

Alexis Zhang

Professor Jonathan Ruseski

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Feeling White Clouds: On Nuvole Bianche and Susan Sontag

If you wake up to a worry-free tomorrow and see the sun out, accompanied by white clouds floating in the sky and a gentle breeze, how would you spend your day? People often go through life constantly worrying about many issues: deadlines, work, financial instability and more. This leaves little room to relax and enjoy the moment. Yet people find respite in forms of art—like listening to music—to take their mind off their troubles. In the Spring of 2004, Ludovico Einaudi composed *Nuvole Bianche* (translated as “White Clouds”) upon seeing white clouds floating ‘like majestic ships in the sky’ outside the windows of his flat in Milan (Johnson). His masterful combination of melody, tempo and dynamics, delivered in a neoclassical minimalist style, evokes the sensation of drifting white clouds. Consequently, this solo piano piece provides a compelling argument supporting Susan Sontag’s thesis in “Against Interpretation,” echoing her argument that the audience should experience a work of art through the senses, focusing on its form rather than hunting for a deeper meaning in its content. *Nuvole Bianche*’s seamless fusion of form and content discourages interpretation and forces the audience to enjoy the song through their senses.

MELODIC LOOPS AND REPETITION

Melodic loops and repetition in *Nuvole Bianche* creates a hypnotic sequence that hooks the listener and keeps their senses engaged with the familiar patterns. In music, melodic loops are a chain of notes played in succession; they are usually short, containing only a few notes that

are catchy and easy to remember. The melodic loops form the main rhythm of the song that creates this calm and clear atmosphere for the clouds to inhabit. And repetition of these loops imitate the wave-like movement of the clouds for the audience.

One memorable loop is the B \flat -C-B \flat -A \flat melodic chain that is introduced early on and repeated six more times (Einaudi 1:21-1:39). This catchy B \flat -C-B \flat -A \flat chain, regardless of the varying subsequent notes, serves as a call in a “call and response.” In music, the call functions as a question and the response, the answer, in a musical conversation. The first few occurrences of the B \flat -C-B \flat -A \flat chain sets the expectation on what the song sounds and feels like based on the timbre: a distinctive sound produced by an instrument (Carlson). It also indicates that these sets of notes will be repeated a number of times later on like from 2:03-2:23, keeping the listener hooked with its familiarity.

Similarly, a A \flat -B \flat -A \flat -A \flat tune is also repeated several times throughout *Nuvole Bianche*. It is softly introduced around 0:38, painting a light and airy atmosphere for the drifting clouds through the sparse notes, but is more prominently played and repeated a few times three minutes later (Einaudi 3:58-4:00, 4:10-4:14). The employment of another call and response with the A \flat -B \flat -A \flat -A \flat tune acting as the call to the response that occurs between the aforementioned two instances suggests that this technique is cyclical in nature. It is this usage of repetition and the call and response technique that allows the audience to experience the song as steadily flowing—to feel the constant underlying thrumming that makes up the sensation for the slow yet continuously moving clouds.

Another notable melodic sequence is A \flat -G-F (on the higher octave) played four times successively in descending order. The same notes are played an octave lower as a segue into the A \flat -G-F played on the higher octave (Einaudi 2:45-3:00; 4:52-5:12). Compared to the other

melodic sequences, it is more powerful and emotionally impactful. Each note is clearly articulated in the buildup to the climax—where the song becomes more rhythmically dense and emotionally intense—and the repetition reinforces the sensations that arise as a result of this climax. That does not mean the previous melodic loops and repetitions that the audience has experienced are not as impactful. It is the variation in the melodic sequences throughout the song that make it “our own experience” and more “real to us” (Sontag 10). Each person has unique experiences that make them who they are. Because of this, they may experience the melodic loops differently: they may feel calm, nostalgic, happy, or sad. It all varies. Yet, it is the melodic loops that lay the foundation for feeling white clouds by creating a steady rhythm that is reminiscent of their floating state and strengthened by the repetition. Together, they make up a song that embodies white clouds that compels the audience to keep listening through their senses and make this experience their own.

