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# Antiphonal Composing in Salvatore Sciarrino's *Superflumina*

## *Composición antifonal en Superflumina de Salvatore Sciarrino*

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### Abstract

Salvatore Sciarrino's *Superflumina* references a biblical text and religious themes, such as the beginning of Psalm 137. He incorporates an antiphon in *Quadro III*, connecting the Psalm text with the antiphonal method used in church music. The *Quadro III (Antifona)* represents an interrupted dream, assuming peripeteia function. In an interrogation scene, the protagonist, "La Donna," recites fragments from the *Song of Songs* while being interrogated by a policeman. The various instruments perform disparate sound elements, contrasting various musical ideas. This research aims to identify compositional strategies that clarify Sciarrino's approach to the antiphonal mode of composing and explore the elements from antiphonal performing for the quotation of the *Song of Songs*, and in what form he integrates them into his compositional style.

**Keywords:** Antiphon, Compositional Style, Psalm 137, Contemporary Music, Opera.

### Resumen

*Superflumina*, de Salvatore Sciarrino, hace referencia a un texto bíblico y a temas religiosos, como el comienzo del Salmo 137. Incorpora una antifona en el *Quadro III*, conectando el texto del Salmo con el método antifonal utilizado en la música sacra. El *Quadro III (Antifona)* representa un sueño interrumpido, asumiendo la función de peripecia. En una escena de interrogatorio, la protagonista, "La Donna", recita fragmentos del *Cantar de los Cantares* mientras es interrogada por un policía. Los distintos instrumentos interpretan elementos sonoros dispares, contrastando diversas ideas musicales. Este estudio pretende identificar estrategias compositivas que aclaren el enfoque de Sciarrino sobre el modo antifonal de componer y explorar los elementos procedentes de la interpretación antifonal para la cita del *Cantar de los Cantares*, y de qué forma los integra en su estilo compositivo.

**Palabras clave:** Antifona, estilo compositivo, salmo 137, música contemporánea, ópera.

## Introduction

The music theatre *Superflumina* was premiered on 20 May 2011 at the Nationaltheater Mannheim under the musical direction of Tito Ceccherini and with staging by Andrea Schwalbach (Elzenheimer, 2011). Further performances took place in Aachen in 2012, in Palermo in 2017 on the occasion of the Italian composer's 70th birthday (Elzenheimer, 2019) and in Ostrava in 2022 as part of the New Opera Days (Havlíková, 2022). *Superflumina's* plot takes place at a large railway station in Italy. In the preamble to the score, entitled *Le grandi stazioni ferroviarie*, the Sicilian-born composer points out that this place is intended to represent a theocratic monumental building that foregrounds the loneliness of each individual as passers-by flow in all directions and become a river that contributes to the depersonalisation of humanity (Sciarrino, 2010).

The libretto of *Superflumina*, as with most of the libretti of his stage works, was written by the composer himself. At this point, it should be noted that his writing process usually consists of drawing on existing texts, which he then subjects to a process of reduction and condensation (Nyffeler, 2011) whereby Sciarrino often tends to use very short and concise sentences (Samonà, 2020). Specifically, references to texts from the Bible can be recognised in *Superflumina*. In addition, Sciarrino reveals that he used other literary sources of inspiration for the libretto such as Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* and, in particular, a novel by the Canadian writer Elisabeth Smart, from whose reading the theme of the opera emerged (Sciarrino, 2010). The novel in question is *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, published in 1945. The title itself refers to a specific passage from the Bible which Sciarrino in turn used for the title of this opera, namely the beginning of the Psalm 137, "Super flumina Babylonis illic sedimus et flevimus", in English, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept" (Biblica, 2023a). Sciarrino probably intended the title to create an association between the waters of Babel and the anonymous streams of people that often occur in Italian railway stations (Elzenheimer, 2019).

*Superflumina* has La Donna as her main protagonist, a woman who is constantly crossed by numerous passers-by who always disregard and ignore her. Sciarrino once said as he once replied to the question of why he often uses a woman as the main protagonist for his operas: "The female character should always be at the centre of the opera, for the world is always seen through the eyes of a woman" (Saxer, 2011, p. 28). In the preface to the score, La Donna is introduced as follows:

A homeless woman, a being wounded by love, will be our protagonist. Although she is a stranger to herself, she seems to camouflage herself in her milieu, in the emptiness that precedes violence. As she puts on her torn identity today, she uses the greatest lyrical expression there is, the *Song of*

*Songs* from the Old Testament. (Sciarrino, 2010, *Le grandi stazioni ferroviarie*, par. 15)

The second biblical reference in this opera has just been mentioned. The *Song of Songs* is a book of the Old Testament and the Hebrew *Tanakh*, which contains tender, sometimes explicitly erotic love songs dating from around the 10th century BC. The *Song of Songs* is characterised by the alternating appearance of two main characters, a man and a woman (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023), although other speakers occasionally have their say, acting as a kind of chorus. No logically coherent plot can be derived from the narrative in this book, for it is basically about a man and a woman alternately expressing their love for each other by emphasising the beautiful qualities of their counterpart (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023).

