

Music That Everyone Can Read

Luigi Castiglioni with Dr Ed McKeon



Fig. 1

Reading

Can you read music? I do not only mean “are you musically literate”, capable of decoding or interpreting musical signs, but more to question whether reading is the same activity when I am contemplating a musical score as it is when absorbing myself in prose. If they are the same, then we might assume that composing a text has points of similarity to writing music. Printing scores and publishing books might also share techniques and common methods. The project I have initiated as Luigi Castiglioni Editore explores these issues.

As a fine printer and bookbinder, I am familiar with the subtle and sensitive crafts of using letterpress, inks, paper selection, design, and binding to evoke a writer’s work without simply illustrating its contents. The task is to supplement the text like a perfumier, or more precisely as an artist of memory, so that the physical material and sensory qualities of the binding call to the reader’s mind something of the text’s meaning. This art acknowledges that reading is not only cerebral but also offers pleasure through the ways in which acts of interpreting and reflection are also felt. Books can touch us emotionally and intellectually, just as we can handle and feel them as artefacts.

Music collectors appreciate these tangible and affective qualities too, which is one of the reasons why vinyl records have been favoured. They create attachments because they are meant to be held, their cover designs imprinted on the memory like teenage passions, whilst lyrics and notes are grooved into the heart. Deriving from *recordari*, the act of being recalled to the heart (*cor*), records are supposed to provide music for the soul, after all. The world of bibliophile collectors is relatively small by comparison. Opening up fine printing and binding to musicophiles has the potential to inspire new affiliations. In partnership with bookbinders worldwide, this project can become a new showcase for this art, uninhibited by language and translation, for music speaks across borders even on the printed page.

Crafting musical scores for readers presents captivating challenges. To begin with, reading is commonly understood to require or to invite *imagination*, a visual faculty. How, then, might readers be seduced to listen? The composer Pauline Oliveros (1932-2016) proposed “auralization” as an auditory counterpart to imagination, an “inner sound or sounding”, adopting the term from the architect Mendell Kleiner who used it for acoustic simulations of rooms and buildings (1). The notion of reading-as-listening is not itself novel, but its application to fine printing and binding certainly is.

A surprising aspect of this challenge is that it should even come as a surprise. After all, one of the foundational legends of literacy concerns the discovery of *silent* reading as a process of inner listening and contemplation. St Augustine remarks in his *Confessions* (book six, chapter three) on visiting St. Ambrose, who was often to be found reading silently. Whilst now commonplace, this was contrary to Roman custom of voicing the text whether alone to oneself or to others. Augustine observed that “as he read, his eyes glanced over the pages *and his heart searched out the sense*, but his voice and tongue were silent.” (2) Might reading in the mode of listening be precisely the sense that enables a text to speak to the heart?

It is because words are never “simply words” that writers have paid special attention to the musicality of their texts. This is persuasively expressed in the history of ekphrasis, conventionally understood as the use of words to convey meaning from another sense, especially but by no means only pictorial description. Indeed, as the philosopher Lydia Goehr reminds us, in its ancient form ekphrasis was concerned not only with the imagination but with giving presence to things that were necessarily absent, bringing to life what appeared only in memory (3). It was in this sense that the Roman rhetorician Quintilian credited the Athenians with a proper concern that words be “in tune”, and emphasised the musicality of rhetoric arts—whether delivered through oratory or writing—in conveying *vivid* impressions to listeners and readers. As an aside, we can note that the tradition of “talking drums” in some African

music has its counterpart in the European musical tradition of understanding the articulation of beats in correspondence with poetic meters.

Examples of music “speaking” and speech “singing” abound. Alongside “musical” writers such as Marcel Proust, Thomas Bernhard, or the poet John Ashbery, we might consider artists who both compose and write novels, from Paul Bowles and Anthony Burgess to Kerry Andrew. Others, meanwhile, have experimented with writing music in the form of (nonsense) text, famously with Kurt Schwitters’ *Ursonate*, but also with John Cage’s musicalisation of words by James Joyce (*Muoyce*) and Henry David Thoreau (*Mureau*), following in part the example of his friend, the poet Jackson Mac Low.

