

Giovanni Bataloni

Franco Donatoni - *La Souris Sans Sourire* – for string quartet – (ediz. Ricordi – 1988)

An overall view on form and analysis of the counterpoint and other combinatorial technics in Donatoni's style.

La souris sans sourire, the 6. and last string quartet in the composer's catalog, has been composed in 1988 and dedicated to the Quartet of the Ensemble Intercontemporaine.

This work (16 minutes of duration) is builded as a series of panels, that means different sections, with different metronomes. Each panel has a own internal structure and coherence.

These panels are separated by clear breaks, (sometimes a whole measure) and are approached according to a (principle of contrast), by alternating omorhythmic sections and counterpointed sections, *solo* and *tutti* sections etc.

The composition follows a single formal direction. Since the beginning and for two panels the extension doesn't exceed two octaves, the central range of human voice. From the third panel on Donatoni gradually extends the range until the ninth panel. After this point he begins to resume the previous figures, but by reducing and filtrating. In the last measures there is a real *reprise* of the *incipit*. The composition finishes with just one note (c#) played on 3 different octaves.

As far as dynamics are concerned we can see the same form. At the beginning there is *ppp* (*con sordina*), then there is a *crescendo* until the *fff, sempre* of panel 9. From 10 panel on it diminishes and come back to *ppp, alla punta*. Only the last note is played *fff pizzicato alla bartòk*.

In the following table is the sequence of panels with a short description of their characteristics:

PANELS	BPM	BARS	DESCRIPTION
PAN. 1	♩ = 52	1-18 (18)	Presentation of materials and first <i>figure</i> . Descending semitones. Two octaves of extension. " <i>pp</i> " <i>con sordino</i>
PAN. 2	♩ = 63	19-46 (28)	Figure: repeated notes in the same range of the previous section. Ascending semitones (inversion of the previous sequence). <i>Sempre "pp"</i>
PAN. 3	♩ = 104	47-94 (34+12)	Part 1 (47-81) = solo viola with "answers" of cello and short breaks "a 4" Part 2 (81-94) <i>chorale</i> mouvement with glissandi and trills (<i>crescendo</i>)
PAN. 4	♩ = 93	94-138 (26+9+9)	Part 1: tight alternation <i>tutti/solo</i> – broken rhythms - <i>pp pontic</i> - Part 2: solo cello with accents of violins e viola. Part 3: solo violin I with others that play <i>glissando</i> - <i>f</i> -
PAN. 5	♩ = 115	139-190 (50)	<i>Fugato</i> of violins and viola with cello <i>pizzicato</i> - <i>f sempre</i> - Omorhythmical sequences a 4 (harmonizer) - <i>pp</i> – broken by interventions of violin II (extension of the range)
PAN. 6	♩ = 74	191-211 (21)	<i>Chorale</i> section. Octaves with glissando and trills - <i>ff sempre</i> - <i>pos. norm.</i>
PAN. 7	♩ = 115	212-248 (37)	Solo of two violins with interventions (harmonics, <i>gliss.</i>) of viola and cello. Further expansion of the range. The panel ends with <i>glissando</i> upwards (indef.) of the 2 violins. – <i>pp, tast</i> -
PANN. 8	♩ = 104	249-255 (7)	Short, <i>violent</i> break of soli Viola and Cello – <i>f, pos. norm.</i> -
PANN. 9	♩ = 93	256-298 (44)	Reprise of the octaves glissando with rhythmical <i>mismatches</i> broken by omorhythmical ascending sequences. - <i>fff sempre</i> – Maximum extension of the range.

PANN. 10	♩ = 104	299-340 (42)	Few notes (with mordent) that gradually becomes ticker. Wide range but narrowing. – <i>f</i> , <i>punta</i> , <i>pontic</i> - End with <i>solos</i> viola and violin I.
PANN. 11	♩ = 41	341-368 (20)	Section with chords – Few chords that becomes ticker. Narrower range. - <i>p e ppp</i> – Tacet for *3 bars between 359 and 361, broken by a single intervention <i>tutti</i> . Highest note (as possible) with mordent - <i>ff</i> , <i>al pontic</i> . -
PANN. 12	♩ = 63	361-368 (8)	Ascending chromatic scales (<i>pizz</i>). They put again the damper – <i>ff</i> , <i>ma con sordina</i> - omorhythmical sequences that breaks. Central range.
PANN. 13	♩ = 52	369-385 (17)	Descending chromatic scales broken by <i>glissandi</i> . At bars 374 the <i>tempo</i> becomes: "il più veloce possibile" (as fast as possible). End with solos of the two violins – <i>ppp</i> -
PANN. 14	♩ = 52	386-394 (9)	Ripresa of the first <i>figure</i> with different notes and with different movements - <i>ppp</i> , <i>punta arco</i> , <i>tast</i> -
PANN. 15	♩ = 63	395-396 (2)	Repeated notes, harmonics (short reprise of panel 2). <i>Glissando</i> upwards (as possible – undef) of violin II - <i>f</i> - End on a <i>c#</i> over 3 octaves. Medium-low range - <i>pizz bartók</i> , <i>fff</i> .

