

REFERENCES TO EARLIER MUSICAL GENRES AND TOPICS IN SALVATORE SCIARRINO'S IL CANTO S'ATTRISTA, PERCHÉ?

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Abstract

This paper examines Salvatore Sciarrino's engagement with earlier musical genres in *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* (2019), focusing on two central references: the military march and the tempo notturno. Situated within a broader operatic tradition of mythological subjects and based on material derived from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Sciarrino's opera reactivates historical genres not as direct quotations, but as transformed dramaturgical and compositional devices. The analysis first considers the march in Scene III, where Agamemnon's return after the destruction of Troy is accompanied by a stylised and distorted march-like texture. Through rhythmic models such as dotted figures and triplets, as well as references to Verdi's *Marcia trionfale* from *Aida*, Sciarrino evokes the genre's ceremonial and military associations while subjecting them to fragmentation and theatrical deformation. The second part turns to the *tempo notturno* in Scene V, relating it to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions of the notturno and nocturne, as well as to Sciarrino's own sound worlds of darkness and heightened perception. Here, reduced instrumentation, fragile textures, air sounds, harmonic glissandi, and vocal writing create an atmosphere

of suspended dramatic tension. The paper argues that Sciarrino fuses historical genre references with his distinctive compositional language in order to intensify dramatic situations and shape the listener's perception of the action.

Keywords : Salvatore Sciarrino; *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*; military march; *notturno*; contemporary opera.

Introduction

Myth, Libretto, and Tradition in *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*

Salvatore Sciarrino, born in Palermo in 1947, is among the most distinctive Italian composers of his generation. According to the catalogue of works by genre published on his official website, by 2025 he had composed seventeen theatrical works, among them the opera examined in the present case study, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* (*The Singing Becomes Sad, Why?*), completed in 2019 (Sciarrino, n.d.). Sciarrino's operatic compositional style does not appear to have changed drastically since *Luci mie traditrici*; rather, each of his operas reveals the continuity of a highly developed personal idiom, one that distinguishes his musical language from that of other contemporary composers. A particularly noteworthy characteristic of his theatrical works is his choice of subjects, which varies considerably and encompasses themes from different historical and cultural periods. Nevertheless, themes derived from Ancient Greek mythology occupy an especially significant position in his recent output. Since 2019 alone, Sciarrino has composed four operas inspired by mythological material: *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, followed by *Venere e Adone* in 2021, and, in 2025, *L'Agamennone* and *Il novello Perseo. Opera in un atto* (Sciarrino, n.d.). The former, which forms the subject of the present article, is based on the first part of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, in which the transition from archaic customs, such as blood sacrifice and family feuds, to the democratic society of the Attic polis is dramatised (Stadttheater Klagenfurt OG, n.d.-a). With a libretto written by Sciarrino himself, as is generally the case in his operas, the premiere of *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* was originally scheduled for March 2020 at the Stadttheater Klagenfurt in Austria. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it had to be

postponed until February 4, 2021 (Stadttheater Klagenfurt OG, n.d.-b). Because of the strict public-health regulations in force in Austria at the time, the work could not be premiered before a public audience and was instead presented only to media representatives. Shortly afterward, on February 23, 2021, a dress rehearsal was recorded by the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, the *Österreichischer Rundfunk* (ORF) (Cerha, 2021). Later that year, in October 2021, the first public performance took place at the Erholungshaus Leverkusen in Germany (Theaterkompass, n.d.).

Against this historical and mythological background, Sciarrino's opera places the audience in the aftermath of the Trojan War, an event traditionally dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century BCE. According to the most familiar version of the myth, the conflict was set in motion by the abduction of Helen, wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, by Paris, prince of Troy (Roy, 2026). In response, Agamemnon led a Greek expedition against Troy in support of his brother Menelaus. Yet the departure of the fleet was obstructed by the goddess Artemis, who, angered by Agamemnon's killing of a deer sacred to her, sent adverse winds against the Greeks. Following the counsel of a seer and in order to enable the fleet to sail, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia (Pippert, 2021). After ten years of siege and the eventual destruction of Troy, King Agamemnon finally returns to his homeland of Mycenae, his arrival announced by a light signal on the horizon. His victory, however, is overshadowed by ominous forebodings, not least because he returns accompanied by the Trojan captive Cassandra, who has become his concubine. Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, is far from reconciled with these events: she can forgive neither the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia nor her husband's infidelity (Cerha, 2021). Cassandra, for her part, laments to Apollo that she has been brought to a place marked by death and slaughter. Endowed with the power to utter true prophecies, she foresees Agamemnon's murder, orchestrated by Clytemnestra. Although her warnings are ignored by the people, who attribute them to the horrors she has endured during the war, Cassandra remains conscious of her own approaching death and submits to her fate with solemn acceptance. In a final appeal, she asks the people of Mycenae to bear witness (Pippert, 2021).

