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***Prometeo, Tragedia dell'ascolto:* 'A New Way of Thinking Music' in Luigi Nono**

ABSTRACT

In *Prometeo, Tragedia dell'ascolto* Luigi Nono integrates texts ranging from Aeschylus and Friedrich Hölderlin to Walter Benjamin to create reflections on the myth of Prometheus. *Prometeo* presents a 'theatre of consciousness' on the continuity of endeavours towards freedom and utopia. Nono confirmed the simultaneity of musical and political reality, musical invention and moral insight, and musical activity and social commitment. Nono sought to discover 'a new way of thinking music' with 'a transformation of thinking' through re-awakening active listening and the cultivation of new modes of listening. Nono's experimentation with innovative technologies — which enabled sound to circulate in space — focused on new dimensions of sound in space and time: combinations of chamber ensembles, live electronics, and spatially distributed vocalists enhance the movement of sound in space. Nono explored the dimensions of musical expression beyond the prevailing twelve-tone compositional methodologies. Nono understood the development of serialism as not only a revolutionary departure but also 'the result of a historical evolution of music, conditioned by the human and musical necessities of our time'. Emphasising the necessity for contemporary music to 'intervene' in the 'sonic reality of our time', Nono's 'critical composition' resonates with active moral and political engagement in the historical conditions of the present. In Nono's music, the endeavours to rectify historical and present domains of injustice culminate in the affirmation of continuous striving for freedom opening up a horizon of anticipation.

1. INTRODUCTION 'A NEW WAY OF THINKING MUSIC'

To wake up the ear, the eyes, human thinking, intelligence, the most exposed inwardness. This is now what is crucial. (Nono 2001, 1–522.)

Luigi Nono (1924–90) sought to discover 'a new way of thinking music' with 'a transformation of thinking' through re-awakening active listening and the cultivation of new modes of listening (Stenzel 2013). Exploring the musical principles established in the first half of the 20th century by the Second Viennese School, Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, Nono developed the full implications of Schoenberg's ideas of order, structure, and completeness in the use of the chromatic scale (Iddon 2013). Nono's musical and critical-theoretical commitment, historical understanding, and conception of musical space expanded the horizon of musical possibility beyond the formalism of serialism. Nono understood the development of serialism as not only a revolutionary departure but also 'the result of a historical evolution of music, conditioned by the human and musical necessities of our time'. Nono's music urges the listeners to direct themselves inwards — towards a simultaneous renewal of listening and reflection.

2. PROMETEO, TRAGEDIA DELL'ASCOLTO

2.1 'A New Way of Thinking Music'

Prometeo, Tragedia dell'ascolto (*Prometheus, Tragedy of listening*, 1984–85) is regarded as one of the most significant compositions of Luigi Nono and among the most important works of contemporary music. The libretto by Massimo Cacciari incorporates texts by Hesiod (*Theogony*), Aeschylus (*Prometheus Bound*), Euripides (*Alcestis*), Herodotus (*History* I, 32), Goethe (*Prometheus*), Friedrich Hölderlin ('Schicksalslied' and 'Achilles'), Pindar (*Nemean*, VI), Walter Benjamin ('On the concept of history'), and Arnold Schoenberg (*Moses und Aaron*). *Prometeo* is a realisation of listening as thinking. It presents the possibility of listening to sounds and silence simultaneously and to be open to listening to new forms of sounds and ideas. Some of the text of *Prometeo* is only read silently by the performers. *Prometeo* activates the capacity of art, in Adorno's words, for 'uttering the unutterable'.

Nono developed his ideas for 'a tragedy of listening' from his collaborative work with Massimo Cacciari. Nono's composition is conceived in close correlation with the content of the libretto (Cecchetto and Mastinu 2005, 102). In *Verso Prometeo* (*Toward Prometheus*), Cacciari emphasises the importance focusing 'rigorously for the purposes of listening, no embellishing, no effects' and creating a 'place where listening is not distracted' (Cacciari 1984, 21).

Integrating different versions of the Greek myth of Prometheus Nono and Cacciari interpret the myth of Prometheus as signifying the human struggle for liberation.¹ Evolving from Nono's earlier conception of opera as 'azione scenica', stage activity (*Al Gran Sole Carico d'amore*, 1972–74)², and a 'theatre of consciousness', *Prometeo* continues to uphold the possibility of hope in witnessing the Promethean courage transcending the inordinate suffering.