- **Figure** and combinatorial technics.

Donatoni uses this word, *figura*, to indicate not a thematic element, but a complex basis element of the structure, that he develops following the alchemic principle of ***solve et coagula***.

The Figure is a *clot* of sound, rhythmic articulation and gesture (instrumental gesture and expressiveness).

With *coagula* Donatoni identifies the figure as it is determined, and *solve* is the handling, as the figure will grow and change.

The composer then identifies a unit of instrumental gestures, rhythmic articulation and timbral (and harmonic) content as a source of his inspiration. The manipulation, the combinatorial work as the development of this inspiration.

Analysing these 3 aspects that make up the figure, we find that the instrumental gesture is the most important element, that brings back to the inspiration, to the source of the gesture (both of playing and of composing). It's very important to note that Donatoni began his musical career as a violinist, therefore he had a deep knowledge and mastery in writing for strings.

Rhythmic articulation, at least at the beginning of each panel, is strictly linked to the nature of instrumental gesture, but then develops according to different criteria, generated from a development of the figure itself or from mathematical criteria. Among the most important influences in rhythm, we can remember Donatoni's passion for jazz music. He composed works as *Sweet basil* and *Hot* directly inspired to jazz and we can find traces of this (at least rhythmical) inspirations here too.

As far as harmonic content is concerned, each figure in this work is characterized by the repetition of fragment of chromatic scale in group of 2, 3 or 4 consecutive degrees, or more, to the use of the entire 12 semitones scala presented in different forms, with alternating degrees, and then to the *glissando* (panels 6-9).

It is interesting to observe how Donatoni often uses contrapuntal technics to create figures or entire sections that however doesn't seem contrapuntal by the listening.

The use of contrapuntal technics, along with other manipulation technics is found throughout the course of the work. At this point I would therefore present a more detailed analysis of some passages in which you can find the most clear evidence, so as to have a better idea of the combinatorial game in Donatoni's compositional *craft*.

Example n° 1

Take for example the very first initial figure. It is built from a single sequence divided into 4 parts, respectively, which begins with the note *e* (part I and IV) and the note *a* (part II and III), and is closed by the repetition of the last 4 notes with the addition of a *d*.

Sequence:

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Violin I (A), Violin II (B), Viola (C), and Cello (D). Each part is written on a separate staff. Part A (Vln I) starts with a red note 'e' and continues with a sequence of notes. Part B (Vln II) starts with a red note 'a' and continues with a sequence of notes. Part C (Vla) starts with a green note 'e' and continues with a sequence of notes. Part D (Cello) starts with a blue note 'e' and continues with a sequence of notes. The sequence is divided into four parts, each starting with a different note and ending with a repetition of the last 4 notes with the addition of a *d*. A *Coda* symbol is present at the end of the Cello part.

The composer uses the 4 parts of the sequence to build a sort of *headless canon*, as follows:

Violin I	Part I	Part II	Part III	Part IV
Violin II	Part II	Part III	Part IV	Part I
Viola	Part III	Part IV	Part I	Part II
Violoncello	Part IV	Part I	Part II	Part III

I called this scheme *headless canon* because all four parts come almost simultaneously, without following the imitative pattern of canon.

The incomes also are not exactly simultaneous. Here too Donatoni, recalling a contrapuntal model offset the attacks so that each of the 4 instruments comes in sequence (even if very fast) according to an order that recalls (at least on paper) the pattern *Subject – Response – Subject – Response*, typical of the *Fugue*.

Example n 2

In the 2nd panel there is a figure with repeated notes alternate to held notes or chords. The composer chooses here a figure contrasting with the previous one both for gesture and for direction: the same half-tone movement, but this time ascending.

The base notes are different from those of first panel, but we can find a symmetry between the two sections: the notes of the starting chords ($f\#_3 - d_4 - f\#_4$; $6_{amin} - 3_{amaj}$) are exactly the inversion of those at the opening of previous panel. ($f_3 - a_3 - f_4$; $3_{amaj} - 6_{amin}$). In addition the melodic path of every part is obtained by inverting the previous sequence, with an exchange between the instruments (*violin I* \leftrightarrow *cello*; *violin II* \leftrightarrow *viola*).