Contrary then, to its reputation as the most abstract art, divorced from language, music can be approached as that which gives words body and depth, breath and pregnant silence. Writing and music have, in aesthetics, been presented as opposite ends of a spectrum between objective meaning and subjective feeling, yet they have more in common than we might think. They are both “published” and read (at least in notated practices of music), unlike visual art, architecture, and dance, generally. Albums provide a medium for treasuring memories in poetry as well as in music (and, of course, in photography). Yet where printed text is regarded as a “dead letter”, marking the absence of that which is past, to read musically is to animate it, to give it life. The proposition of Luigi Castiglioni Editore, is that we can perform music by reading it.

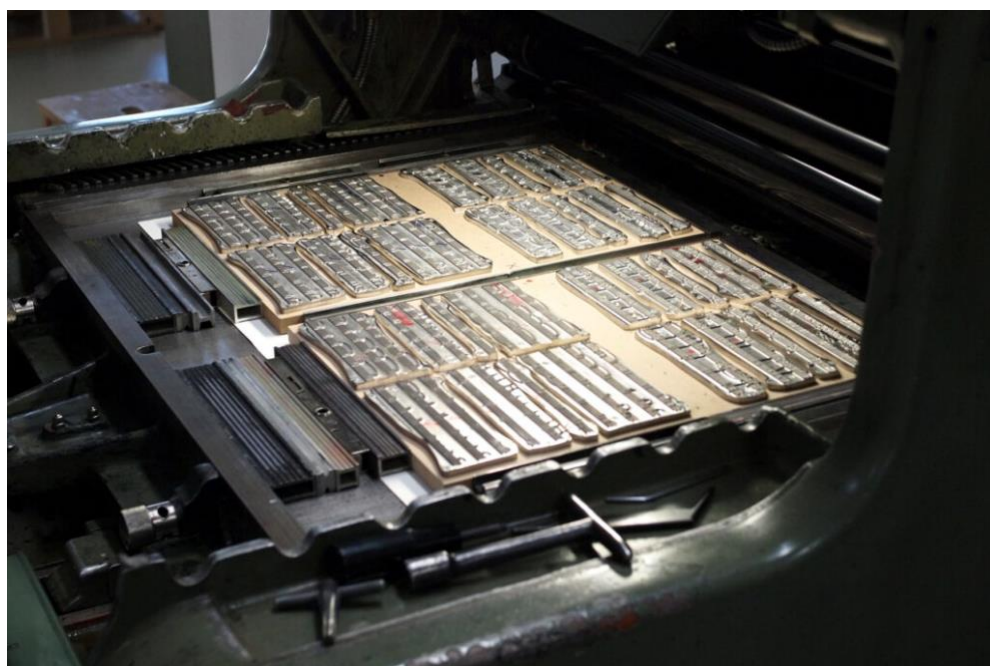


Fig. 2

Writing

Look at a musical score from the Western tradition. What do you see? If you look carefully, you are likely to find three elements: a staff or “system” of staves acting as a kind of temporal grid; graphic elements overlaid onto this framework as musical pitches and symbols indicating performance characteristics; and textual instructions or descriptions [Fig. 2]. In the twentieth century, composers have exploited this by separating them out, emphasising one aspect over the others, or omitting some altogether. Consider John Cage, for example, whose professional life began by working with printers and bookbinders linked to Hazel Dreis in Santa Monica, near Los Angeles, in the 1930s, forming a percussion ensemble with them. Cage created three versions of his three-movement “silent” piece, *4’33”* (1952), in which the performer or performers are to perform the piece without sounding their instruments (a little like St Ambrose, perhaps). One version used only the staff notation with bar lines and a musical time signature to indicate the duration of each bar. Another used only graphic elements, described as “proportional notation” in which space—the length of a line—was equated with time. A final version uses only text, instructing the (unspecified) performer(s) to remain “tacet”—the Italian term indicating silence for musicians.

Whilst this is perhaps an extreme case, the use of text- and graphic-only scores as well as peculiar hybrids has become quite commonplace. For example, Yoko Ono issued a collection of instruction scores, *Grapefruit*, in 1964, whilst Oliveros’s *Sonic Meditations* were published a decade later. Cornelius Cardew’s *The Great Learning* and George Crumb’s *Spiral Galaxy* are just two of many celebrated re-imaginings of graphic and framing elements. *Notations* (1968), an exhibition and book project by John Cage and Alison Knowles, gathered together explorations of musical scores by composers from Pierre Boulez and Leonard Bernstein to lyrics by The Beatles. The idea was revisited by Theresa Sauer four decades later for *Notations 21*, with contributions by composers from over 50 nations taking inspiration from pop culture, films, rock music, and even comic books as well as from traditions of scored music (4). Here, then, is music as much for the reading ear as for the mind’s eye, for public performance as for silent listening.

