

MUSIC OF THE PROFOUND

“The poor shaped my identity”, told us Brother Arturo Paoli (1) one evening at Bolzano while we were having dinner. For over 40 years this Little Brother of the Gospel from Lucca walked the dusty paths of the world, finding shelter amongst the wretched of the Earth (from the Argentinean woodchoppers to the Salvadorian peasants, from the Brazilian homeless to the many inhabitants of the *favelas*). He is a righteous among the nations, one who saved the lives of many Jews that were persecuted by the Nazis; he experimented freely with his own quest for infinity, lived in the Algerian desert and contributed to the Latin American liberation theology. He blended together earth and heaven. He never stayed still. Roberto Ghiozzi listened quietly to the stories of this “righteous among nations”, almost seeing himself in many things Brother Arturo said: “Like Arturo”, he told me later on “I too am a nomad, I too travelled on ships and I too can say that my identity was shaped by the last outcasts from society”.

Roberto is a musician. He has played everywhere. He was the keyboardist for the “Satellites”, a rock band that was known in the Sixties for having played with Ricky Gianco and later, in the mid-60’s, for achieving remarkable success with the cover “*For Your Love*” of the Yardbirds, in Italian “Finirà. On the wave of success, and after the group broke apart in 1971, Roberto sought new musical and human experiences. He played anywhere and with anyone he would met, even just for a night. He plunged into the pulsating night life of New York, seizing the moment. For two years, he retraced – perhaps unknowingly - the life of Thomas Merton (2), the famous Trappist monk of Kentucky and banner of the protest against the Vietnam War who died inexplicably due to a defective fan in Bangkok.

Roberto’s stories about his American experience always remind me of the young Tom who used to hang out in the pubs of New York, listening to jazz and blues, until he found God in the disfigured faces of the homeless who slept on the street corners of the

big city. "What I wear", he would say "is a pair of pants, what I do is live, the way I pray is to breathe". Back in Italy, Roberto worked as a pianist on cruise ships for tourists en route to the northern seas, and continued to play in piano bars and nightclubs up until the mid-1980s. Then, his music was seized by the face of the other: HIV-positives, the terminally ill, the suffering, the outcasts. He opened his soul to the ultimate dimension of death, in the harmonic space that sways between a before and an after, between being and not being. But, most importantly, he had to come to terms with the tragedy of the loss of a dear friend, killed by HIV. "Suddenly", Roberto recalled "I felt terribly alone. I was tired of living in those places; I wanted to quit my job. I felt particularly lonely and dissatisfied". Roberto talked about conversion, as if the music from before was no longer the same. The questions of meaning went on: «I realized" he recalled "that somehow my music encouraged the public to consume more alcohol and to get high. I was tired of all that ». It was a revealing moment. Roberto began looking for and discovered his "cosmic" dimension. Some monks, particularly Franco a Camaldolese monk, showed him a path. Roberto followed it, reflecting on the fundamental questions of all time. He entered the "Basements of History" (a drug rehabilitation center) where young people struggled desperately to get out of the drug tunnel: "In a short while - Roberto recalled - I met many young people who had become slaves to heroine and other drugs. I could not understand the reason for all this suffering. At the rehab center I met young men and women who wasted their lives chasing a substance: it was their god, their idol. They placed the baggie on an altar and bowed to it, sacrificing all their dreams. It was a new and very powerful environment to me. Some of the girls were my daughters' age. It felt natural to be close to these people, but I was often assailed by doubt and fatigue and I would catch myself thinking: "What am I doing here?" and feeling a sense of peacefulness as I replied to myself: "This is where I belong". In such places my life made sense. I thought of all the places where I had worked before: the piano bars, the discos, the nightclubs. It was an absurd, empty

existence that no longer meant anything to me. I often said to myself: "There is so much suffering, these kids take drugs, destroy and kill themselves. If I can manage to rescue even one of them, to make that person understand how beautiful and precious life is, in spite of everything, my existence will have gained meaning and I will not have lived in vain ". Music was Roberto's art form. The music that until then had served to entertain nightclub patrons henceforth would become an important instrument to accompany life, but also to cure diseases of the nervous system, the psyche and as a source of strength to recover from drug addiction. Roberto furthered his studies and following the presentation of his research work in the field of HIV, was invited to be part of the Study and Research Group of the Chair of Special Pedagogy for the Handicapped of the University of Verona. He then decided to undertake a new professional course in parallel with his therapeutic work and, in collaboration with the Cesfor Agency of Bolzano, he founded a music therapy school inspired by an approach called Transformative Humanistic Music Therapy, which he conceived and developed himself. Roberto later founded a professional music therapy association named "Punto di Svolta" and a Music Therapy Study and Research Group based in Verona. In 1993, he played the piano for terminal patients affected by HIV. A Caritas project in Bolzano opened the doors to the Infectious Diseases Ward of the Hospital of San Maurizio for him. It was a delicate, difficult job, completely focused on human relationship. Sound communicates, tells, reveals, and unveils. A "religious" environment was established, in the true sense of the word, one of deep connection that brought together reality and mystery.

That first experience was revealing. Roberto realized that henceforth that would be his profession. He studied, traveled, learned, listened, experienced. His work extended to other areas: autistic children, brain-damaged children, compulsive pathologies such as pathological gambling, degenerative spinal atrophy, coma and post-coma. From April 2002 to June 2006 the Coma and Persistent Vegetative State Ward of the Hospital of S. Cuore di Negrar in Verona (Italy) drew on his expertise. With the help of other three

colleagues, Roberto worked meticulously through music to encourage patients to awaken. He played music, related empathically with his patients and observed the effect produced by sound; he analyzed data, recorded every little tremor since even the slightest movement could provide medical therapy with meaningful information. It was hard work, made possible by a strong self-discipline achieved through meditation. Every day Roberto would set some time aside to empty his soul, to substantiate the inner void; not with the negative connotation of the word in Western culture, but with the sense of depth the East confers to it, as taught by the Tibetan monks. The wise Rinpoche wrote: « *Emptiness, the ultimate nature of Dharmakaya, the Absolute Body, is not a simple nothingness. It possesses intrinsically the faculty of knowing all phenomena. This faculty is the luminous or cognitive aspect of the Dharmakaya, whose expression is spontaneous. The Dharmakaya is not the product of causes and conditions; it is the original nature of mind.* » Roberto's journey continued in depth, fostered by research, his work as a therapist, his numerous travels, his lectures in Italy and abroad, and his work as a trainer. All this, as he himself stated, in order to be at the service of the other, to become an expert in humanity, to disconnect from the sense of separateness, and with reference to the systems of life, he affirmed, “We are not islands but continents, everything is interconnected, animated beings with inanimate objects.

Dott. Francesco Comina, journalist and writer

- (1) Arturo Paoli, who was one of the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, died at the age of 104 in 2012. He lived and worked for over 40 years in Latin America
- (2) Thomas Merton, writer and mystic