¹ In *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Jean-Pierre Vernant presents an illuminating discussion of the Prometheus myth in Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Plato (Vernant 1965). Prometheus is the Titan who brought the gift of the arts to mankind, taking the fire from the gods; he is eventually freed from Zeus' perpetual punishment by Heracles.

² In place of a linear actions or chronological narrative sequence of causally related succession of events, Nono's innovative conception of opera as 'azione scenica', constructs a synthesis of historical documentary evidence, songs, letters, and poems. In montages of citations from both musical works and philosophical and literary texts, ranging from Marx to Rimbaud — from whose poem the title of the work originates —, Nono presents a vigorous affirmation of freedom and revolutionary courage throughout history from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the struggles for national independence in the 20th century in Asia and Latin America.

Prometeo is imbued with Walter Benjamin's ideas on history in 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' ('On the Concept of History', Stenzl 1995):

As flowers turn toward the sun by the power of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history. (Benjamin 1991, IV.)³

For Benjamin history is not a seamless continuum but an archipelago of events overwrought with interpretive analyses ranging from the myth of the golden age (Hesiod) to inexorable progress (Hegel). Benjamin emphasises that the historical past is 'open' in so far as it is continuously reconfigured in the process of recollection.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. (Benjamin 1991, VI.)⁴

Prometeo is a musical and philosophical affirmation of the continuity of creative endeavours for freedom and utopia (Vieira de Carvalho 1999) and resonates with Benjamin's understanding of the possibility of the recalibration of the past, which has moral and aesthetic resonance in the present. Benjamin upholds the fortitude of the human capacity for liberating the future from the confinement of the orthodoxy of the present and the tendency to regard the past as ossified relics.

He remains master of his powers: man enough, to explode the continuum of history. (Benjamin 1991, 16.)⁵

2.2 'Many Islands of Quiet Sounds Magically Travelling Through Space'

As Claudio Abbado described, *Prometeo* consists of 'many islands of quiet sounds magically travelling through space' (Abbado 1999). *Prometeo* consists of three main 'Islands', two Interludes, two sections of 'Three Voices', and two Stasima.⁶ The nine sections of *Prometeo* are: Prologo, Isola Prima, Isola Seconda, Interludio Primo, Tre Voci (a), Isola Terza — Quarta — Quinta, Tre Voci (b), Interludio Secondo, Stasimo Secondo.

Claudio Abbado conducted the first performance of the monumental first version, 150 minutes of duration, at the Church of San Lorenzo in Venice on 25 September, 1984, with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and a choir from the Hochschule für Musik Freiburg. The painter Emilio Vedova worked on 'Image-signs in movement for *Prometeo*' for the 'lighting interventions'.

In 1985, Nono conducted the revised version containing new compositions and major revisions — which became the basis for subsequent performances — at Teatro alla Scala in Milan. 1985 version of *Prometeo* is scored for 5 solo voices (2 sopranos, two altos, one tenor), two reciters, three percussionists, a twelve-voice choir and four instrumental groups of thirteen musicians each — consisting of flute/piccolo, clar-

inet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, four violins, viola, cello, double bass.

Two musical directors collaborate with a team of three musicians/sound technicians who work on an electronic processing in real time of the instrumental sounds, moving them in space three-dimensionally, through twelve speakers arranged along the entire concert space. The sounds produced live from the score are supplemented and transformed and conveyed within the space by means of live electronics. In *Prometeo* there are no stage directions for the singers. The score contains sparse instructions for the live electronics which were elaborated and composed during the extensive rehearsals at the SWR Experimentalstudio (Southwest German Radio's Experimental Studio).

The libretto by Massimo Cacciari is non-linear. The words are separated into their component syllables and are distributed among different voices, rendering the meaning of words independent of linear sense of narrative. The sung texts in *Prometeo* are natural as well as electronically separated, determining the direction of traces of sounds and silence. In the combination of varied chamber-musical instrumental groups, live electronics and spatially distributed vocalists, the parameters of space and timbre have a predominant significance in contrast to the constants of pitch and rhythm.

The harmonic material of *Prometeo* is 'polarised between close intervals, including micro-intervals, and expansive ones — the 'Promethean' fifth being a constant —, amidst similarly polarised pitch and dynamic ranges' (Phillips 2009, 161). Nono interrupts linear articulation and anticipates the problem of atomisation by way of an articulation through 'colour'. Nono calls this articulation 'the smallest transition' distinct from the 'dramaturgy of contrasts' which characterised most music, especially opera, as a mode of representation (Stenzel 1998, 112).

Prometeo comprises shifting microtonal chords in the chorus, contrapuntal overlapping of the solo voices and the orchestration in which the instruments are played at the extremes of their ranges. The electronic acoustic configurations in *Prometeo* generate continuously changing contextualisations of sound. Nono explored the possibilities of the timbre of instruments in relation to the potentials of resonance of space (Pape 1999, 59-60). The music arising from various points was to interrelate with the space.

2.3 'Mobile Sound' and Musical Space

[M]obile sound which does not fill the space, but discovers it, unveils it. And this provokes an unexpected and unpredictable being in the sound, not to begin to perceive, but to feel part of the space, to play. (Quoted in Phillips 2009, 162; Pape 1999, 62.)

In presenting a 'mobile sound' *Prometeo* provides immersion in a 'multi-directional listening'. In his conversations with Massimo Cacciari on *Prometeo*, Nono spoke of the multidirectional quality of the everyday sounds in Venice, a city with a tradition of spatial music: Giovanni Gabrieli's *cori spezzati* — split choirs describing polychoral singing — was inspired by the architecture of San Marco. As Abbado has explained, Nono's conception of mobile sound is interwoven with the musical traditions of Venice:

Deep down, his bond with the long tradition of Venetian music was never severed. It is recognisable in his infallible perception of spacial sound, such as that displayed by Gabrieli in San Marco.

³ 'Wie Blumen ihr Haupt nach der Sonne wenden, so strebt Kraft eines Heliotropismus geheimer Art, das Gewesene der Sonne sich zuzuwenden, die am Himmel der Geschichte im Aufgehen ist'.

⁴ 'Vergangenes historisch artikulieren heißt nicht, es erkennen 'wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist'. Es heißt, sich einer Erinnerung bemächtigen, wie sie im Augenblick einer Gefahr aufblitzt'.

⁵ 'Er bleibt seiner Kräfte Herr: Manns genug, das Kontinuum der Geschichte aufzusprengen'.

⁶ Choral odes in Greek tragedy, divided into strophe and antistrophe.

Also, Gigi's feeling for *espressi violins*, for cantability in fact is deeply rooted in the past. (Abbado 1999.)

Nono conceived the sound complexes of the music and the texts to move and evolve in space in a continuum of transformation. The music of *Prometeo* was intended to surround the spectator, arising from various locations and with alternating points of origin with the natural sounds of the voices and simultaneously working with electronic equipment.

Nono explored the idea of *spazio sentito* (space heard) in *Prometeo* placing discrete groups of musicians within a given space. This gave rise to the need for a space which would create a new relation between the audience and the musical performance and transform the hierarchical and linear arrangement of a conventional concert hall. Nono engaged the Renzo Piano Building Workshop to design (Figure 1) a 'musical space' (Fondazione Renzo Piano 1985).⁷ The traditional concept of the concert hall was revolutionised, turning the space into a gigantic musical instrument, a resonant 'structure' — as Nono and the musicians referred to the construction — to contain the stage, the audience, and the orchestra.

The idea was to create a structure which would integrate the stage, the set, the orchestra pit and the sounding board into a single element. Incorporating shipbuilding techniques, each individual 'keel' was made up of a series of horizontal elements curved connecting elements between the ends of the keels and the vertical elements and vertical cantilever 'masts' at the points where the curves were inserted.

The walls of the 'sounding board' consisted of a series of interchangeable panels in laminated wood. Through the openings between the panels, the sounds were deflected by the church's architectural elements. By altering the configuration of the fills and voids, the musical instrument could be 'tuned' to obtain distinct and specific acoustic results. The audience (400 people) was seated at the centre of the space and the musicians and singers — some of whom moved about during the performance — were placed at different heights. Nono's conception of 'musical space' for the listeners and the musicians (Figure 2), enabled a complete immersion in sound (Drees 1998).

The structure was built inside San Lorenzo in Venice, with the sound reverberating from the walls. The music generated inside caused the immense soundboard to vibrate. In a brief note to Renzo Piano, he wrote:

No opera/ no director/ no set designer/ no traditional characters/ but/ dramaturgy-tragedy with mobile sounds that/ read discover/ empty fill up space. (Cecchetto and Mastinu 2005, 102.)

The construction of the 'musical box' was an important part of exploring the relation and the parallel structural and compositional processes in music and architecture. In the staging of *Prometeo* Nono conceived space as instrument which produces the mobile sound. The auditorium of wooden shell providing stations for the singers, speakers, instrumentalists, electronic technicians, and listeners became a single musical instrument. Space and sound were made indistinguishable.⁸



Fig. 1. Construction of the musical space for *Prometeo*⁹.



Fig 2. