

Technical Manifesto of Futurist Music

*by Francesco Balilla Pratella**

(11th of March 1911)

The second of Pratella's three manifestos on Futurist music, this text is a technical elaboration on the first manifesto, *Manifesto dei musicisti futuristi*. He promotes irregular rhythms, atonality, and other subversions of traditional composition, aiming for a musical equivalent to Marinetti's freeing of words. Published by the *Direzione del Movimento Futurista*, Milan, March 11, 1911.

All innovators have logically been Futurists in relation to their time. Palestrina would have judged Bach crazy, and thus Bach would have judged Beethoven, and thus Beethoven would have judged Wagner. Rossini boasted of having finally understood the music of Wagner by reading it in reverse! Verdi, after an audition of the overture of *Tannhauser*, called Wagner insane in a letter to one of his friends!

We are, therefore, at the window of a glorious mental hospital, while we declare, without hesitation, that counterpoint and the fugue, still considered today as the most important branch of musical education, do not represent anything other than the ruins belonging to the history of polyphony, properly of that period that runs from the Flemish until J. S. Bach.

In their place, harmonic polyphony, the rational fusion of counterpoint and harmony, will prevent the musician, once and for all, from splitting himself between two cultures: a trespasser on some other century, as well as part of his own contemporary culture; these being irreconcilable with each other because the products of the two are very different in manner of feeling and conception. The second, for logical reasons of progress and evolution, is already a remote and unattainable consequence of the first by having summarised, transformed, and surpassed it by a great distance.

Harmony, historically a matter of course in the melody-played subsequently according to diverse modes of the scale-was born when each sound of the melody was considered in relationship to the combinations of all the other sounds in the mode of the scale to which it belonged.

In such a manner, there developed an understanding that the melody is an expressive synthesis of a harmonic succession. Today people cry and lament that the young musicians no longer know how to find melody, alluding, no doubt, to those of Rossini, Bellini, Verdi, and Ponchielli.... Instead, these musicians conceive of the melody harmonically; they hear harmony through different and more complex combinations and successions of sounds and then find new foundations for melodies.

Young musicians, once and for all, will stop being vile imitators of the past that no longer has a reason for existing and imitators of the venal flatterers of the public's base taste.

We Futurists proclaim that the diverse modes of old scales, the various sensations of major, minor,

augmented, diminished, and also the very recent modes of scales for internal tones are none other than simple details of a unique harmonic and atonal mode of a chromatic scale. We declare, moreover, that the values of consonance and dissonance are non-existent.

The Futurist melody will be embellished by the innumerable combinations and by the various relationships that derive from them. This other melody will only be the synthesis of harmony, similar to thousands of sea waves in unequal crests.

We Futurists proclaim as progress and as a victory of the future the chromatic atonal mode, the research and realisation of the enharmonic mode. Whereas chromatism uniquely rewards us with all the sounds contained in a scale that is divided into minor and major semitones, enharmonic music, by using even smaller subdivisions of tones, will offer in addition the maximum number of interminable and combined sounds to our renewed sensibility. Enharmonic music will also permit the newest and most varied relations of chords and timbres.

But above all, enharmonic music renders the possibility of intonation and the natural and instinctive modulations of enharmonic intervals, which at present are not feasible, given the artificiality of our scale within the tempered system that we wish to overcome. For a long time we Futurists have loved these enharmonic intervals that we find only in the dissonance of an orchestra when the instruments play out of tune and in the spontaneous songs of the people when they are intoned without a knowledge of art.

The rhythm of dance: monotonous, limited, decrepit, and barbarous, will have to yield its rule of polyphony to a free polyrhythmic process and limit itself to remaining a characteristic detail of it. Therefore, one must recognise that a relationship between even, uneven, and mixed tempos is possible just as the relationship between binary, ternary, ternary-binary, and binary-ternary rhythms is accepted. For example, one or more bars of uneven tempo placed in the middle or at the end of a musical phrase, which is either in even or mixed tempo or vice versa, cannot be considered wrong by using the ridiculous rules and fallacies of the so-called quadratura [continuous steady rhythm], the disgraceful umbrella of all the impotents who teach in the conservatories.

The technical knowledge of instrumentation must be conquered experimentally. The instrumental composition may be conceived by imagining and hearing a particular orchestra for every particular and diverse musical condition of inspiration.

All this will be possible when the conservatories, schools, and academies are deserted and closed and when the necessity of experience is finally provided for by giving a character of absolute freedom to musical studies. The masters of today, transformed into the experts of tomorrow, will be the guides and objective collaborators of the studios. They will cease from their unconscious corruption of budding geniuses that they have caused by suppressing them with their own personalities and by imposing their own errors and criteria on them.

For man the absolute truth is in what he feels as a human being. The artist, by purely interpreting nature, makes nature human.

Sky, water, forests, rivers, mountains, the entanglements of ships, and swarming cities are transformed through the soul of the musician into marvellous and powerful voices that humanly sing the passions and the desires of man, his joy and his sorrows, and they are revealed to him by virtue of art as the common and indissoluble bond that binds him to all the rest of nature.

The musical forms are none other than an aspect and a fragment of a unique and complete whole. Every form exists in relation to the potentiality of expression, to the development of a passionate and generated motive, and to the sensibility and intuition of the artistic creator. Rhetoric and pompousness, proceeding from a disproportion between the passionate motive and its explanatory form, produce, for the most part, cases influenced and blinded by traditions, culture, environment, and often by cerebral limitations.

