



# One says Mexico: The Mexican Soundscapes of Stefano Scodanibbio

Luis Velasco-Pufleau

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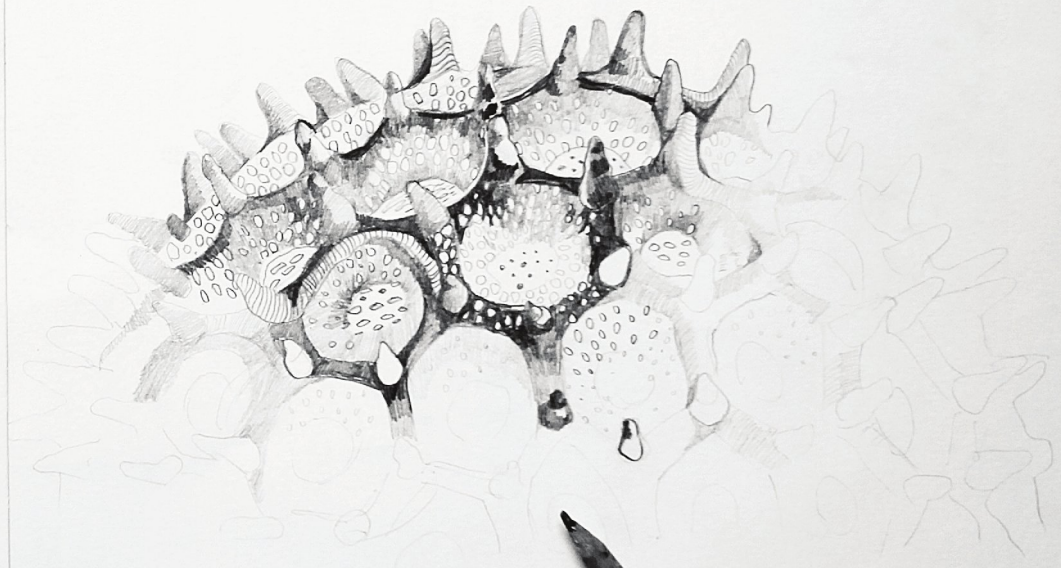


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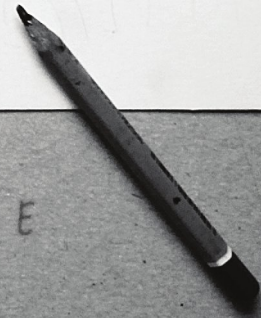
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SOUNDSCAPE





# ***One says Mexico:***

## **The Mexican Soundscapes**

### **of Stefano Scodanibbio**

Luis Velasco Pufleau

*In memoriam Stefano Scodanibbio<sup>1</sup>*

An unexplained geographic loyalty leads Scodanibbio to create this place of acoustic and mental encounter called *One says Mexico*. The result is amazing and has something hypnotic and ritualistic.

*Adolfo Castañón<sup>2</sup>*

"The music gave me the opportunity to live in complete freedom"<sup>3</sup>, claimed Stefano Scodanibbio (1956-2012) during the Radio Nacional de España programme *Ars Sonora*, a few months before his death. Music, creation and freedom were the main life axes of Scodanibbio, both as a double-bassist and a composer<sup>4</sup>. His compositional catalogue began in 1979 with *Oriente-Occidente* for solo double bass<sup>5</sup>, and continued until his death – "composing help me to perform, and vice versa", he said. Interpretation, composition and improvisation were all part of the same project: a life driven by creative activity.

Over fifty minutes long, the Hörspiel<sup>6</sup> *One says Mexico* is a commission of the Saarländischer Rundfunk, which Scodanibbio completed in 1998 and dedicated to the Mexican writer Adolfo Castañón. The work is an intimate tribute to Mexico, a sound portrait, and a musical means of remembering a country that the composer loved and where he decided to die<sup>7</sup>. Scodanibbio himself explained: "Mexico has always been

a kind of second home for me, and I always wanted to honour it in some way. So I decided to pay tribute to it with a Hörspiel, through the medium of radio"<sup>8</sup>.

As we will see, the work can be analysed as a vast soundscape: an individual and collective memory of the composer's Mexican experiences. Bringing together imagination, memory and history, Scodanibbio recreated his own private Mexico in which music, soundscapes, texts and voices intertwine. *One says Mexico* addresses, through the use of soundscapes, quotations and references, that which the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls the issue of "the representation of the past"<sup>9</sup>. The work serves the dual functions of being a sound memory of the composer's experiences in Mexico while also introducing the listener to the Mexican acoustic world and Mexican history.