RUBATO

The rubato—the slight increase or decrease in tempo—in *Nuvole Bianche* creates the flowy and cascading timeless sensation that resembles how clouds flow in alignment with the wind. As the audience continues listening, their senses (like those clouds) capture and relay the speeding up and slowing down of the music. The first instance occurs before the two minute mark: the music starts slow but the next few notes are played in quick succession before returning to its original speed, creating the idea that it quickly speeds up before slowing back down (Einaudi 1:43-1:48). The variation in tempo is another facet in how the audience experiences the sensation of the drifting clouds. It imitates human breathing—the speeding up mimics a sharp inhale while the gradual decrease in tempo, the slow exhale—as well as the clouds riding the wind. Through

this synchronization, it pulls the audience into the atmosphere and invites them to become a passenger to the wind.

About three minutes later, Einaudi applies a similar usage of rubato, resulting in a subtle yet gradual increase in tempo that builds up to the climax (Einaudi 4:21-4:31). His slight acceleration bridges the gap between the calmer prior sections and the more energetic climax. In doing so, the tempo mimics the wind gathering momentum—pulling the clouds (and the audience who are experiencing this change in tempo) to a greater velocity!

Another noticeable change in tempo occurs when *Nuvole Bianche* slows down and seems to fade into silence, resembling a current gently letting the audience wash ashore (Einaudi 5:07-5:14). The slowing down into the silence allows all the aspects of the piece—including the sensations—settle, letting the audience process what they feel. In doing so, they prioritize the sensations over the interpretation of the art, reflecting Sontag’s assertion at the end of her essay, “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (10). By shifting the focus from the tendency to overanalyze to the human senses, it allows for a closer, more direct involvement between the audience and the song. The rubato that Einaudi incorporates throughout *Nuvole Bianche* is one of the aspects that aids in this process as it engages the listeners’ hearing, time and spatial perception. As the song subtly increases or decreases in tempo, it simulates the ebb and flow of the drifting clouds, allowing them to feel the timelessness with the non-linear subtle changes as they are taken along for the musical journey.

DYNAMICS

The gradual changes in dynamics, from crescendo to decrescendo, captures the ‘voice’ within the lightness of the clouds and creates the peaceful atmosphere that quickly becomes predictable and enjoyable to the audience. *Nuvole Bianche* begins quiet, with dynamics ranging

from *piano* (soft) to *mezzo piano* (moderately soft), slowly introducing the calm and light atmosphere of the song to the listeners. It then transitions from the soft and quiet beginning to the middle of the song via a crescendo, going from a *mezzo forte* (moderately loud) to *forte* (loud). The change in dynamics—through the many crescendos and mini decrescendos—indicate a change in tune that becomes more emotionally dense, more heavy—similar to how clouds may change from white and light to dark and heavy. Towards the end, the ‘high tides’ of the dense rhythm and melody from the middle fades to *piano* with an echo-y effect as the song comes to an end. The variations in dynamics—the crescendos and decrescendos—alter how the audience experiences *Nuvole Bianche* and the associated emotions it evokes. Like Sontag suggests, “We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (10). *Nuvole Bianche* facilitates the return of experiencing through the senses that Sontag pushes for. As a non-lyrical song, it blocks the tendency to interpret the lyrics for understanding and forces the audience to connect to their senses—what they hear, what they feel—to experience the song. It pushes them to focus on aspects like the dynamics—how the notes get louder or softer—to experience that sensation of drifting white clouds the song embodies.

CONCLUSION

For forms of art such as *Nuvole Bianche*—a lyricless song experienced purely through its piano solo—interpretation takes away from the experience as a whole. In attempting to dissect the art to find a ‘deeper meaning,’ one would no longer be able to enjoy it how it is meant to be enjoyed—in its entirety. They would not truly feel the light sensation of the constant drifting of the white clouds that arises from the melodic loops and repetition, the rubato and changing dynamics. And as a result, this interpretation removes the intimacy that comes from the audience experiencing the art themselves through their senses, making them indifferent to art. Do not let

the intellectualization of art dictate how art is meant to be experienced. We should enjoy works of art more fully through our senses. Instead of thinking “what does this mean?,” consider “how does this make you feel?” or “what does this feel like to you?” By experiencing more with our senses, it grounds us, connecting us more to the present moment than just floating along in a ‘false world’ built on overinterpretation. While art might require deep thought and interpretation, there must also be a balance—set aside time to ground yourself in the present through your senses; no interpretation.

Works Cited

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