

The Gravesano Studio

Excerpt from Hermann Scherchen, *Aus meinem Leben Rußland in jenen Jahren* (1984)

Gravesano is a tiny village in the canton of Ticino, Switzerland. There are only 200 inhabitants. We live in the poorest part of the village – I wouldn't have been able to afford the property otherwise; it would have been far too expensive. It is actually nonsensical for people to buy such large plots of land like this because there is no car access, and the main road between Lugano and Bellinzona is quite far away. It was only by chance that I came to the site after seeing a peculiar newspaper announcement that I thought was worthwhile to investigate. So cheap, so much land – 2 hectares of forest together with 6,000 square metres of fertile land, a house with 12 rooms and walls 50 cm thick. I arrived, stood on the hill belonging to the house, and I was so lost in the moment that I immediately signed the contract.

In 1954 I built my first studio, which finished in three months. I was fortunate to befriend an incredibly kind architect named Hoeschle. At first, he was very shocked by my proposals, but then he saw that although I had changed my mind at least five times, I always stuck to the basic idea, which he accepted enthusiastically. And that was the following: a studio with five walls, not four, and a sloped ceiling – essentially a space in which every parallelism is barred. I explained to Hoeschle at the outset: “Listen, I want to try to eliminate interferences and stationary waves with this structure. I want to restrict the typical characteristics of a space.” The basic idea was so: every space that one finds himself in is an individual – big or small, upholstered or, how we say, bare – only consisting of stripped walls. And this individual transmits every sound that exists in the space differently. A space with bare walls carries all with a long echo. However, it simultaneously muffles the sound because the high tones, which are too faint, will be absorbed.

On the other hand, in a space with entirely bare walls – and possibly a lot of glass – the highest frequencies will have heavily reverberated. In a nutshell, the space provides clothing, actual timbre, and complexion for each kind of music generated. As a result, it is not possible to have a space suitable for all kinds of music. Only very beautiful types of spaces exist. I would like to have a room that I can deactivate. How can I do this? I must override the two space characteristics – the generation of timbre and echoes. This can only be achieved by manipulating the reverberations through this peculiar, asymmetrical spatial design and by making the space as echoless as possible. To my great fortune, the technical director of the Swiss Post and Telegraph agency and Swiss Radio, Professor Forer, had the patience to listen to me for three hours after I took my adventurous idea to him – and to take me seriously from the start. I told him, “Listen, I would like to build such a space on such and such grounds.” And he thought to himself and let me continue. Then I said to him, “You see, I would like to muffle the space and do the following: I would like to hang numerous vases. Vases are, in fact, resonators. One can tune a space with these vases, as they absorb certain frequencies.

I have built this studio for myself. I don't mean “for myself” in an arrogant sense, more modest – that is to say, as a direct activity of my existence. I live Gravesano. I have injected every effort into it that could possibly be injected. In a short time, not only students have come to me; as soon as eight days after the studio's completion in 1954, the first large convention in Gravesano began. Twenty-two of what, I must say, were Europe's leading scientists, electrical engineers, and musicians who came together to work for eight days. In the mornings, they held lectures lasting roughly two hours, and in the afternoons and evenings, there were discussions followed by experiments addressing the morning meetings. The delegates came from French radio, English radio, the Italian RAI and the German broadcasting company. One of the most notable speakers was Professor Meyer-Eppler, whom I persuaded to compile a book containing 22 lectures. This book

was titled *Gravesano – Klanggestaltung* (Gravesano – Sound Composition). Shortly afterwards, I founded the magazine *Gravesaner Blätter* (Gravesano Review) with the motto, “Issues surrounding the boundaries between art, electrical engineering and the science of sound.”

Although in the 20th century, we live within a most vigorous period of specialisation, and today there are claims that this specialisation must further precipitate a breakdown into specific sections of the particular sciences, we witness through records, radio, cinema and television that a synthesis has been simultaneously introduced. That is why I built Gravesano. Then these things that I just mentioned live no longer in specialisation but in a collaboration between electro-acoustic engineering, the science of sound and artistic creation. That was my objective. Thus, the experimental electro-acoustic studio Gravesano has a significant advantage: it is an entirely independent conception. That means being free from a higher authority dictating what is allowed to happen and what’s not allowed to happen. There are no working hours, no time limits on the use of the equipment, and no discrimination based on nationality, religion or race. It is instead just – as I would put it – my downright primitive life goal to fill the moment as intensely as possible and everything living that comes with that, no matter how it confronts me. Gravesano is entirely private and has no concern for propaganda. Gravesano is a home for those spirits who want to and can exert their influence and – I stress once more – in the most unprejudiced sense.