#### ***One says Mexico: Imagination, memory and history***

The *One says Mexico* project took Scodanibbio from 1995 to 1998, during which he was in charge of the recording and production processes, and all the final details – even the design of the album cover. *One says Mexico* combines a variety of acoustic materials from diverse backgrounds that, across landscapes, places, people and the history of Mexico, speak about the significance of Mexican literature and the composer's experiences. In his composition, Scodanibbio principally used three types of materials in heterogeneous sound spaces, as he explains:



In this work many elements converge, with at least three major elements. [The first] is the musical element, which is provided by pieces for solo guitar or two guitars: they are three pieces I wrote during my stays in Mexico, overlapped and re-mixed. Another important element is the soundscapes that I have recorded in Mexico during many of my trip – hours and hours of recordings in streets, cities, bus stations, markets, bars (*cantinas*), etc. The third element, very important, is the voices: the texts read by around twenty-five speakers, because it is a musical, acoustic and literary portrait of Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

The dramatic progression of *One says Mexico* lies in the thematic contrast of those elements within the macro-formal structure. The form gradually heads towards an almost total immersion in the acoustic world of Mexico, represented in the fourth movement by the numerous soundscapes and Mexican musical references. The texts, soundscapes and guitar works chosen by Scodanibbio follow a narrative logic developed by a formal plan based on dramatic opposition to autonomous and complementary movements (Table 1).

Scodanibbio's efforts in this composition mobilised imagination, memory and history, both in the material itself and in the editing of heterogeneous elements, which is characteristic of radio compositional forms. The guitar works used by Scodanibbio in his Hörspiel are related to his imaginary world, in which a particular geography stimulates creative activity, taking a specific form and aesthetic. Moreover, the soundscapes are linked with the acoustic memories of the places, spaces and people that the composer recorded. They were integrated into the work through meticulous editing in which the sounds are used both for their evocative power and their internal musicality. Thus, Scodanibbio created a representation of his past experience in Mexico through the use of imagination and memory: as Ricœur asserts, "imagination and memory have as a common trait the presence of the absent"<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the fictional, poetic, or historical texts used by Scodanibbio in *One says Mexico* are only from foreign writers who wrote about Mexico. Their appearance is based on the narrative needs and formal structure of the work. These texts are read in different languages by friends of Scodanibbio, allowing him to use several different accents, intonations and dictions, besides the meaning of the words and the inherent musicality of each language.

	I	II	IV	V
Duration	25'13"	7'24"	7'46"	9'55"
Movement	Fast	Slow	Medium	Fast
Character	Dramatic (unstable)	Tragic	Mystical / Magical	Expressive (stable)
Narrative	Immersion in and discovery of the country	History of the conquest of Nueva España	Mystical texts linked with Mexico	Numerous soundscapes and acoustic references to Mexico

**Table 1. Form and movement character of *One says Mexico*.**



### Guitar sounds

The first element of *One says Mexico* is the guitar sounds – the representative Mexican instrument for Scodanibbio – taken primarily from two of the four works that form the composer's catalogue for this instrument: *Quando le montagne si colorano di rosa* (for two guitars, 1984-1988, 10'), and *Dos abismos* (for solo guitar, 1992, 13')<sup>12</sup>. The first work is dedicated to the duo Castañón-Bañuelos (Margarita Castañón and Federico Bañuelos), and the title is inspired by *Visas*, a book by Italian poet Vittorio Reta (1947-1977). The second work is dedicated to guitarist Magnus Anderson, and its title is inspired by the poem *Rapsodia para el mulo* by Cuban writer José Lezama Lima (1910-1976). The versions of these two works used by Scodanibbio were recorded in Saarbrücken by guitarists Elana Casoli, Jürgen Ruck and Magnus Anderson, under the artistic direction of the composer, at the studios of the Saarländischer Rundfunk, in late 1997. In each of the four movements of *One says Mexico*, Scodanibbio freely used fragments of these works, evoking his artistic activity and creative relationship in Mexican territory (temporally and geographically). Procedures of tempo, pitch and spatial transformation, alongside juxtaposition or layer overlapping, create the



**Example 1. Fragment of *Quando le montagne si colorano di rosa* (bars 186-191), used in the first movement of *One says Mexico* (0'24" - 0'29").**

lno Scodanibbio

Quando le montagne si colorano di rosa  
per due chitarre

Vertiginoso  
+ o + o sim.

poca

Para dos acérrimos amigos,  
Margarita y Federico

p x o x o sim. cresc. sempre p

**Example 2. Opening bars of *Quando le montagne si colorano di rosa* (1-16), used in the first movement of *One says Mexico* (6'03" - 6'16").**

unique musical identity of each movement, constantly following the texts' meanings<sup>13</sup>. The musical language of Scodanibbio's guitar works is generally characterised by numerous harmonics, left hand *ligados*, and technical resources such as the Bartók *pizzicato* (Example 1).

