The Soundscapist

Danilo Capasso *interviewed by Iain Chambers*
Naples, December 2004.

Editorial Note

Last December – while watching Yvonne De Rosa's uncanny photographs of objects left behind by the patients of a former psychiatric hospital on show at an exhibition entitled "Crazy God", held at PAN (Palazzo delle Arti, Naples) – I happened to meet both Danilo Capasso and Iain Chambers. Serena Guarracino and I had just started planning this issue of *Anglistica* on music and I asked Danilo whether he wanted to contribute something. It turned out that, four years earlier, Iain had interviewed him on his experience as a 'soundscapist' for a publication, which had never materialized. He also agreed to update the interview, if only Iain could trace the text on his computer. Which Iain actually did. This explains the two-sections format of the following interview.

(MV)

Iain: How would you describe what you do?

Danilo: What I do involves a very eclectic attitude in which a series of parallel activities are in constant elaboration in a dialogue with the future. This is important given the difficulties of realising projects in a context which can easily lead to abandonment. Naples is a difficult place to work in. So my perspective involves looking far ahead so that immediate obstacles are overshadowed and I manage to find the energy to look at projects in a positive fashion, thereby overcoming those daily difficulties so typical of the city. Naples is a mythical-poetical city. It is quite distinct from those other cities where everyday life tends to function 'normally' and it is possible to arrive at results through a daily accumulation of organised work. Naples is overwhelmingly precarious, you can never take for granted what you have set up or carried out yesterday.

Iain: There are no guarantees?

Danilo: So it seems, but there are some. You need to be able to 'read' the situation and take it on trust. What I do here in Naples has to do with my interests in the media, in architecture, in music and in the creative arts. This is obviously not unique to Naples, the only difference lying in the amount of energy required in order to remain 'actual' and, at the

same time, contemporary with similar activities in other European cities.[1] In fact, what I am involved in are precisely those activities that have difficulty in acquiring visibility in the Neapolitan scene. I won't say avant-garde, given that the avant-garde does not exist; I am simply speaking of what is 'actual': the world of the media, digital cultures, the Web, where art has become very much a 'pop' phenomenon. This is the context in which I work, simultaneously following parallel developments. I've worked as a DJ in Naples for many years. It was and is my passion: selecting music for others, i.e. communicating a certain artistic and conceptual perspective as an act of cultural mediation, remains a constant factor in my life. For me this comes from my education in architecture. I haven't finished my degree, but it has provided me with an excellent frame for receiving and evaluating ideas and perspectives that arrive from diverse cultural contexts within the existing situation of this city. For example, I began my university studies early, when I was 17, as I had studied in an art institute that allowed me to anticipate my university entry, but I still haven't finished. The reason is not because I'm not interested but rather because the manner in which architecture here in Naples is taught disappointed me. The approach was rarely stimulating. This reflects the Neapolitan paradox: a city rich in culture and people with brilliant ideas, but which, at the same time, is dominated by an overriding individualism where there is no systematic aggregation. It is left to my generation to attempt to create certain structures and systems here in Naples.

Iain: How old are you?

Danilo: I'm 32. If you fail to elaborate a structure then it is impossible to produce novelty. This means co-operation, distribution, exchange, offering what you have with a certain generosity. So, Naples gives me a lot of stimulus, it provides me with many creative ideas, but, at the same time, in order to develop I have to travel. Other cities provide me with a catalyst and stimulate me in a manner so that I avoid stasis. As I've said I haven't completed my university studies, this is because prior to developing a passion for architectural studies I encountered other possibilities. I encountered music, the clubs, and a series of transversal interests that drew me elsewhere and have acquired an increasing importance. In this particular space, living here in southern Italy and drawing upon European Union funding I have been able to create a new media company composed of young, eclectic people like myself involved in graphics, advertising, the digital arts, and so on.

Iain: What exactly does this association do?

Danilo: It's called HUB. The name itself gives an idea of what it is all about, a knotting together of a series of intersecting interests. A group of us, each with his or her specific competence – photographer, graphic designer,

[1] The term 'actual' used by Danilo Capasso here resonates with the connotations of 'contemporary', 'up-to-date' or 'topical' attached to the Italian word 'attuale'. We preferred to keep it as connoting not just 'current' and 'existing now', but 'existing in fact' and 'real as distinct from ideal' [Editorial Note].

programmer, video maker, sound designer – seeks to elaborate a project, a reality, within the city that can function as a nodal point, a hub.