Perhaps the best historic examples of this combination of music written for sensory pleasure, for recollection, and for performance are the illuminated manuscripts of Medieval music. The *Chantilly Codex*, for example, includes one chanson written in the shape of a heart, whilst the mid-13th century *Fontevraud Gradual* incorporated exquisite images of biblical lore—the Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, and Trinity among others—within its collection of Gregorian Chant, proses, and polyphonic pieces.

Printing and Binding

This brief survey of musical reading and writing provides the background to Luigi Castiglioni Editore, for, as far as I am aware, the arts of letterpress and fine binding have not been used for music until now. I trained as a musician and musicologist before turning to these craft skills, developing my understanding and techniques through a period of apprenticeship with many of Europe's finest book artists. Over time, I built my own studio and practice, appreciating not only the skills of fine binding but also the poetic imagination—or should that be auralization—that manifests in books that can be living objects for sensitive collectors and readers.

The idea of rendering music in a format that anyone might read, not only those trained in music, came to me in 2010. A world of possibilities began to take form in which musical works might be appreciated and valued like *objets d'art*, not only as technical information for performing. A composer's writing, in my opinion, has the same value and power as a painter's brushstroke or a sculptor's chisel stroke.

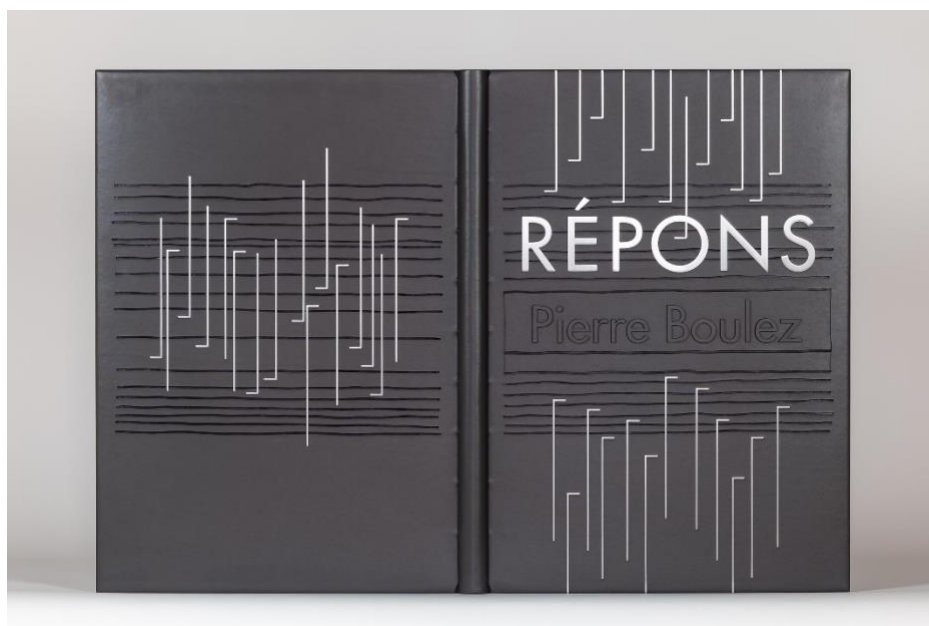




Fig. 3



Fig. 4

I explored these possibilities with magnificent examples of rare scores, such as Pierre Boulez's *Répons* [Fig. 3] and György Ligeti's *Artikulation* [Fig. 4], before settling on the idea of collaborating with living composers and artists to make unique editions.

My first collaboration began when approached Gavin Bryars (b.1943), the eminent British composer. He had collaborated with Cage in the 1960s and taught in British Art Schools in the 1970s, so whilst my idea was completely new he understood and appreciated it immediately. One of his most-loved pieces—recorded in a cover version by Tom Waits, which sold over a million copies—features a recording of an unidentified homeless man singing what sounds like a chapel hymn, repeated like a mantra [Fig. 5], that gives the title, *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1971). Touched by its sincerity and fragility, Bryars dignified this act by

providing an accompanying chorale, usually performed on strings and often by his own ensemble. Over the following years, he made several variations for different musical forces and situations, as if the piece continued to grow and find maturity as a living work. He proposed that I make a final (sixth) variation of the piece that he authorised and signed, becoming the first fruit of this initiative.