The idiomatic aspect of these works is developed by overlapping different sound planes, obtained mostly with the technical independence of each hand, as well as by the repetition and aggregation of micro-patterns or rhythmic cells (Example 2).

Scodanibbio played the guitar himself, and also wrote his works with the instrument in his hands, because improvisation was closely linked to the creative process of his compositional work: "Improvisation was always part of my musical life, whether as a soloist, including some of my works, or with other musicians or groups"<sup>14</sup>.

### Mexican soundscapes

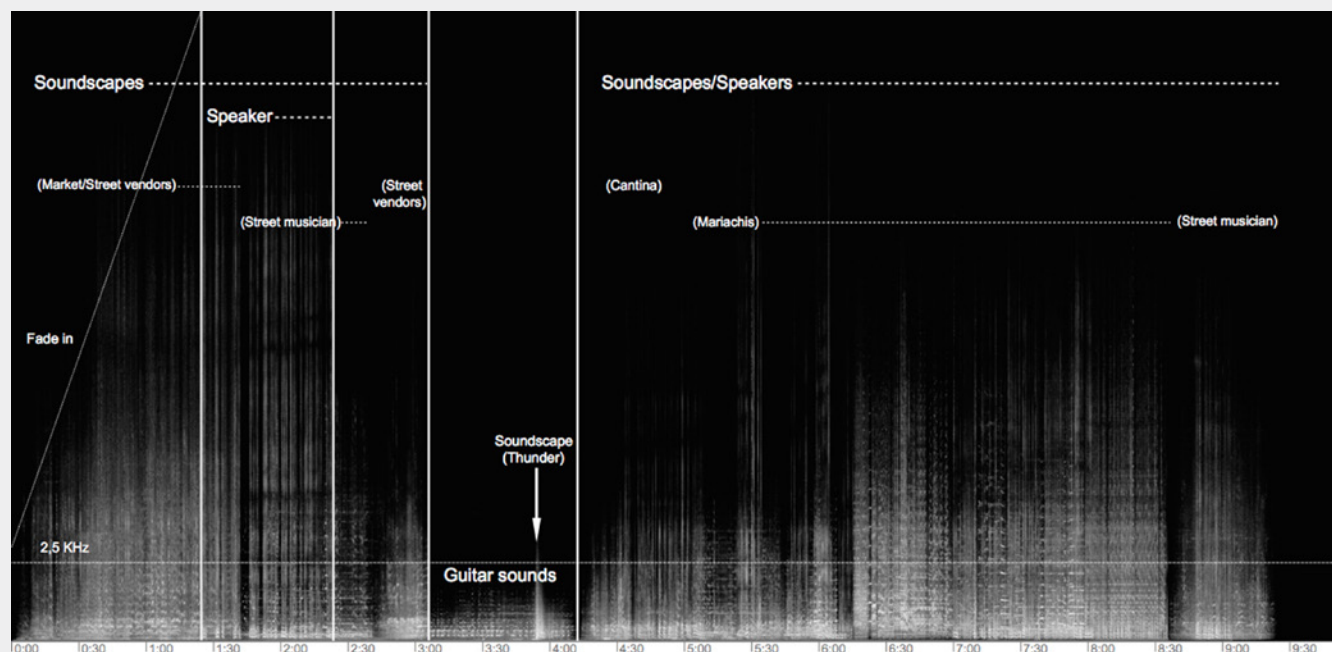
The second main element of *One says Mexico* is the Mexican soundscapes that Scodanibbio recorded with a portable DAT (Digital Audio Tape) recorder during his travels<sup>15</sup>. These soundscapes, irregularly distributed across the movements of the work, are formed by the shouts of street vendors, bird songs, folk songs performed by trios or mariachis, and the sounds of markets, plazas, bars (*cantinas*), bus stations and airports. In general, the soundscapes accompany and bring life to the texts, guiding the listener through the intimate spaces of Mexico that Scodanibbio recorded patiently during his journeys. Thus, the composer recalls Mexico as sonic experience, making present what is absent in an "inhabited space"<sup>16</sup>. The soundscapes relate to a certain acoustic geography of Mexico, both in its nature and its relations with human activity, conceived of as a displacement of external figures "adopted as a basis and intermediary for the work of memory"<sup>17</sup>. In

this way, Scodanibbio took the sound space as "the setting for the inscription of slower oscillations than those known by history"<sup>18</sup>.