Iain: You have undergone a transition from Disk Jockey to Digital Jockey.

Danilo: Sure. I began talking about the relationship between the DJ and architecture precisely because I consider that architecture involves a capacity or disposition that does not necessarily involve constructing a building: it evokes a systematic approach to the complex interaction between things, whether these systems are buildings, events, works or projects.

Iain: In this passage from DJ to DJ, from Disk to Digital Jockey, you continue to be involved in music. Or, rather, to be involved with sounds.

Danilo: That has remained constant. But yes, let's speak of sounds. I don't consider myself a musician.

Iain: Perhaps we should define you as someone who is involved in the architecture or design of sonorial landscapes.

Danilo: Exactly, a soundscaper. What I'm interested in is what occurs in space. Between music and architecture there are a whole series of significant connections. Music interpellates space even when the latter is apparently empty, producing an architecture of vibrating molecules of air. It gives form and content to space. In this sense, architecture is congealed music. We could travel back in time through a semiotic lens and consider the musical divisions and rhythms of Baroque music and their consonance with the visual system incorporated in the *facciata* of the buildings of the period. Then this interest of mine has developed further in the light of my working in HUB and learning things that I never thought I would have to deal with: project management and organisational skills, marketing! Activities that here in Naples are difficult to pursue. Naples has a rather stifled market in terms of the media, advertising, Internet. We need to remember that in Italy some eighty per cent of the communications market is in Milan. Of the remaining twenty per cent most of it is in Rome, a bit in Florence and Bologna, and some crumbs in the South. However, the South is potentially an enormous cultural market. Although it lacks a strong communications sector it has a series of assets at the local level in terms of cultural activities and tourism; it is these that it needs to develop rather than remain the victim, as with the rest of Italy, of its history. This is the real danger: we are victims of our past, we have a lot of difficulty in removing this weight.

Iain: Perhaps both victims and the adoption of a certain 'victimisation'.

Danilo: Exactly, but to the degree that we are 'victims' we can paradoxically also exploit that category in a positive way. For example, in the attempt to revitalise those discourses that orbit around my interests in architecture and music the *Sintesi* festival was created. This emerged after a long gestation that included my DJ career in the period after the 1980s:

that period with House music and stuff in which Naples played a key role in Italy. While there were, and are, clubs everywhere, in northern Italy the situation is far more provincial and is deeply entrenched in the local tradition of Saturday night dancing so that the appearance of House music didn't really change anything, merely the genre. Here in the city this moment was experienced in an altogether more intense fashion. It is sufficient to say that major DJs arriving from Britain and the United States always commenced their Italian experience in Naples. Between 1990 and 1995, Naples was the crucial scene. Subsequent developments have led to a different situation today. Electronic music has now acquired a certain institutional recognition. House and Techno have in part been integrated with the pop panorama and are no longer strictly underground. At the same time, there has been a cultural reconfiguration of such proposals as they have been drawn into becoming part of the experimental scene in which electronic music becomes a branch of the contemporary art scene.

Iain: A process of contamination: on one side, electronic music developed in the context of musical modernism and the history of classical music; on the other, this other modality of electronic music, that apparently emerged from 'below', from the House movement, youth culture and the popular culture scene.

Danilo: I fully agree; it is something that brought together both 'high' and 'low' culture…

Iain: At this stage it becomes extremely difficult to draw the line and indicate the distinction that separates a trajectory that arrives from the contemporary classical world of Boulez, Stockhausen and others, and one that comes from subcultural sounds…

Danilo: This is because of technology. Initially there were academic studies in experimental music that required expensive and inaccessible technology. Today, for example here in my bag I have a laptop computer and I am free to experiment with all sorts of sounds and approaches. I can be John Cage… I have a software that I can programme to imitate Stockhausen or Cage. With the synthesising of sounds we have arrived at an extremely intimate level. What you're saying is true: contemporary, experimental, avant-garde electronic music has descended into the arena of popular taste…

Iain: Perhaps we could suggest that this distinction – between high and low culture – has become largely invalid. We might then prefer to say that the avant-garde has not so much descended into the popular as gone elsewhere, beyond this traditional scheme.