This mythological trajectory is, however, articulated within a compositional architecture that, in contrast to the apparent linearity of the plot, Sciarrino describes

as fundamentally symmetrical (Sciarrino, 2019a, Introduzione all'opera). The prologue, the intermezzo, and the congedo function as structural pillars within a dramatic design divided into two main parts. This symmetrical structure lends the libretto a further formal dimension, while the text itself appears to have been shaped, at least in part, through Sciarrino's engagement with an Italian translation of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, preserved at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel and forming an important component of the materials connected with the opera's genesis. This source also suggests a possible origin for the opera's title. In the Italian translation, the passage corresponding to lines 975–979 and 988–992 of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* reads: “Perché il mio canto, non chiesto, non pagato, è un canto funesto di vaticinio?” (Avezzù, 2010–2011, p. 7). Marked by Sciarrino and spoken by the chorus in *Agamemnon*, this sentence may be rendered in English as: “Why does this song of mine, though no one asked for it and no one paid me for it, turn into a dark prophetic chant?” Particularly significant is the fact that, in the text used by Sciarrino, he adds the note “s’attrista” after “il mio canto,” thus anticipating the final title of the opera: *Il canto s’attrista, perché?* A further resonance with the title, and with the affective character of the work as a whole, may be found in the parodos of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, where the chorus enters antiphonally and formulates a ritornello-like lament: “Intona lugubre canto, lugubre canto [...] intona; [...] E tu con questi presagi accorda lugubre canto.” This may be translated as: “Raise a mournful song, a mournful song [...] raise; [...] and you, in accord with these omens, strike up a mournful song.” Since Sciarrino explicitly marked this fragment, it may likewise be regarded as an important textual and conceptual reference in his choice of the opera's title.

This engagement with Aeschylean tragedy also opens onto a broader historical perspective. As noted above, *Il canto s’attrista, perché?* It is not the first stage work in which Sciarrino draws on Ancient Greek mythology; in doing so, he places himself within a long operatic tradition that reaches back to the earliest decades of the genre, when mythological subjects played a central role in the emergence of opera around 1600. Yet the affinity is not limited to the choice of subject matter. Sciarrino's compositional language also reveals points of contact with early Baroque vocal practice, particularly in his treatment of the voice.

His highly developed vocal writing has been understood as recalling Baroque ornamentation and the monodic gesture characteristic of early operatic traditions (Elzenheimer, 2019, p. 90). Such a Baroque affinity has also been identified by scholars in relation to Sciarrino's repertoire of gestures and figures, which at times evokes historical models without simply imitating them (Hiekel, 2019, p. 20). In *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, this engagement with tradition appears to extend further through the use of earlier models, genres, and stylistic references. The present case study examines this aspect of Sciarrino's compositional practice with particular attention to the military march and the *tempo notturno*. Through an analysis of the score, relevant scholarly literature, and selected historical models, it seeks to trace these references and situate them within Sciarrino's broader compositional practice. The methodology combines close musical analysis with a genre- and topic-oriented approach. Particular attention is given to rhythmic, timbral, textural, and dramaturgical features that function as historically recognisable markers of the march and *the notturno*. By comparing these features with selected historical precedents and with evidence from Sciarrino's sketches, the study examines how genre references are transformed within the composer's own musical language.