However, the composer also used soundscapes as specific sound material: he made them musical through various effects and transformations such as filtering, transposition, modulation, distortion, and via editing operations (repetition, overlapping, juxtaposition). The use of this material considerably enriches the palette of colours, textures, densities, and acoustic effects. It allows the listener not only to move within the acoustic geography of Mexico, but also to discover the soundscape's musicality in itself. A sonogram shows the form of the fourth movement of *One says Mexico*, structured according to the narrative of the musical, acoustical and literary elements of the work.

### Literary soundscapes in multiple voices

The third main element structuring the sound discourse of the work is the collection of texts written by twenty-four foreign authors that the composer's friends and colleagues read aloud in Mexico and other parts of the world. For Scodanibbio, this element is "the perspective of the visitor, the foreign writer who has travelled in Mexico, who visited Mexico and wrote about Mexico, [...] is my own point of view, the foreigner who goes to Mexico"<sup>20</sup>. The texts were read in their original languages – Italian, French, German, English, Spanish and Portuguese – and address different periods in the history of Mexico, as well as a variety of aspects of Mexican life, which affected the different visiting writers. The historical, poetic, and narrative content of the texts, as well as their interaction with the soundscapes, characterise each of the movements of *One says Mexico*, contributing to its dramatic progression. For example, in the first movement, the longest and densest of the four (25'13"), the tight editing of quotations from the



**Example 3. Fourth movement sonogram of *One says Mexico* (9'55'')<sup>19</sup>.**

readings by different voices creates the unpredictable motion and gives the impression of continual transformation (see Table 2). By contrast, in the second movement, the extension of the four historical texts, as well as the slow and repetitive rhythm of the elements, give an impression of temporal immobility which follows the tragic content of the text (the conquest and founding of *Nueva España*).

A detailed analysis of the relationship between the texts, soundscapes and dramatic progression of *One says Mexico* exceeds the limits of this essay and deserves an extensive study. However, it is possible to highlight the complexity of this relationship as well as the impressive work of the composer, who wrote, recorded and organised the narrative over several years. *One says Mexico*, the title taken from the first sentence of the book *Mornings in Mexico* by D. H. Lawrence<sup>21</sup>, was conceived of as a personal journey through the life, history, space, time and people of Mexico. As Paul Ricoeur explains, "in passing from memory to historiography, the space in which the protagonists of a recounted history move and the time in which the told events unfold conjointly change their sign"<sup>22</sup>. As Scodanibbio crossed Mexico, he was increasingly affected by his experiences while simultaneously leaving his own mark. The words of Pablo Neruda which begin the fourth movement could have been Scodanibbio's own: "I wandered Mexico, ran across all their coasts, high coastal cliffs, burned by a phosphoric perpetual lightning. Mexico, the last of the magical lands"<sup>23</sup>.

For the Mexican writer Adolfo Castañón, "in *One says Mexico* the artist manages to join the imaginary reality and the historical and empirical reality, combining the intimate and the public, the history, and the magic"<sup>24</sup>. *One says Mexico* shows most powerfully the creative freedom of Stefano Scodanibbio, closely linked to his manner of feeling life and art, his travels, and the friendship, which accompanied his life. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote about the relationship Scodanibbio had with his music, "Stefano [was] not just a great artist, but also a happy one, who took delight in his own music, even if, like every form of art, it were to wound him to death"<sup>25</sup>. In his own words, Stefano Scodanibbio conceived his music as the "ability to imagine other possible worlds with no leaning on models borrowed from other disciplines, on flavour-of-the-month technology, on academic rules and regulations, or on what passes for musically correct"<sup>26</sup>. Instead of conforming to known places and pre-designated paths, the composer chose "looking around, travelling, going to museums, absorbing, going inward, and never stopping experimentation"<sup>27</sup>. *One says Mexico* is a living memory of part of the life of Scodanibbio – an intimate soundscape, in which Mexican sounds are combined with a foreign perspective of Mexico. Scodanibbio's creativity transformed these elements into a collective memory, capable of dealing with the passage of time. ■

I		
Speaker	Author	Text
Andrew Murphy	D. H. Lawrence	Mornings in Mexico
Wolfgang Korb	Alexander von Humboldt	Politischer Versuch über Das Neue Spanien
David Moss	William S. Burroughs	Junky
Wolfgang von Stas	Gustav Regler	Im Tal der blutbefleckten Pyramiden
Paulo Alvares	Énrico Lopes Verissimo	México – Historia de uma viagem
Mario Zanzani	Pino Cacucci	La polvere del Messico
Terence Vanden Berg	Allen Ginsberg	Ready to roll
Terry Riley	Jack Kerouac	Tristessa
David Moss	William S. Burroughs	Queer
Alfredo Valdez Brito	José Lezama Lima	Paradiso
Stefano Scodanibbio	Emilio Cecchi	America amara
Aldo Tenedini	Italo Calvino	Sotto il sole giaguaro
Mario Zanzani	Pino Cacucci	Camminando
Terence Vanden Berg	Allen Ginsberg	Siesta in Xbalba
Gunter Cremer	Bruno Traven	Nachtbesuch im Busch
Raimund Gilvan-Cartwright	Malcolm Lowry	Under the Volcano
Matthias Ponnier	Wolf Wondratschek	Die Einsamkeit der Männer. Mexikanische Sonette (Lowry-Lieder)
Fátima Miranda	María Zambrano	Un descenso a los infiernos
II		
Santiago Genovés	Francisco de Aguilar	Relación breve de la conquista de la Nueva España
Rafael Taibo	Bernal Díaz del Castillo	Historia Verdadera
Julio Estrada	Bartolomé De Las Casas	Relación de la destrucción de las Indias
Andrew Murphy	D. H. Lawrence	The Plumed Serpent
III		
Stéphane Schleiningner	Antonin Artaud	Les Tarahumaras
Wolf-Dietrich Sprenger	Ernst Jünger	Annäherungen. Drogen und Rausch
Napoleón Glockner	Carlos Castaneda	El fuego interno
Roberto Kolb	Carlos Castaneda	The Teachings of Don Juan
IV		
Álvaro Bitrán	Pablo Neruda	Confieso que he vivido
Mario Zanzani	Pino Cacucci	La polvere del Messico
Raimund Gilvan-Cartwright	Malcolm Lowry	Under the Volcano
Paulo Alvares	Énrico Lopes Verissimo	México – Historia de uma viagem
Maurizio Boldrini	Francesco Carletti	Ragionamenti del mio viaggio intorno al mondo
Aldo Tenedini	Italo Calvino	Sotto il sole giaguaro

**Table 2. Speakers, authors and texts (fragments) used in *One says Mexico*.**

- 1 I would like to express my gratitude to Maresa Scodanibbio; her help made it possible for me to write this article. I would like to thank Helen Lantsbury for her help with the English translation of this text.
- 2 Castañón, Adolfo, *Viaje a México: Ensayos, crónicas y retratos*, Iberoamericana, Madrid, 2008, p.31. Excep.references to other translated texts, this translation is by the author.
- 3 Interview with Stefano Scodanibbio in the monographic edition of the *Radio Nacional de España* programme *Ars Sonora*, presented by Miguel Álvarez-Fernández and Rubén Gutiérrez del Castillo, on June 18, 2011 ([www.arssonora.es/?p=638](http://www.arssonora.es/?p=638)).
- 4 Scodanibbio is known for having accomplished a technical revolution of the double bass, and for his collaboration and friendship with some of the most important composers of the second half of the 20th century: Scelsi, Nono, Berio, Sciarrino, Xenakis, Stockhausen, Cage, Riley, Ferneyhough, Estrada, Frith, Bussotti and Donatoni. His artistic activity exceeded the field of contemporary art music, as shown by his collaborations with dramatists (such as Rodrigo García), choreographers (such as Patricia Kuypers) and writers (such as Edoardo Sanguineti).
- 5 The compositional catalogue and discography of Stefano Scodanibbio are available on his website: [www.stefanoscodanibbio.com](http://www.stefanoscodanibbio.com).
- 6 A musical genre born in Germany through the initiative of composers who dealt with a new method of composition for state radio. It is characterised by a heterogeneous fusion of different sound planes, environmental sounds, soundscapes, voices, texts and music. From an aesthetic and historical perspective, "the Hörspiel has participated in the same acoustical and formal experimentation that has characterised avant-garde music in [20th] century" (Cory, Mark and Haggh, Barbara, *Hörspiel as Music – Music as Hörspiel: The Creative Dialogue between Experimental Radio Drama and Avant-Garde Music*, "German Studies Review", Vol. 4, nº 2, 1981, pp. 257-279).
- 7 The work is available to listen to here: [www.radioartnet.bandcamp.com/album/one-says-mexico](http://www.radioartnet.bandcamp.com/album/one-says-mexico).
- 8 Interview with Stefano Scodanibbio, *op. cit.*
- 9 Ricœur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University Chicago Press, Chicago 2004 [2000], p.xvi.
- 10 Interview with Stefano Scodanibbio, *op. cit.*
- 11 Ricœur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, *op. cit.*, p.44.
- 12 The other two works in his guitar catalogue are *Techne* (for two guitars, 1980-1981, 8'), dedicated to the duo Castañón-Bañuelos, and *Verano de suerte* (for solo guitar, 1981-1982, 7').
- 13 As Mark Cory and Barbara Haggh assert, "because the Hörspiel, since its inception, has been a literary genre, the dominant convention remains one of conveying a semantic message of some sort" (Cory, Mark and Haggh, Barbara, *Hörspiel as Music – Music as Hörspiel: The Creative Dialogue between Experimental Radio Drama and Avant-Garde Music*, *op. cit.*, p.279).
- 14 Interview with Stefano Scodanibbio, *op. cit.* Scodanibbio combined contemporary art music works with improvisation during