Danilo: Fine, they've gone elsewhere.

Iain: There has now emerged another space.

Danilo: Sure, my use of the terminology 'high' and 'low' is fundamentally polemical, a criticism of the academic custodians of certain traditions and

their abhorrence of recent transformations in which art flows in unsuspected channels and comes to be increasingly inscribed in the category of fashion. This means that everyone ends up listening to experimental electronic music. Two weeks ago I was in Rome to hear a fantastic concert by the London Sinfonietta, where, alongside pieces by Ives and John Cage they played Boards of Canada, Aphex Twin, pieces of electronic music arranged for orchestra – something that I'd never heard before. But what is important to note here is that there were something like 2,500 people there; it was packed, and largely a youth audience. There was even an article the next day on *La Repubblica* in which a classical composer expressed surprise that there was an audience of this type for such a concert. "… There were all these young people listening to the orchestra and applauding a piece by John Cage as though it were the Chemical Brothers. A concert hall full of tattooed bodies: it is something to think about…".

Iain: Of course. Let's speak a bit about how you yourself elaborate such sonorial landscapes; for example, in the context of the *Sintesi* festival that you organise here in Naples every year.

Danilo: Yes, every year in two sessions. Rather than an artist I'm one of the curators of the festival. The festival is something that a group of us invented. The festival itself is our artistic work. Most of us who work in organising the festival itself are unable to insert our individual works, we offer the space to others. Even though each of us is involved in the areas of music and video we invite other artists. The festival was launched in order to insert Naples in a European and international circuit of festivals and activities of this type; that is to render Naples a participant in an international dialogue. In fact, the *Sintesi* festival is better known outside Naples than in the city itself. This is fundamental. Of course, this non-recognition is typically Neapolitan! To be acknowledged it is necessary, whether you like it or not, to emigrate. Otherwise you remain blocked; there's something in this city that makes creativity implode. It's like Vesuvius, it refuses to explode and hence remains constipated.

Iain: Sure, just like after the earthquake in November 1980 there was that outburst of creative energy in the local scene. There was electricity in the air.

Fig. 1: San Severo's Church, hosting the 2002 *Sintesi* Festival, photograph, courtesy of Danilo Capasso.

Danilo: *Sintesi* is not the result of a spontaneous idea, but rather took shape over many years as a group of us sought to realise a project of this type. It took time but six of us who were willing to deal with the difficulties managed to put together a group in 2000 to manage the festival; we 'took up the cross' as we say. This is the positive side of living in Naples; that is, when people, fully aware of all the difficulties, decide to realise a project such as this. Naples, apart from *Sintesi*, is right now witness to a whole series of initiatives of this type. So, just as there is a Film Festival and a Comics Festival, there is also the development of a festival of the electronic arts. The latter is quite separate from the development of contemporary art, which in Naples is now integral to the business of the art world and local politics. We have put together this festival and we present it in historical buildings, reinvesting the past with new languages and interrogations, exorcising to some degree the burden of the past. Taking this super-contemporary, super-electronic material and its digital aesthetics, and inserting it in Baroque *palazzi*, Renaissance churches, we create a strong and disquieting contrast between the future and the past. This has become a fixed element in the elaboration of the festival.[2]

Iain: Certainly, my own experience is that of climbing the massive stairs of poorly illuminated Baroque buildings, and then stepping out of the yellow, crespuscular light to be enveloped in waves of electronic sound as the future comes to invest the past.

Danilo: Exactly! It is this sort of short-circuit that we seek to achieve. In fact the first edition of the festival was extremely dramatic from this point of view. The Chiesa di San Severo al Pendino is a Renaissance church. There were also unsuspected connections, given that some of those who performed in the festival are part of a minimalist current which could be said to have a resonance with Brunelleschi! We have a church, an architectural environment, in which the proportions are those proposed by the circle, the square, the sphere, the cube; only the altar is Baroque.

Since then we have moved to the seventeenth-century Palazzo dello Spagnuolo with its marvellous open Spanish staircase, as guests of the Fondazione Morra, and later to the Chiesa dell'Annunziata, which dates back to the fourteenth century. It is an ex-institute for unwanted babies, waifs and strays, and today a hospital, and has an astonishing subterranean circular chapel by

[2] For an example of this super-contemporary re-use of an ancient church, see the video of one of the performances of the 2002 *Sintesi* festival made available by Danilo Capasso, to be found in the **Multimedia** section.
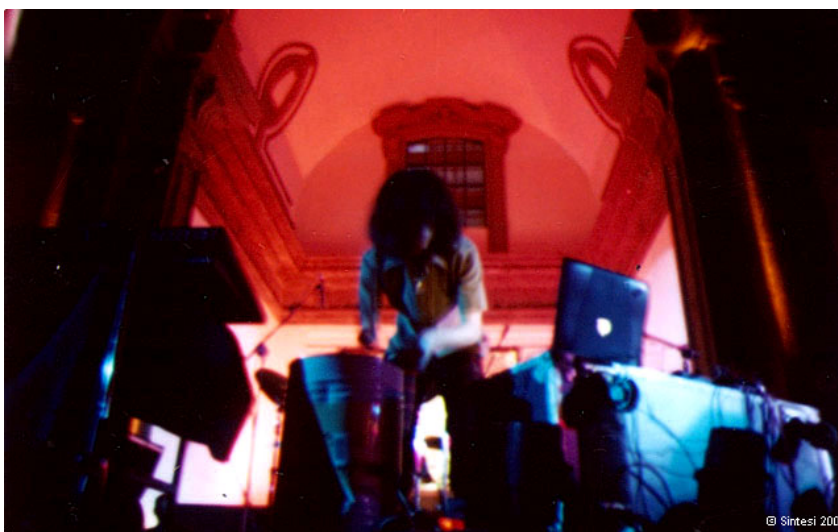

Fig. 2: *Sintesi* Festival, 2002, photograph, courtesy of Danilo Capasso.

Vanvitelli in which we hold the concerts. So, once again, there is this type of dialogue. This morning I was at the National Archaeological Museum; there we want to use the Farnese Hall, or the main entrance to the Museum for the next edition of *Sintesi.*

Iain: Right now at the Museum there is a similar operation taking place, with those exhibitions of modern art (Clemente, Kapoor, Serra, Keifer) in the four large rooms on the ground floor in a building brimming with the relics of Pompei.

I want to ask you something else. Along with all the structural and cultural difficulties of working in Naples, the perspective that *Sintesi* seeks to promote finds itself operating in a situation in which there already exist many sonorial landscapes – from Baroque music to Neapolitan song — so I would like you to comment on this situation, on the possible convergences, conflicts, dialogues or absence of. This is an inherited humus that is extremely persistent, and insistent, in Naples: a sedimentation that weighs on the present.

Danilo: Sure, but with the music here in Naples it becomes a more flexible inheritance that does not readily exclude innovation. So, and returning to young people involved in electronic music, in the last three years in Naples the situation has developed extremely rapidly. For example, my own experience throws some light on all this. After working as a DJ I became actively involved in producing music, not so much as a 'musician' but rather by working with what at the beginning of the 1990s was the most simulating instrument: the electronic sampler. The whole question of music and creativity was for me concentrated in the use of the sampler. I 'sampled' sounds from the streets and surrounding space, and then compiled and composed these sound 'images' or 'photographs' via the computer to produce a music that responded to the immediate environment. Right then I was heavily involved in dance music. So, the sounds, instruments and voices of the Neapolitan tradition, often 'stolen' from the streets, became part of an experimental repertoire in the mid-1990s that also links through to the sounds of such groups as Almamegretta. It was all part of a developing dialogue. I was involved in this sort of thing that I tend to refer to as *dub-trance*, a bit like some of the Asian groups in London such as Asian Underground, which in Naples becomes a sort of Mediterranean Underground, even though I never really managed to bring it to full fruition: local producers were not yet interested in such a proposal. However, it was an interesting idea, and although I no longer do that sort of thing the city has musically grown. It is sufficient to note that today amongst the most important Italian DJs that travel the world, the vast majority are Neapolitan. Today, as always, Naples produces many artists in the world of music. In a musical perspective, Naples is extremely productive. This has always been the case.

Iain: Yes, throughout the whole arc of modernity, from 1500 onwards.