Military March

Among the moments in *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* in which a military march might most plausibly be expected, Scene III occupies a particularly significant position. The scene stages Agamemnon's arrival in Mycenae after the conquest of Troy, thus offering a dramaturgical situation strongly associated with military return, victory, and public display. Before turning to the musical realisation of this passage, it is useful to recall its immediate dramatic context. After the fall of Troy, Agamemnon claims Cassandra as a slave and brings her to Mycenae. It is precisely this arrival that Sciarrino describes in the synopsis preceding the opera:

In the following scene, Agamemnon arrives in a war chariot, with Cassandra at his side: a captive and concubine, a prize bestowed upon him by his soldiers. Despite the victory, this is no triumph. The king appears worn down and fearful; too often, he has exposed himself to divine punishment. Clytemnestra publicly declares her love for her husband, but soon husband and wife begin to quarrel.

Agamemnon then enters the palace. Clytemnestra murmurs something under her breath and follows him inside (Sciarrino, 2019a, Riassunto).

Accordingly, Scene III presents Agamemnon's return after the victory over Troy. Yet the scene is not framed as an unequivocal triumph. Rather, the king's arrival is marked by unease, exhaustion, and latent threat. Against this ambivalent dramatic background, Sciarrino introduces what may be understood as a march, or at least its impression. This is suggested by the tempo indication *Poco più mosso (alla Marcia)*, which appears at the beginning of the passage and remains in force until the subsequent indication *meno mosso* in bar 24 (Sciarrino, 2019a, p. 89). The libretto likewise reinforces the ceremonial and public character of the scene. Cassandra is seated beside Agamemnon, her head bound with priestly fillets and a laurel branch in her hand; she looks ahead with a dreamlike gaze. The people of Argos then address the returning king with the words: "How shall we greet you? King, conqueror?" Agamemnon, entering the city, responds: "A column of smoke: that is what remains of Troy" (Sciarrino, 2019a, p. 3).

Before delving into Sciarrino's march, a brief remark on the genre of military music may help to clarify the integration of this reference into his compositional style. The military march may be understood as a composition frequently performed by wind ensembles and usually written in duple metre, whose original function was to coordinate the movement and tempo of a walking, and later marching, group, while also strengthening martial spirit. The term *military march* thus refers to the genre's origin and to the functional musical characteristics shaped by that origin (Hofer, 2016). Lully's *Marche pour le Régiment de Savoye*, shown in Musical Example 1, offers a relevant historical point of reference. Its military function is supported by Brenet's study of French military music under Louis XIV, which notes that Lully composed marches for military contexts. Brenet further reports that Lully—born in Florence, later naturalised as French, and active in the service of Louis XIV—received from Victor-Amédée, Duke of Savoy, a portrait "richly set with diamonds, worth a thousand crowns," in recognition of his composition of three drum-calls and five instrumental pieces (Brenet, 1917, p. 349).



Musical Example 1. Lully, *Marche pour le Régiment de Savoye*, mm. 5–8

Source: Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Marche pour le Régiment de Savoye* (1685), ed. Luca Ripanti.

This Marche pour le Régiment de Savoye already displays several features that would become emblematic of the European march tradition: a regular duplet metric framework, often articulated in common time, though alla breve also occurs frequently, and a pronounced use of dotted rhythm. While common time is identified in nineteenth-century lexicography as characteristic of the modern march (Lincoln, 1880), the dotted rhythmic profile points to a broader military and ceremonial vocabulary (Pau, 2015), one that also resonates with the rhythmic idiom of the French overture in the Baroque period. These characteristics provide a useful historical frame for approaching Sciarrino's own stylised engagement with the march and its conventional associations. The sketches preserved at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel offer insight into Sciarrino's thoughts on integrating a *marcia* into this scene. For example, the note "Marcia trionfale (trombette)" appears in connection with this scene, suggesting that Sciarrino may initially have associated Agamemnon's return with a triumphal, trumpet-coloured march. Since Sciarrino writes the phrase "Marcia di Verdi" in his sketches, the passage may plausibly refer to Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, especially the triumphal scene. Yet Sciarrino's own annotation, only partially legible, appears to characterise the passage as a "Marcia screziata (goffa e ...)"—a "variegated march, clumsy and ..."—and thus suggests that the march is conceived less as a solemn or heroic gesture than as a form of theatrical caricature. At first sight, such a reading seems to stand at some distance from Johann Mattheson's eighteenth-century description of the march as a genre.

