty or academic. Then with young people there is a certain desire for discovery. I am getting older but I believe that this desire for discovery has never left me, something that causes problems in some institutional settings [laughs]