The only passionate motive imposed on the musician is his own formal and synthetic explanation, since synthesis is the cardinal property of expression of musical aesthetics.

The contrast of several passionate motives and the relationship between their potential of expansion and development constitute symphony.

The Futurist symphony considers as its maximum forms: the symphonic, orchestral, and vocal poem, and the theatrical opera.

The pure symphonist, drawing from his passionate motives, developments, contrasts, lines, and forms, with ample and free imagination, must not conform to any criterion that is not a result of his artistic sense of equilibrium and proportion, but he must find his goal in the complex of expressive means and proper aesthetics of pure musical art. This sense of Futurist equilibrium is nothing more than the attainment of maximum intensity of expression.

The opera composer, in contrast, attracts all the reflections of other arts into his orbit of inspiration and musical aesthetics-in powerful competition with the multiplication of expressive and communicative effectiveness. The opera composer must conceive these other secondary elements as being controlled by his inspiration and musical aesthetics.

The human voice, also being a maximum means of expression because it is ours and comes from us, will be surrounded by the orchestra, sonorous atmosphere full of all the voices of nature, rendered through art.

The vision of a poem written as a scenario leaps to the imagination of the artistic creator to meet his particular necessity, emerging from a wish to explain the generated and inspired passionate motives. The

dramatic or tragic poem will not be able to be conceived with the music if it is not the result of a musical state of inspiration and a unique vision of musical aesthetics. The opera composer, creating rhythms in connection with the words, already creates musically and is the only author of his own opera. By writing music for the poetry of others, instead, he stupidly renounces his particular fountain of original inspiration, his musical aesthetics, and takes the rhythmic part of his melody from others.

Free verse is the only suitable one, not being bound by the limitations of rhythm and of accents monotonously repeated in restricted and insufficient formulas. The polyphonic wave of human poetry finds every rhythm, every accent, and every mode in free verse. These are necessary for the exuberant expression of itself as in a charming symphony of words. Such freedom of rhythmic expression is certainly Futurist music.

Man and the multitudes of men on the stage must no longer imitate common speech phonically but must sing, as when we, unconscious of the place and the work, seized by a deep wish to expand and to dominate, burst out instinctively in essential and charming human language: natural, spontaneous song, without the music of rhythm or of intervals, artificial limitations of expressions that sometimes make us regret the efficiency of words.

We conclude:

It is necessary to conceive of melody as a "synthesis of harmony," considering the harmonic definitions of major, minor, augmented, and diminished as simple details of a unique chromatic atonal mode.

Consider enharmonic music as a magnificent conquest by Futurism.

Crush the domination of dance rhythm, considering this rhythm as a detail of free rhythm, just as the hendecasyllable can be a detail of the strophe in free verse.

Create polyphony in an absolute sense by fusing harmony and counterpoint; never tried until today.

Take possession of all the expressive, technical, and dynamic values of the orchestra, and consider instrumentation as an aspect of universal sound that is incessantly mobile and that constitutes a unique whole through the fusion of all its parts.

Consider musical form consistent and dependent on generated passionate motives.

Do not mistake the usual traditional dead and buried schemes of symphony for symphonic form.

Conceive of theatrical opera as a symphonic form.

Proclaim that the musician must be the author of dramatic or tragic poems for his music. The symbolic action of the poem must leap to the imagination of the musician, urged by his wish to explain passionate motives. The written verses of others require the musician to accept the rhythm for his own music from others.

Recognise free verse as the only way to arrive at a criterion of polyrhythmic freedom.

Contain in music all the new attitudes of nature that are always tamed by man in different ways by virtue of his incessant scientific discoveries. Give musical animation to crowds, great industrial shipyards, trains, transatlantic steamers, battleships, automobiles, and aeroplanes. Add the domination of the machine and the victorious reign of Electricity to the great central motive of a musical poem.

The above text published originally at <http://www.futurism.org.uk/manifestos/manifesto18.htm>

***Francisco Balilla Pratella**

Pratella was born in 1880 at Lago di Romagna, Ravenna. He was a composer and writer. In 1899 he went to the Pesaro Liceo Musicale and graduated with a composition diploma in 1903.

He composed music for the piano and also composed the prize-winning opera *La Sina d'Vergöun*, performed at Bologna in 1909. The following year he became director of the music school at Lugo.

He met Marinetti on 20 August 1910 at Imola where some of his works were being performed. He joined the Futurists straight away and his home became a meeting place for Futurists in Romagna.

On 11 October 1910 he published the *Manifesto of Futurist Musicians*. Although his music was never as radical as Russolo's, it was Pratella who was to take the first steps in the direction of Futurist music theory. The *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Music* followed on 11 March 1911. It was essentially a technical elaboration of his first manifesto. In it he promoted irregular rhythms, atonality and other subversions of traditional composition aiming for a musical equivalent to Marinetti's "words in freedom". Finally, on 18 July 1912, he published his third manifesto *The Destruction of the Scheme*.

In 1915 he wrote several pieces for the Futurist Synthetic Theatre and he later wrote music for Folgore's *Paper Roses* and Ricciardi's *Theatre of Colour*. He was director of the Bolognese review *Pensiero Musicale* from 1922 until 1924 and in 1929 he became director of the Ravenna music institute. He wrote many articles and books on music of all fields, from popular to folk music. Pratella died in 1955 at Ravenna.