He defines its proper character as “was heldenmüthiges und unerschrockenes; doch nichts wildes oder laufendes” — “something heroic and fearless, yet nothing wild or running” — and adds that it should be neither “traurig, kläglich, jämmerlich und weinend” — “sad, plaintive, miserable, and weeping” — nor excessively leaping or dance-like (Mattheson, 1739, pp. 226–227). Yet Mattheson also allows the march to change its character according to theatrical circumstances: “die Marsche [müssen] ihre Eigenschaft verändern, und sich nach gewissen Umständen einrichten” — “marches must alter their character and adapt themselves to particular circumstances”. In the case of comic or ridiculous figures, he even points out that the more ridiculous the march turns out on such an occasion, the better it is (Mattheson, 1739, p. 227). Against this background, Sciarrino's march may be understood as a deliberate deformation of the march topos.

This deformation of the march topos becomes more tangible when considered in relation to *Verdi's Marcia trionfale* from *Aida*, which Sciarrino explicitly mentions in his sketches. Since the present article focuses on selected moments in which earlier genre references become especially prominent, the musical examples reproduce only those excerpts and instrumental layers of the score that are directly relevant to the analysis, rather than the complete orchestral texture of *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* A comparison between the opening of Verdi's march and the beginning of Scene III of Sciarrino's *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*—both represented in Musical Examples 2 and 3 by the upper portion of the respective scores—further supports the idea that Verdi's march appears to have functioned as an important point of reference in Sciarrino's compositional process. The trumpet rhythm in the first measure of Verdi's *Marcia trionfale* reappears in Sciarrino's passage in measure 2, where it is assigned to the oboe and cor anglais. Conversely, the motif played by oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns in measure 5 of Verdi's march is taken up by the cor anglais in measure 1 of Sciarrino's version. Sciarrino thus appears to draw on Verdi's rhythmic material while altering its order of appearance and, at times, fragmenting it across different instruments. In both works, moreover, the march accompanies the return from a military victory: in *Aida*, Radamès leads the Egyptian army back after its victory over the Ethiopians, whereas in *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, Agamemnon returns to Mycenae after the defeat of Troy.

Triumphal Scene
(from *AIDA*)

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Allegro maestoso ♩ = 100

Flutes 1, 2
Piccolo
Oboes 1, 2
Clarinets in B♭ 1, 2
Bassoons 1, 2
Horns in F 1, 2
Horns in F 3, 4
Trumpets in C 1, 2

(CUED INTO EGYPTIAN TRUMPETS ALSO)
ff squallante

Musical Example 2. Verdi, *Aida*, Act II, Scene II, “Marcia trionfale,” upper portion of the score
Source: Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida*, Act II, Scene II. Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 1.

Scena III

Poco più mosso (alla Marcia)

Ottavino
Flauto in Do
Flauto contralto in Sol
1.
2 Oboi
2.
Corneo inglese in Fa
2 Clarinetti in Si♭
Clarinetto basso in Si♭
1.
2 Fagotti
2.

Musical Example 3. Sciarrino, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, Scene III,
upper portion of the score, mm. 1–3
Source: Salvatore Sciarrino, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* Edizioni Musicali Rai Com, 2019a, p. 89.

A further similarity lies in Sciarrino's treatment of the characteristic dotted rhythmic profile associated with the march. At the beginning of the *alla Marcia* passage, which is notated in common time, the cor anglais presents this rhythm within a multiphonic gesture. The first sound occupies the duration of a dotted quarter note; rather than notating this value by means of double dotting, however,

Sciarrino writes a sixteenth rest before the following sixteenth note. In Verdi's analogous rhythmic figure in measure 5 of the *Marcia trionfale*, the first note is written simply as a quarter note; however, together with the following dotted-eighth rest, it produces the total duration of a double-dotted quarter note, corresponding to the value used in Sciarrino's example. In the second half of Sciarrino's measure, the same rhythmic idea appears twice more, though in a compressed form: the first duration is reduced to the equivalent of a dotted eighth note, notated as a sixteenth note followed by an eighth rest, while the second value remains a sixteenth note. In this way, Sciarrino preserves the recognisable profile of the march rhythm while subjecting it to subtle notational variation.