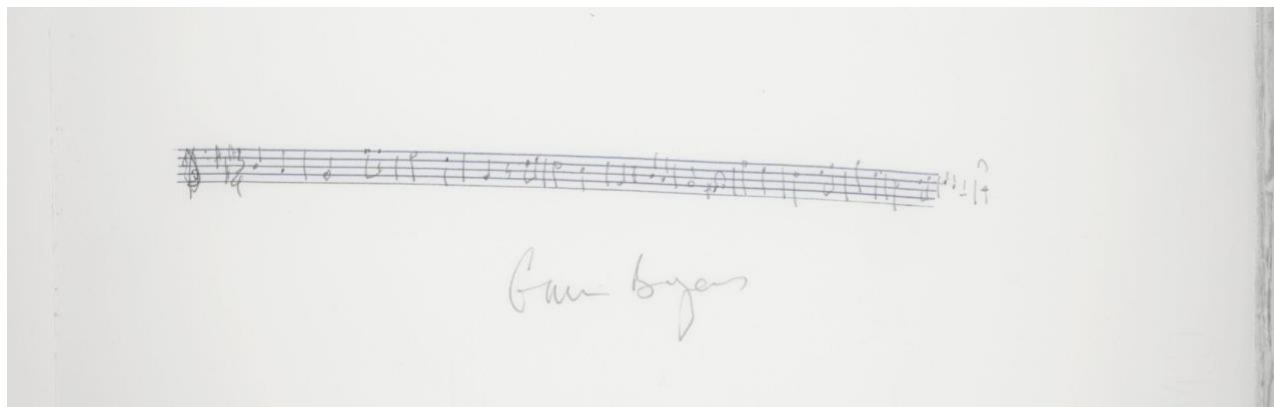


Fig. 5



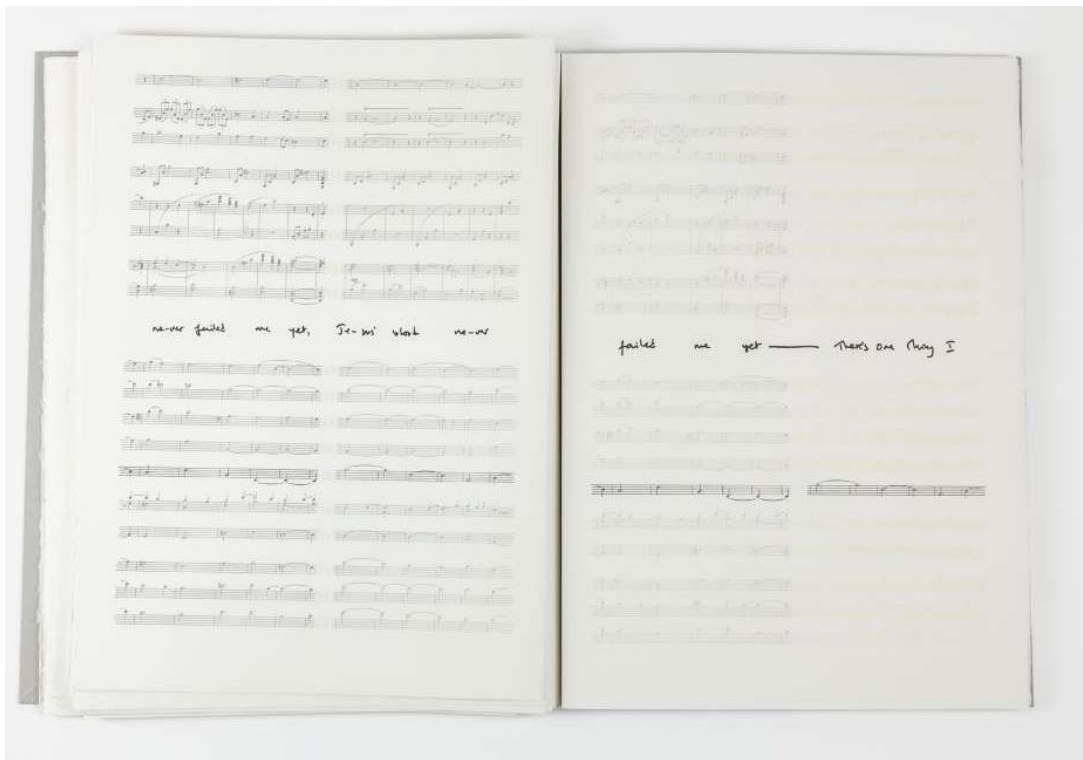


Fig. 6

The key challenge was to make the musical experience of the piece immediately intelligible to an “innocent” reader. The piece unfolds by gradually introducing players from the ensemble before reversing the procedure to leave the man hymning alone into dust, like one large crescendo and diminuendo, an expansion and contraction. A breath in, and a last breath out. I decided to use fine gradations of ink to render this on the page, from almost white on white to bold type, with the pauses at the end of each phrase written as rests in white ink to

indicate the musical presence across these pregnant moments of stillness. The double bass—Gavin's instrument—becomes the last to depart, as if holding the man's hand until the near end [Fig 6]. Marking the piece's 50th anniversary, I then incorporated a vinyl album, uniquely featuring the man's voice alone with 25 iterations on each side [Figs 7 & 8]. The response of the composer, of musicians, collectors and fellow fine binders has been phenomenal, encouraging me to go further.



Fig. 7

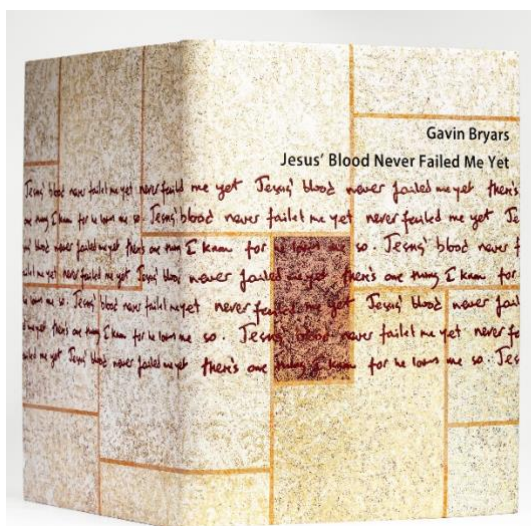


Fig 8



Fig. 9

Gavin agreed for me to work on a new version of another iconic piece, *The Sinking of the Titanic*. What had started out for him as a Conceptual Art piece, based on detailed research into the tragedy, took on new life when he was commissioned to compose it. He had recorded interviews with some of the few remaining survivors, added sound samples based on testimonies from the event, and took the poetic idea of the ship's band playing on, making an assemblage with melodies from tunes in their repertoire such as *Autumn* and *Aughton*. He then layered performer instructions to alter the sound of their instruments to suggest the idea of them gradually becoming submerged. I translated this process in three ways. At the bottom of each page, I “sank” the pages of the score in ink, from light to dark as the piece descends [Fig. 10]. At another, I used texts from the interviews alongside the musical notation and graphic representation of the tape part, to present the idea of the assemblage. I commissioned the artist Cristina Iglesias—a friend of Gavin who had collaborated with her husband, Juan Muñoz—who made three exquisite etchings to accompany the score [Fig. 11], and finally supplemented this with a unique vinyl recording of the interviews with the ship's survivors.