Danilo: In fact, traditional Neapolitan music underwent its canonisation in the sixteenth century. It was Roberto De Simone who theorised that process; however, this has also resulted in a profound historicisation and subsequent mummification of that music. It has become the unquestioned, classical tradition of Neapolitan music.

Iain: The canon.

Danilo: The canon. This has had negative consequences and it has taken some time to unblock this situation. However, it remains interesting to see what remains and continues to circulate, so even electronic music participates in this Neapolitan 'mood'. For example in the last *Sintesi* festival we brought to Naples 'Invisible Cities', an installation created by an Irish collective called Fällt who took Calvino's text and transformed it into an interesting sonorial installation. 'Invisible Cities' proposes a journey through twenty-three cities purely through sound. There are sonorial compositions, without visual accompaniment, that narrate these different cities through five minutes of aural perception. The curator of this installation, Christopher Murphy from Fällt, invited a series of musicians largely involved in experimental electronic music to produce compositions that mixed both abstract motifs and field recordings, entrusting to each musician a city. He subsequently created a large planosphere on which for each city there's a headphone socket. Inserting the headphone in the diverse sockets you journey from city to city. With the acoustic mass of each city in your ears you are left to imagine diversified urban scenes, further underlining that the perception and beauty of sound is physical, and in such a fashion you perceive space.

When this installation came to Naples in the last edition of *Sintesi*, it was suggested that Naples be inserted into the installation. So I and another sound artist and electronic composer who works in *Sintesi* and who is called Mass, aka Mario Masullo from DSP Records, put together this soundtrack, this sound portrait of the city which we've called '*Randomitopoiesis*'. We began with the idea that we did not want to create a stereotypical 'picture' of Naples, we wanted to avoid the common place. So '*Randomitopiesis*': that is, the mythical-poetical elements of the city crossed with the random logic of the software we employed. We went about with our Minidisks, one of us going to the beach, the other to the market, or recording the transit from home to work, or spending an afternoon recording sounds in the middle class Vomero district. In this manner, we recorded a whole series of interesting situations, spaces, events, and then in the studio we sought to compile them in the 'flattest' style possible, reducing our intervention to the minimum. Then we selected some of these sequences and inserted them into a programme that 'randomised' them: decomposing and recomposing them. Out of this

'randomic' language there emerges a city that, even while you are avidly seeking to evade the stereotype, continues, in the five minutes, to present sonorial experience with the unavoidably specific manner it has for narrating itself. In these five minutes there is the street seller hawking out his wares, the fish monger, all the sounds that constitute 'Naples', even though we had no intention of seeking these sounds out. This is it! Even if you would rather not acknowledge the fact, this is it. There exists this unavoidable net. There's no escape. So, even if you want to do John Cage, you remain caught, suspended, in that Neapolitan net. Seeking to escape it, we find ourselves reconfirming local Neapolitan myth and poetics: there's no way out! And if you really want to cancel it you find that you have also to cancel yourself and, with it, the value of an identificatory aesthetics.

Iain: In fact, the real question is how to work with this material, how to re-elaborate, rather than abandon, such sounds.

Danilo: Certainly, and this is not so much music as a sound portrait, an example of sound art. While in the musical field there was, for example, the *Sonar* festival last week in Barcelona: this is a major festival of electronic music that attracts many, many thousands; something that we are trying to explain to the governing bodies of this city. It is not sufficient to offer Anselm Keifer, there is also a potential public composed of young people, aged between 18 and 35, who travel the world to participate in concerts and events of this kind, and who constitute a far greater public than that attracted to contemporary art. Local authorities ought to be thinking in this direction. Naples is a city, like Barcelona, which is perfect for this type of thing. Anyway, at *Sonar* this year, the only Italian artists invited were from Naples. The only two Italian artists invited to perform at *Sonar* were Neapolitan.

Iain: It is this that interests me; the fact that you, these musicians and artists, propose a language that most certainly belongs to Naples while, at the same time, seeking to reconfigure the city and to transport it elsewhere: not to negate Naples, but to re-elaborate it. Here we are clearly touching upon the sensitive issue of how to 'do' culture in Naples. As you yourself suggested in the case of Roberto De Simone, there is often this stumbling block represented by the philological authority of the past that can so easily become a prison. It has such an implacable force that one inevitably respects those who go elsewhere in order to develop their work and seek recognition. It is in this sense that we run the risk of becoming victims of the past, as though predetermined by destiny.