Exchange and inversion of roles
1 Panel → 2 Panel

Panel I: sequence in "canon"

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello

Panel II: inversion

2 (ex cello)
Vln. I
(ex viola)
Vln. II
(ex violin II)
Vla.
(ex violin I)
Vc.

Example n° 3

Another interesting example shows us how Donatoni uses in a similar way different parts of a sequence (as the initial one) or single notes of a scale, or of a fragment of scale. Take for example the chromatic sequence of measure 34. The extension of this scale is a 7^hmaj (diminished 8^{ve}), from the *f*#₂ of the cello to the *f*₃ of the first violin.

Ex. 3

Seq. 1 (m. 34)

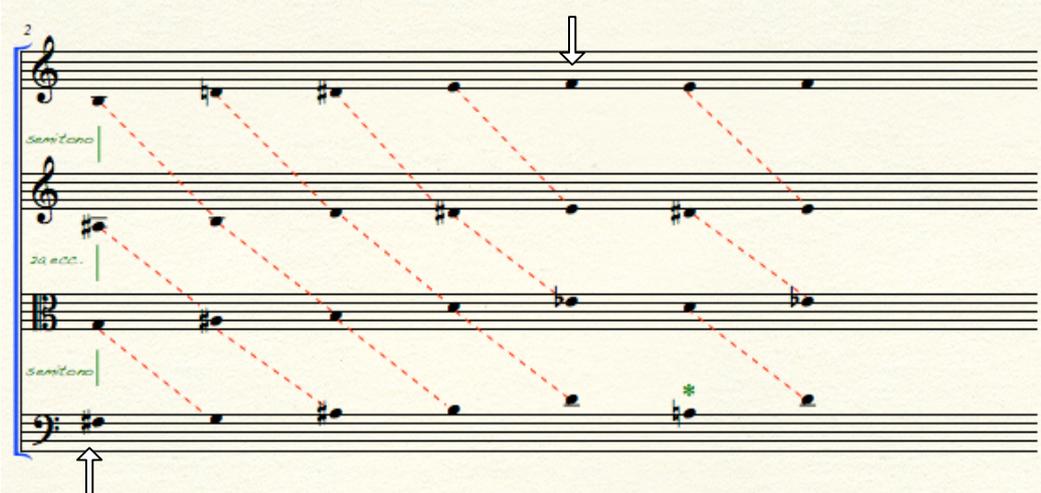


In this range Donatoni builds a path in which two consecutive jump of semitone and 3rd minor (2d *augm*) follow a series of 4 chromatic semitones.

The verticalisation implemented by the composer, with a structure that always remind the canonic structure, turns out as a rapid cluster or chords succession with different intervals and chromatic colours.

Ex. 3 bis

Estremo acuto



Estremo grave

*nota n°3 della sequenza, qui isolata

Example n°4

The treatment of chromatic scales in the Panel n°5 deserves attention too.

This panel opens with a succession of rapid scales of the 2 violins and viola, punctuated by the *pizzicato* of the cello.

Even here Donatoni uses not only the complete chromatic scale, but the same idea of scale, as a rapid succession of adjoining degrees.

Actually he suggests this idea always presenting a scale with more or less irregularities and distortions:

Ex. 4 (m. 141)

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

d# is missing

Example n°5

Finally we can find another example of the technique of verticalisation in the use of the same material from panel 6 (*mm. 192-193*) to panel 9.

At the beginning of panel n°6 all the instruments play a note doubled at the octave and form chords that move (*glissando*) to others chords and create a omorhythmic, quasi choral, harmonic succession.

The same notes that form these chords can be found, always in octave at Panel n°9 (*m. 256*), played like a sequence by the first violin.

Ex. 5 (*mm. 192 e segg., mm. 256-259*)

Accordi - Pannello 6 Sequenza - Pannello 9

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

This analysis is limited to these few cues but could be extended to the whole composition in order to find many other correspondences. In these quartet, as in each work of Donatoni, the writing technic is at the same time instrument to subdue the sound material to inspiration and cue to give life to new musical ideas.

**Actually the third quartet, written during the cooperation with the "studio di fonologia Rai di Milano" is not for strings, but for 4 tracks magnetic tape.*

***References to alchemic principles and technics are taken from the lessons hold by F. Donatoni in Modena in 1996 (Centro Musica Modena – Compositori nel III millennio).*