## The libretto in *Quadro III*

The alternating recitative, which takes place in the *Song of Songs*, is also characteristic of the concept of the antiphon which Sciarrino attempts to realize in this *Quadro III*, presumably due to the initial indication *Antifona*. Sciarrino's choice of this ancient literary source may have something to do with its loving content, which is intended to emphasize La Donna's actions at this point in the opera. In addition, the dialogue form of the *Song of Songs* provides the perfect basis for Sciarrino's compositional striving for an antiphon. In it, La Donna sings fragments from the *Song of Songs* which are intended to represent the above-mentioned interplay between the man and the woman from this biblical book. The personality and mode of expression of the beloved in the biblical *Song of Songs* are recognizable in the verses of the homeless woman, although La Donna in *Superflumina* had to go through a tragic past compared to the biblical depiction: "She finds herself at a zero point of existence, in a situation of nothing-life of such overwhelming totality that no way out seems possible." (Saxer, 2011, p. 31). Furthermore, La Donna does not encounter a groom in *Superflumina*, but rather frightened and aggressive individuals. Moreover, the chorus of the *Song of Songs*, which in Sciarrino's opera is represented by the streams of people passing in a hurry in a public place, the railway station (Elzenheimer, 2011), does not constitute a supportive community.

A sudden change in the plot occurs in the second half of this opera, namely in *Quadro III* (Sciarrino, 2010), to be analysed in this article, which, as mentioned above, bears the subtitle *Antifona* and consists of very different sound elements (Saxer, 2011). Instead of specifying the tempo, Sciarrino writes "Esiste il tempo per i dispersi?", in English, "Does the tempo exist for the lost?" (Sciarrino, 2010, p. 273). The action told here takes place at night, sometime between sunset and dawn in an anonymous office: "too many towers of papers and too much emptiness. A shadow slowly descends and rises again; short as a blink and always

repeating itself" (Sciarrino, 2010) The text of *Quadro III* is a paraphrase of the beginning of the fourth part of the aforementioned novel by Smart, as La Donna is interrogated by a policeman both in this novel and in the opera *Superflumina* (Elzenheimer, 2011). Instead of answering the questions he asks her, the lady recites fragments from the *Song of Songs*. Although Sciarrino uses the quotations that already appear in Smart's novel for his opera, he also employs other fragments from the *Song of Songs*. In doing so, he sometimes picks up on other images that are more symbolically charged than in the original (Misuraca, 2017).

This is a brief outline of the scene: the policeman, who is rude to La Donna, seems to want to urge her to stop her activities at the station and finally go home. La Donna, for her part, fantasises and conjures up her friend. And so he writes "it's an interrupted dream, it blandly takes the place of the peripeteia." (Sciarrino, 2010, *Le grandi stazioni ferroviarie*, par. 22). The text that Sciarrino uses here thus consists, as already mentioned, basically of quotations from the *Song of Songs*. Since there are numerous translations of these biblical poems into many languages, sometimes some words or sentence constructions may look a little different from language to language. The Figure 1 shows two columns, with the left-hand column corresponding to my translation into English of the original text from *Superflumina* (Sciarrino, 2010), while the right-hand column refers to the respective passage of the *Song of Songs* (Biblica, 2023b), from which Sciarrino presumably took the text and possibly adapted it a little:

and as I opened	<b>She</b> <sup>5</sup> I arose to open for my beloved,
<b>A Policeman</b> What's the connection between you and that man?	
<b>The Woman</b> From my hand dripped myrrh	<b>[She]</b> and my hands dripped with myrrh,
<b>A Policeman</b> Be good, you'd better	
<b>The woman</b> myrrh on the latch - I open the beloved had disappeared	<b>[She]</b> on the handles of the bolt. <sup>6</sup> I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had left; he was gone.
<b>A policeman</b> Did you sleep in the same room?	
<b>The Woman</b> If you meet my beloved	<b>[She]</b> <sup>8</sup> If you find my beloved,
<b>A Policeman</b> Shut up	
<b>The Woman</b> What will you say to him?	<b>[She]</b> what will you tell him?
<b>A Policeman</b> No wonder you ended up here	

Figure 1

Comparison of the libretto text (*Quadro III* from Sciarrino's *Superflumina*) and the source text (*Song of Songs*).