At the beginning of measure 2, the final rhythmic cell from the preceding measure appears again, now divided between two instruments: the cor anglais sustains the dotted multiphonic sonority, while the first oboe takes over the second note of the cell. In the second half of the same measure, Sciarrino introduces an eighth-note triplet figure. Although triplets may seem less central to the march idiom than dotted rhythms, they nevertheless appear within the genre's broader rhythmic vocabulary. One example can be found in Schubert's March No. 4 from the *Six Grandes marches*, D. 819, where an eighth-note triplet shapes the opening motif and repeatedly functions as the upbeat to the first three phrases, while the dotted rhythm also remains present. Like both Verdi's and Sciarrino's marches, Schubert's march is notated in common time. Sciarrino's recourse to march-like materials in *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, is therefore not an isolated case, but forms part of a broader compositional engagement with historical genres and stylistic references. In *Da gelo a gelo [From Winter to Winter]*, completed in 2006 and based on the diary and poems of the eleventh-century Japanese writer Izumi Shikibu, Sciarrino similarly introduces conspicuous Western materials in Scene 16, designated *musica di corte* in the composer's sketches. These include a Schubertian military-march idiom as well as a reference to Mozart's "Alla turca" from the Piano Sonata in A major, K. 331 (Sciarrino, 2006, p. 78). From a topical perspective, such idioms evoke regularity, ceremony, and public display, establishing a sphere of social legibility that cuts across Sciarrino's otherwise fragile and rarefied textures.

As this analysis has shown, both march motifs—the dotted rhythm and the triplet figure—characterize the opening of Sciarrino's *alla Marcia* passage. They are articulated primarily by the winds and percussion, thus recalling the historical association of the march with wind ensembles discussed above. In the following measures, however, the voices and, at times, the strings introduce a different layer of musical material. Between measures 13 and 15, for example, march elements remain present in the oboes through dotted rhythms and triplets, while Agamemnon's vocal line unfolds with a considerable degree of independence from the surrounding instrumental figures. This vocal writing corresponds to Sciarrino's distinctive technique of *sillabazione scivolata*, or "sliding syllabification." As Marion Saxer observes, this procedure is based on short vocal building blocks that typically display a tense, two-part structure: a sustained tone, often shaped by a crescendo, is followed abruptly by a rapid, formulaic, speech-like figuration (Saxer, 2019, pp. 42). The resulting texture constitutes a complex interaction in which Sciarrino's personal vocal language refracts the inherited march topos through his own compositional idiom. Rather than simply signifying victory, the march reflects the contradiction of Agamemnon's return: through fragmented rhythms, unstable timbres, and a distorted ceremonial profile, it presents him as a conqueror while already undermining heroic triumph and anticipating catastrophe.

Tempo notturno

Having examined Sciarrino's transformation of the military march, the analysis may now turn to a second historical reference in *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*: the *notturmo*, or more precisely the indication *tempo notturno*. Whereas the march in Scene III is connected to public display, military return, and the distorted image of victory, the *tempo notturno* in Scene V points towards a different expressive sphere: darkness, suspension, and latent threat. Sciarrino describes the dramatic situation in the synopsis as follows: "è buio ormai. Cassandra è rimasta finora seduta, immobile sul carro. Dalla porta esce Clitemestra, affretta Cassandra ad andare dentro, poiché la stanno aspettando; la gente assiste con animo sospeso. Clitemestra rientra, non ha tempo da perdere" (Sciarrino, 2019a, Riassunto). This may be translated as: "It is dark now. Cassandra has remained seated until this moment, motionless on the

chariot. Clytemnestra comes out through the door and urges Cassandra to go inside, since they are waiting for her; the people look on in suspense. Clytemnestra goes back inside; she has no time to lose.” The scene, therefore, takes place at night, and Sciarrino’s indication, *tempo notturno*, corresponds closely to its dramatic setting. At the same time, the term is not, at first sight, a precise tempo indication in the conventional sense. It does not prescribe a specific metronomic value, nor does it immediately define a clear mode of performance. This raises the question of how such an indication should be understood: what kind of tempo, character, or expressive attitude is implied by a *tempo notturno*?