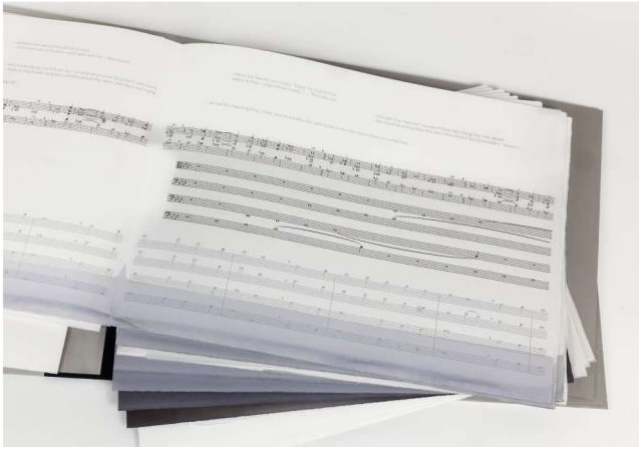


Fig. 10



Fig. 11

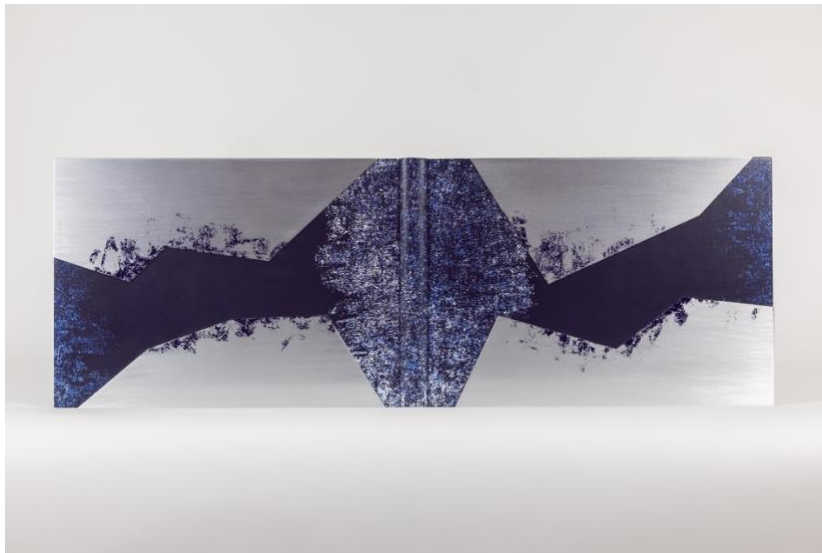




Fig. 12

My approach, then, has been not only to use the arts of fine printing and binding to render the music in printed form, but also to collaborate with composers in finding distinctive solutions to the challenges presented by each piece. Each is *sui generis*, conjured from the poetry of the music and my intuition for the work, using all the techniques and manifold possibilities of letterpress, graphics, commissioned images, colour, inks, paper, and material binding. Further editions are underway, with pieces by Tom Johnson, Joan La Barbara, and my first full realisation of a work by Boulez. Gavin's ensemble will then perform at a very special event marking an exhibition of this work with the leading Parisian auction house, Artcurial in June 2024.



The creation of the musical works required a completely different artistic approach from me. In the case of Gavin's two compositions, I created a new way of writing music, a completely personal way; in the sense that I had the opportunity to break with traditional musical notation and think of the score as graphic art. When I introduced my idea to Gavin, he was immediately enthusiastic, especially because the two compositions were conceived by him as "open works", and therefore suitable for continuous transformations and modifications, always remaining within the same basic concept.

Embodying both the profession of publisher and that of bookbinder, I reflected a lot on what the right relationship to maintain is, and I preferred to clearly separate the concept of typographical/graphic work from the concept of artistic binding. I would like the choice of decoration not to have as its origin what is printed inside the book, but to come only from listening to the music contained in it. I believe that during the phase of inspiration and creation of the decoration of the binding, one should start from purely acoustic and aural research rather than approach the scores by leafing through the pages. The result will be unexpected and surprisingly original.

Luigi Castiglione Editore is not only a platform for my innovation but is also an invitation to other fine printers and bookbinders to showcase their creativity and skills, as well as to practice new ones. I welcome collaboration. How might listening, profoundly, affect and expand your approach, inspire new techniques or suggest unanticipated materials?

With this initiative, my aim has been to offer the miracle that music is in a form that everyone can read and, in reading, perform. The pleasures of the text involve all the senses, not the least of them listening, and with listening bringing to life the treasure-house of memories that music affords.

Notes

1. Pauline Oliveros, "Auralizing in the Sonosphere: A Vocabulary for Inner Sound and Sounding", *Journal of Visual Culture* 10/2 (2011), 162-168.
2. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. Albert C Outler, rev.d Mark Vessey, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007, 74.
3. Lydia Goehr, "How to Do More with Words. Two Views of (Musical) Ekphrasis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50/4 (2010), 389-410.

4. Theresa Sauer (ed.), *Notations 21*, New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2009.

Further reading

Details about bindings and more images

<https://luigicastiglioni.it/tipologie/music/>

Details about Luigi's creative process, more images and his collaboration with Gavin Bryars

https://luigicastiglioni.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/LCE-Manifesto-SITO_Eng-1.pdf