Libretto	<i>Song of Songs</i>
<b>The Woman</b> Bowed cherry tree  I go to meet my friend him who tramples the lilies	( <i>Song of Songs 2</i> ) <b>He</b> <sup>15</sup> our vineyards that are in bloom. <b>She</b> <sup>16</sup> My beloved is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies
<b>The Woman</b> How beautiful you are my friend how beautiful you are your eyes doves  How beautiful you are my friend how beautiful you are your eyes doves	( <i>Song of Songs 1</i> ) <b>He</b> <sup>15</sup> How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves. <b>She</b> <sup>16</sup> How handsome you are, my beloved! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant.
<b>The Woman</b> Stilling a garden  of every incense tree  Blow on the garden exhale its aromas	( <i>Song of Songs 4</i> ) <b>He</b> <sup>13</sup> Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates <sup>14</sup> with every kind of incense tree, <b>She</b> <sup>16</sup> Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere.
<b>The Woman</b> Open me friend perfect dove	( <i>Song of Songs 5</i> ) <b>He</b> <sup>2</sup> Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one.

There is no literal quotation from the *Song of Songs* at the very beginning of *Quadro III*. However, it does contain certain symbols that hint at the second part of the *Song of Songs*. Here La Donna says: "I go to meet my friend, him, who tramples the lilies" (Sciarrino, 2010, pp. 277–278). Although there is another statement in the *Song of Songs*, it also includes references to the friend and the lilies, namely: "My beloved is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies" (Biblica, 2023b). Unlike before, the next part is derived literally from the first part of the *Song of Songs*. Here, La Donna recites two fragments from the two main characters of the *Song of Songs*, the first of which is said by the man and the second by the woman. La Donna sings both here: "How beautiful you are my friend, how beautiful you are, your eyes doves. How beautiful you are my friend, how beautiful you are, your eyes doves." (Sciarrino, 2010, pp. 291–295). The next fragment comes from the 4th part of the *Song of Songs* and there are some changes regarding the selected words, although other sections of the text are reproduced almost verbatim. Once again, La Donna takes on the role of both the man and the woman from the *Song of Songs*. She says: "Stilling a garden of every incense tree, Blow on the garden exhale its aromas" (Sciarrino, 2010, pp. 302–303). The rest of the text recited by La Donna comes exclusively from the 5th part of the *Song of Songs*. There are only minimal changes to the original text, otherwise the original can be recognised for the most part. This section is characterised by the use of the policeman, who also contributes to the establishment of this dialogue form. Despite insistent questioning of the policeman, La Donna persistently continues with the recitation of the *Song of Songs* and does not allow a

coherent dialogue to form between the two characters, while the policeman gradually becomes nervous and ends the conversation with the sentence "No wonder you ended up here" (Sciarrino, 2010, pp. 316–317).

### The music in *Quadro III*

Once the text of *Quadro III* and its dialogue form have been commented on, it is now time to return to the concept of the antiphon, which Sciarrino attempts to implement compositionally in this work. This particular type of musical performance, characteristic of church music, is characterised by the appearance of a refrain, which is often sung before and after a psalm or canticle, sometimes even

between their verses (Nowacki, 2016), as in the following antiphon *Rorate caeli*, in English, "Drop down, ye heavens" (Fig. 1). Here, this refrain with the corresponding text *Rorate caeli* is sung repeatedly before each verse and at the very end. In total, it occurs 5 times.

The principle of the *Rorate caeli* antiphon just described is also adopted by Sciarrino in *Quadro III*, where he even uses the refrain 18 times. What is also striking is the fact that the initial appearances of the refrain follow a certain periodicity, because up to the 15th entry, each appearance always takes place at intervals of 6 bars. However, the 16th entry only occurs after 7 bars, as does the 17th entry. The 18th and final appearance of the refrain, on the other hand, only occurs after 14 bars.

1. **R** Orá-te cae-li dé-su-per, et nubes plu-ant justum.

*The Choir repeats : Rorate.*

1. Ne i-rascá-ris Dómi-ne, ne ultra memi-ne-ris in-iqui-tá-tis : ecce cí-vi-tas Sancti facta est de-sérta : Si-on de-sérta facta est : Je-rú-sa-lem de-so-lá-ta est : domus sancti-fi-ca-ti-ónis tu-ae et gló-ri-ae tu-ae, u-bi lauda-vé-runt te patres nostri.

**R.** Rorate.

3. Vi-de Dómi-ne, afflicti-ónem pópu-li tu-i, et mit-te quem missú-rus es : emítte Agnum domi-na-tó-rem ter-rae, de Petra de-sér-ti ad montem fi-li-ae Si-on : ut áufe-rat ipse jugum capti-vi-tá-tis nostrae.

**R.** Rorate.

2. Peccá-vimus, et facti sumus tamquam immúndus nos, et ce-cí-dimus qua-si fó-li-um uni-vé-rsi : et in-iqui-tá-tes no-strae qua-si ventus abstu-lé-runt nos : abscondísti fá-ci-em tu-am a no-bis, et al-li-sísti nos in manu in-iqui-tá-tis nostrae.

**R.** Rorate.

4. Conso-lámi-ni, conso-lámi-ni, pópu-le me-us : ci-to vé-ni-et sa-lus tu-a : qua-re moeró-re consúme-ris, qui-a inno-vá-vit te do-lor? Sal-vá-bo te, no-li tímé-re, ego e-nim sum Dóminus De-us tu-us, Sanctus Isra-el, Redémptor tu-us.

**R.** Rorate.

Figure 2  
*Rorate caeli* (Solesmes Abbey, 1961, pp. 1868–1870).

Musically, the vocal melodies, which are first performed by La Donna, but later by her and the policeman, are articulated by the periodic interruptions of a concrete instrumental sound pattern. This is a figure that always consists of similar elements, namely the strokes of the plates and bass drums, the low sounds of the piano, the downward *glissandi* of the strings in harmonics and several interventions by the woodwind instruments. Figure 2 shows the very first entry of the refrain in bar 31. First, I would like to point out the downward *glissandi* in the strings, which are marked in red. The first and second violins as well as the violas and cellos are each divided into two groups. In this first appearance, as in most, each of these string groups plays two harmonics at intervals of a major second. The harmonics are tremoloed and played in fortissimo dynamics. This instrumental module is almost identical to a figure that has already been described by Christian Utz with regard to Sciarrino's opera *Luci mie traditrici*, composed in 1998, who categorises it as "module C" (overtone *glissandi*) and is intended to imitate the sound of the wind in this opera about Gesualdo (Utz, 2010, p. 54). These *glissandi* from the strings are activated by the short bangs in pianissimo dynamics from the two pianos and the two bass drums. The two bassoons and two bass clarinets also contribute to this with multiphonics in piano dynamics. In addition, the flutes produce strongly accentuated air notes in fortissimo, which quickly disappear again.

I call these elements impulse sounds, which are performed by both percussion and woodwind instruments, and they are now marked in blue. Such impulse sounds are characteristic of Sciarrino's music, which he calls "little bang" in *Le Figure della musica da Beethoven a oggi*, because these figures generally trigger a chain of often new and surprising events (Cruz Guevara, 2016, p. 112). However, horns, trumpets, trombones and the steel plate (*lastra* in Italian) are responsible for a different element, as they play relatively long (quasi pedal) notes and are labelled in green. This involves horns playing a loud, muted sound which, like the strings, lasts for two bars, whereby the horns have a diminuendo up to pianissimo. Trombones, for their part, play with wa-wa mutes and sustain the fortissimo sound for two bars. However, the trumpet enters a little later and takes over the brass sound *dal niente*. The other instruments occasionally enter with a slightly shorter sustained note, often in conjunction with a wave-like dynamic course. These instruments, namely the first flute with air tone, the alto flute and Bb clarinet with *bisbigliando*, oboe and English horn with multiphonics as well as the marimba, are now marked in violet. All these elements make up the refrain, which adopts the following form on its first appearance.

However, the elements already listed do not always appear in the same shape, as illustrated by musical example 3, which depicts the twelfth appearance of the refrain. The red-marked downward *glissandi* of the strings are a permanent feature in all appearances of the refrain, although there are often variations in pitch and occasionally

also in the dynamic course. As before, each string part is divided into two groups, with each of these groups playing harmonics at intervals of a major second in relation to each other. Unlike before, they now do not play everything in fortissimo dynamics, but perform a crescendo and then a diminuendo. They start in mezzopiano and reach the climax of the crescendo at the end of the first bar, in fortissimo, after which they diminish "al niente". The beginning and end of these strings' figure is also emphasised by the double basses using *glissandi*. The impulse element marked in blue is also present, which is performed by both pianos and the flutes as before, although the dynamics are now also different. Trombones, horns, oboe and English horn also participate in this. Furthermore, the sustained notes that always appear at the beginning of the chorus can also be found here. While the bass drums, bassoons and bass clarinet produced an impulse sound at the very first appearance of the refrain, they are now responsible for the sustained tone element. Sciarrino thus strives for a subtle modification in the orchestration and sound colour of the elements used here when the refrain reappears and, to this end, makes use of popular compositional strategies such as repetition and variation, which run through *Superflumina*, especially the *Quadro III* (Villalobos, 2017, p. 96). The last element, namely the comparatively short sustained notes in violet, which are characterised by the wavelike dynamics, is also carried out here by the flutes and brass.