In order to approach this question, it is useful to consider whether Sciarrino’s indication evokes earlier musical genres associated with the night, since these traditions may help clarify not only the expressive character of *tempo notturno*, but also its implications for tempo and performance practice. In the eighteenth century, the *notturno* was often understood as an instrumental genre, frequently designated by the Italian term and closely related to the serenade: a multi-movement work conceived for nocturnal performance (Unverricht, 2001). During the nineteenth century, another understanding of the nocturne became prominent, especially in the form of a one-movement character piece for solo piano, often designated by the French term *nocturne*. One of its most significant representatives was Frédéric Chopin, whose twenty-one nocturnes are frequently associated with rhythmic flexibility in performance (Guerrero Almagro, 2017, p. 134). Carl Czerny, who himself composed nocturnes for solo piano, describes the genre in terms that are particularly relevant for understanding its expressive character:

The Notturmo for the Pianoforte is really an imitation of those vocal pieces which are termed Serenades, and the peculiar object of such works – that of being performed by night, before the dwelling of an esteemed individual – must always exercise an influence upon its character. The Notturmo, therefore, must be calculated to create an impression of a soft, fanciful, gracefully romantic, or even passionate kind, but never of a harsh or strange one. The construction of it is nearly that of a short Andante in a Sonata, or of an extended theme; and a slow degree of movement is most suitable to the same (Czerny, 1848, p. 97).

Czerny's description is significant because, while it addresses the character of the piano nocturne, it also points to the genre's relationship with earlier vocal models. His emphasis on softness, fantasy, graceful romantic expression, and a generally slow tempo provides a useful historical framework for understanding the affective and performative implications of Sciarrino's *tempo notturno*. In this sense, the indication may, on the one hand, refer to night as the dramatic setting of the scene and, on the other, evoke a broader tradition in which nocturnal music is associated with suspended movement, intimacy, and expressive restraint. Moreover, Czerny explicitly connects the instrumental *Notturmo* with vocal serenades, thereby pointing to a vocal tradition that remained closely related to the instrumental nocturne in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since the voice plays an important role in Scene V of *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, the vocal *notturmo* may serve as a further historical point of reference. One of the central figures in the development of this genre is Mozart, who frequently set Metastasio's poetic texts by Metastasio. As Musical Example 4, *Mi lagnerò tacendo*, illustrates, Mozart's vocal *notturmi* tend to employ relatively slow tempo indications, such as *Adagio*, *Larghetto*, *Grazioso*, and *Allegretto*, sometimes with additional expressive markings such as *amoroso* or *con espressione*. Their texture is often chamber-like, frequently in trio settings, and the voices proceed predominantly in parallel motion, especially in thirds or sixths, although contrapuntal passages are not excluded (Sirch, 2005, pp. 165–166).

(Larghetto)

Clarinetto I in A.

Clarinetto II in A.

Corno di bassetto in G.

Soprano I.

Soprano II.

Basso.

Lyrics for Soprano I and II: Mi la - gne - rò ta - cen - do della mia sorte a - vara, del - la mia sor - te a -

Lyrics for Basso: Mi la - gne - rò ta - cen - do della mia sorte a - vara, del - la mia sor - te a -

Musical Example 4. Mozart, *Mi lagnerò tacendo*, K. 437, mm. 1–7

Source: Wolfgang Amadé Mozart, *Mi lagnerò tacendo*, K. 437. Breitkopf & Härtel, 1881.

Several of these characteristics are already apparent at the opening of Mozart's *Mi lagnerà tacendo*, a *notturmo* on an Italian text by Pietro Metastasio. The tempo indication is *Larghetto*, and the vocal writing is conceived as a trio for Soprano I, Soprano II, and Bass, doubled instrumentally by two clarinets and a basset horn. The two upper voices frequently move in parallel thirds, while the bass is placed at a considerable registral distance beneath them. Although the score contains no dynamic indications at the opening, many recordings adopt a restrained dynamic level, reinforcing the passage's intimate character of the passage. The first line of the text already emphasises the introspective and retrospective quality of the *notturmo*: "I shall silently lament my cruel fate."

The historical associations of the *notturmo* outlined above also resonate with Sciarrino's broader compositional output, in which references to night recur with notable frequency. Across his catalogue, Sciarrino has composed numerous works whose titles explicitly evoke nocturnal imagery, most of them instrumental. These include *De la nuit* (1971), *Tre notturni brillanti* (1975), *Ai limiti della notte* (1982; transcription for cello, 1984), *Che sai, guardiano della notte?* (1981), *Nox apud Orpheum* (1982), *Autoritratto nella notte* (1983), *Notturmo n. 3* and *Notturmo n. 4* (1998), *Due notturni* (1999), *Due notturni crudeli* (2001), *Libro notturno delle voci* (2009), *La navigazione notturna* (2017), and *Nocturnes* (2024), alongside the vocal work *Due arie notturne dal campo* (2001) (Sciarrino, n.d.). Among these works, the four piano *Notturmi* emerge as a particularly relevant point of reference, since they place nocturnal listening at the centre of the compositional concept. It is precisely this nocturnal sound world to which Kursell refers when observing that "Night as a theme in Sciarrino's music is embodied in the mosquito that robs one of sleep, or in the moth whose wings rustle, or in the mouse rustling in the room, or even in one's own body, which in the darkness is suddenly and unexpectedly perceived as loud" (Kursell, 2019, p. 123).

Having considered both the historical *notturmo* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Sciarrino's own earlier engagement with nocturnal sound worlds, it is now possible to return to the *tempo notturno* of Scene V. Here, the instrumental forces are markedly reduced, producing a chamber-like texture. The wind instruments are used sparingly and, when they do appear, they often

contribute air sounds primarily. Percussion is likewise rare and functions mainly to articulate or colour the entrances of other instruments. Most of the musical activity is concentrated in the strings and voices: in this scene, Clytemnestra and the choir sing, while the surrounding instrumental writing creates an atmosphere of suspension. As in the piano *Notturmi*, composed mostly in the late 1990s, listening to *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* takes place within a nocturnal sound world and is intensified through strong contrasts—or, more precisely, through contrasts that are perceived as especially pronounced in the heightened sensory conditions of night. These contrasts arise from different types of motion, sudden dynamic shifts, and the alternation between silence, sound, and noise. They become particularly perceptible when they resist expectation. As a result, the musical process remains difficult to predict: familiar points of orientation, such as metre, are largely withdrawn (Kursell, 2019, pp. 123–124).

Sciarrino himself remarks that night places the senses in a state of alarm, heightening perception and bringing one into contact not only with the unknown outside oneself, but also with the unknown within oneself (Sciarrino, 2019b, p. 58). In such a state, the sounds of nature associated with the night may become especially perceptible. As Christian Utz has argued, Sciarrino's works frequently draw on recurring instrumental modules that function as stylised sonic representations of the natural world, a phenomenon he examines in particular with reference to *Lucimie traditrici* (Utz, 2010, pp. 54–55). Utz associates string tremolos on harmonics with insect-like sounds, while interpreting harmonic glissandi as evocations of wind. This analytical perspective is also relevant to the opening four measures of Scene V of *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, shown in Musical Example 5 by the lower portion of the score, where the brief, reiterated tremolos on harmonic pitches may be understood as an allusion to cicadas. The harmonic glissandi, by contrast, expand this insect-like layer into a broader nocturnal soundscape, suggesting wind as a complementary natural presence. The passage may therefore be interpreted as a constellation of instrumental gestures that articulate an imagined nocturnal environment.

The musical score is for Salvatore Sciarrino's *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* (Scene V), measures 1-4. The tempo is marked "Tempo notturno". The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Violini I, Violini II, Viole, Violoncelli, Contrabbassi, and various soloists. The score shows a complex texture with many short, sharp impulses (pizzicati) in the double basses, which punctuate the texture and mark the emergence of new gestures. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a variety of dynamic markings, including ppp, pp, p, and mp.

Musical Example 5. Sciarrino, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, Scene V,
lower portion of the score, mm. 1–4

Source: Salvatore Sciarrino, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* Edizioni Musicali Rai Com,
2019a, p. 134.

The nocturnal soundscape is further articulated by short impulse sounds, or what Sciarrino elsewhere describes as “little bangs.” In *Le figure della musica*, Sciarrino develops this idea through an analogy with the cosmological “Big Bang,” while emphasising that such an impulse may also be limited in scale and effect. Even a minimal sonic event can momentarily acquire structural prominence and reorganize the weaker elements surrounding it (Sciarrino, 1998, pp. 67–68). As Boyle notes, these impulses often function as unexpected events that interrupt a static situation, or as initial stimuli that trigger further musical activity (Boyle, 2023). In the opening of Scene V, such “little bangs” are represented by pizzicati in the double basses, which punctuate the texture and mark the emergence of new gestures.

Alongside the harmonic glissandi already mentioned, which may be understood as evocations of a breeze, the wind instruments also contribute to the construction of a wind-like figure in measures 1–4. At the beginning of the scene, percussion is absent, and the wind section is reduced to discreet interventions by piccolo, trumpets, and trombones. The trumpets and trombones produce air sounds with flutter-tonguing, without generating a clearly defined pitch. The piccolo, in turn, enters after the brass with a brief descending minor second, likewise coloured by a high degree of air and flutter-tonguing. This descending semitone motif anticipates

Clytemnestra's later vocal entrance in measure 9, shown in Musical Example 6, where the relevant string and vocal layers of the score are reproduced.

The musical score for Musical Example 6 shows the vocal entrance of Clytemnestra in measure 9. The vocal line (Clt.) is written in a single staff, with lyrics: "Anche tu, dentro, va' dentro! Dico a te, Cas -". The string layers are arranged in multiple staves, including 1. solo, Vni I, 2. solo, gli altri, Vni II tutti div., Vle, 1. solo, Vc., gli altri, 1. solo, Cb., and gli altri. The string layers feature various techniques such as pizzicato, arco sul ponticello, and tremolos, creating a layered nocturnal texture.

Musical Example 6. Sciarrino, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*,

Scene V, string and vocal layers, mm. 8–10

Source: Salvatore Sciarrino, *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*

Edizioni Musicali Rai Com, 2019a, p. 136.

In measures 9–10, Clytemnestra's voice then presents this figure four times, establishing it as a recurring element throughout the passage. At the same time, the nocturnal sounds previously identified in the strings remain present: harmonic glissandi, tremolos on sustained harmonics, and short tremolos on repeated notes continue to shape the surrounding sonic environment. Sciarrino thus places the vocal line within a layered nocturnal texture, in which the melodic design enters into counterpoint with an imagined soundscape of natural resonances. As in the earlier march scene, the historical reference is fused with Sciarrino's distinctive vocal and instrumental language. The *tempo notturno* thus exceeds a mere reference to night: through reduced scoring, suspended motion, air sounds, harmonic glissandi, and fragile vocal writing, it makes Cassandra's fate perceptible and the scene's fatal temporality audible.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has shown that *Il canto s'attrista, perché?* engages with earlier musical genres as materials to be transformed within Sciarrino's own compositional language. Two references have been particularly central: the military march and the *notturmo*. The march, associated with public display, military return, and victory, is evoked through common time, characteristic dotted rhythms, triplet figures, and a distorted ceremonial character. *The tempo notturno*, by contrast, draws on a more intimate and nocturnal tradition, suggested by the reduced chamber-like scoring, the slow and suspended temporal character, and the fragile atmosphere of nocturnal listening.

In both cases, Sciarrino does not simply reproduce earlier genres; rather, he filters them through his distinctive idiom of fragmented gestures, rarefied textures, unstable perception, and highly individualized vocal writing. These historical references, therefore, serve a dramaturgical function by illuminating specific moments of the plot, shaping the performative gesture, and guiding the listener's understanding of the scene. The march intensifies the ambiguity of Agamemnon's return, while the tempo notturno frames Cassandra's final passage into the palace within a sound world of darkness, suspension, and fatal expectancy.

Sciarrino's treatment of these genres thus confirms a productive relationship with tradition. As he states in an interview, "La tradizione è identità, è bagaglio. Non si impara dal niente" — "Tradition is identity, it is baggage. One does not learn from nothing" (Sciarrino, as cited in Mattiotti, 2016). In *Il canto s'attrista, perché?*, tradition becomes a field of transformation through which past and present are brought into tension within a contemporary dramatic sound world.

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