his concerts, especially as part of the trio with Markus Stockhausen (trumpet) and Rohan de Saram (violoncello).

- 15 I would like to thank Julio Estrada for this source.
- 16 Ricœur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 17 *Idem.*
- 18 *Id.*, p. 153.
- 19 This sonogram was made with the *EAnalysis* software, developed by Pierre Couprie at the MTI Research Centre of De Montfort University (Leicester, UK) as part of the research project *New multimedia tools for electroacoustic music analysis* ([www.logiciels.pierrecouprie.fr/?page\\_id=402](http://www.logiciels.pierrecouprie.fr/?page_id=402)).
- 20 Interview with Stefano Scodanibbio, *op. cit.*
- 21 *One says Mexico: one means, after all, one little town away south in the Republic*, Lawrence, D. H., *Mornings in Mexico and other essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009 [1927], p. 11.
- 22 Ricœur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
- 23 Neruda, Pablo, *Confieso que he vivido*, Pehuén Editores, Santiago, 2005 [1974], pp.207-208.
- 24 Castañón, Adolfo, *Viaje a México: Ensayos, crónicas y retratos*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- 25 Agamben, Giorgio, *My new address* (liner notes), 2004, p.6.
- 26 Scodanibbio, Stefano, *Idioms, travels, and musical instruments*, *My new address* (liner notes), p.9.
- 27 *Idem.*

## CDs

Scodanibbio, Stefano, *One Says Mexico*, CD, Saarbrücken, Saarländischer Rundfunk, 1998, 50'19":  
 Speakers: Andrew Murphy, Wolfgang Korb, David Moss, Wolfgang von Stas, Paulo Alvares, Mario Zanzani, Terence Vanden Berg, Terry Riley, Alfredo Valdez Brito, Stefano Scodanibbio, Aldo Tenedini, Gunter Cremer, Raimund Gilvan-Cartwright, Stéphane Schlleininger, Matthias Ponnier, Fatima Miranda, Santiago Genovés, Rafael Taibo, Julio Estrada, Wolf-Dietrich Sprenger, Napoleón Glockner, Roberto Kolb, Álvaro Bitrán, Maurizio Boldrini.  
 Guitar duo: Elena Casoli, Jürgen Ruck.  
 Solo guitar: Magnus Andersson.  
 Recording and production: Saarländischer Rundfunk.  
 Producers: Stefano Scodanibbio, Wolfgang Korb (SR).  
 Remix: Stefano Scodanibbio, Gianluca Gentili.

Scodanibbio, Stefano, *My new address*, CD, Saarbrücken, Saarländischer Rundfunk, 2004, 64'00".

## Scores

Scodanibbio, Stefano, *Quando le montagne si colorano di rosa*, two guitars, 1984-1988, 10', facsimile.  
 Scodanibbio, Stefano, *Das abismos, solo guitar*, 1992, 13', facsimile.