To examine the way in which the orchestration of the refrain is varied, it is also worth taking a look at his last appearance. The tremolo *glissando* of the harmonics is now only performed by the violins. It is noticeable that a forte dynamic is not achieved this time. In fact, the strongest dynamic indication for the strings is piano. In addition, the resulting harmony of each group of violins is not a major second, as was often the case before, but a third. This passage also shows that the figure in the strings is actually a continuation of the motif in the cellos and violas a bar earlier. Now the impulse sound or little bang, which is responsible for activating the strings' *glissandi*, is played by the horns, trombones, bass clarinets as slap and by a percussion instrument not yet mentioned, which Sciarrino describes as a bag of beer bottles located outside the stage. The sustained tone element is not present here. It may be recognisable in the melody of the voice, but in the appearance of the refrain, the voice essentially behaves independently of the other elements and instruments. In opposite to this, the last element, which is characterized by the use of short notes, can still be encountered. This figure, marked in purple (see Fig. 4), is performed by the alto flute, bass flute, clarinets and trumpets.

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**Figure 3**  
*Superflumina* (fragment). Sciarrino (2010, p. 280).

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Figure 4  
Superflumina (fragment). Sciarrino (2010, p. 302).



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The musical score is arranged in systems. The top system includes Flutes (Fl. in Do, Fl. c. in Sol, Fl. b. in Do), Clarinets (Cl. in Sib, Cl. b. 1. in Sib, Cl. b. 2. in Sib), and Bassoon (Fg.). The middle system includes Cor Anglais (Cr. 1. in Fa, Cr. 2. in Fa), Trumpets (Trb. 1. in Do, Trb. 2. in Do), Trombones (Trbn. 1., Trbn. 2.), and Saxophone (Sacco di bott. (fuori scena)). The bottom system includes Voice (La Donna, Un Poliziotto), Violins (Vni I, Vni II), Viola (Vle (tutti)), Violoncello (Vc. (tutti)), and Contrabass (Cb.).

Key annotations and markings include:
 

- Fl. b. in Do:** "fra i denti" (between the teeth), "ord. Re-Re#", "PPP", "mf", "10".
- Cl. b. 2. in Sib:** "a 2", "slap", "mf", "1.", "PPP".
- Cr. 1. in Fa:** "ff".
- Trbn. 1. & 2.:** "1.", "1. 2.", "ff".
- La Donna:** "Se incontrate il mi-o a-mato".
- Un Poliziotto:** "stan - za?".
- Vni I & II:** "1. solo", "tutti div.", "P", "PPP", "PPPP".
- Vle (tutti) & Vc. (tutti):** "sul pont.", "IV", "II", "pp", "fermare con l'arco", "PPPP".
- Cb.:** "sul pont.", "I", "II", "mp".

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**Figure 5**  
*Superflumina* (fragment). Sciarrino (2010, p. 315).

## Conclusion

To summarize, it can be said that Sciarrino implements antiphonal composition on three levels in the *Quadro III* from *Superflumina*: (1) The choice of text. The dialogue form of the fragments taken from the *Song of Songs* has a responsorial structure, which is also characteristic of the antiphonal musical performance of psalms and canticles in church music; (2) the Donna in dialogue with herself. The main character of this opera enters into a dialogue with herself at the beginning of this scene. She alternately quotes fragments of the man and fragments of the woman from the *Song of Songs*. Although in the second half of the scene she only recites the text of the beloved woman from the *Song of Songs*, from this point onwards she alternates with the new character entering the scene, the policeman; and (3) the presence of a refrain, which is characteristic of antiphons used in Gregorian chant, for example. This refrain results from the recurring appearance of an instrumental gesture that frames the sung text of La Donna. This refrain is not repeated verbatim, but is subjected to a process of variation and orchestral transformation. Sciarrino thus ties in with his ecological compositional thinking and is presumably intended to increase the intensity of the audience's perception through repetitive or almost repetitive elements (Haselböck, 2019, p. 134), meaning the refrain, which occurs a total of eighteen times. At the same time, it can be interpreted as the strict norms that society dictates to us and which, in this example, attempt to defeat La Donna, who is swimming against the tide. Nevertheless, she continues to sing her verses, trying to ignore and circumvent the dictates that are being imposed on her.

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