Danilo: Yes, it is as if at a certain point Naples asks you to surrender. Why don't you simply surrender and enter my system, my ways, or do you still have the energy to struggle against me?

Iain: Perhaps this part of the great illusion that many live – the idea that Naples is somehow homogenous, as though it were a unique historical

and cultural bloc, when there are clearly tens or hundreds of 'Naples'. It is in this key that you, *Sintesi* and the artists we are referring to, are proposing another way 'to be' in Naples, rendering a previous, domestic and seemingly homogeneous understanding, to use that deeply suggestive Italian term, *spaesato* or 'homeless'.

Danilo: Yes, one frequently encounters the incapacity to change frequency and tune in to a new perspective, a fresh take. In this manner, the city, its representatives and official culture invariably penalise themselves, closing down discussion on emerging aesthetic and artistic tendencies through an unconsciously imposed silence.

Iain: But then the paradox, as always, is that art tends towards revealing precisely what you have avoided seeing or considering; that is art: it disturbs local coordinates and transposes you elsewhere, rather than reconfirming the already perceived.

Danilo: It holds out the possibility of removing the anxiety before the art work and insisting on the multiplicity of creative activities in the world of electronic music as a branch of contemporary art. It is also about creating difficulty; hence debate, discussion, development.

Appendix 2009

To take up where the interview left off nearly 5 years ago, I wish to quote a statement by Geert Lovink, an important media theorist and director of INC in Amsterdam: "[we are] free intellectuals, not as a bohemian choice, but because it is the last option left".[3] My eclectic path inside creative-artistic disciplines has gone on during these years, turning to the city as an object of study and experience and to the Web as an extension of the urban and social dimension in a 'flaneurised' form. It is, finally, the fusion of the different elements constituting my cultural background, made up, as it is, of architecture/art/new media/contemporary music.

Having put to rest our entrepreneurial ambitions in media communication that were so deeply immersed in the wave of false positivism of the late 1990s, we are now back with our feet on the ground, weighed down by the new global crisis and in search of a re-positioning of existence and experience.

Today, my main activities are in the field of design, whether on paper, for the web, or space design, with my small design firm "Questions of Space"; I am also working for MAV, Museo Archeologico Virtuale of Ercolano, for which I am curator of the internet section, designing its content architecture and interface, as well as coordinating the web developers for the museum.[4]

As for the artistic and curatorial side, my activities are concentrated in a project called N.EST Napoliest, a think tank that combines art and new

[3]<www.networkcultures.org>

[4] <www.museomav.com>

[5] <http://www.napoliest.it/>

[6] <www.mediartsoffice.eu>

media, architecture and urban studies, dedicated to the Eastern area of Naples.[5] With N.EST, since 2004, I have been carrying out projects and participating in exhibitions, as well as collaborating with a non profit organization, MAO media&artsoffice, which focuses on the spreading and distribution of new media and art.[6]

Naturally, my soundscapist essence is still alive: music runs parallel to my other activities, emerging here and there in experiences of performance and composition, often accompanied by a visual component.

The latest experience embracing both urban practice and musical performance took place in September 2008 in Liverpool. Within the context of a series of events organized by the Liverpool Biennial (Liverpool was European Cultural Capital in 2008), I was invited to contribute to the creation of a "community event" in a suburban area of the city, together with a local community college. The event was organised in a suburban park around a public art installation. Called "La Dolce Vita", it underlined the relationship between Naples and Liverpool, two port cities, two "cities on the edge". It also stressed the interest of Liverpudlians for Italy, and particularly the Southern Italy of the 1960s.

My participation in the event, alongside my conceptual contribution, was a performance as DJ, with a special selection of Italian songs from the decade between 1955 and 1965: soundtracks and pop songs, covers and jingles, all played from the steps of a building overlooking the event. It was a very unique experience, outside any classic club or dancehall conceptions; a whiff of 1960s Mediterranean sounds, splashed with Campari and Italian food offered to the not so wealthy residents of a rather lower-class suburban area.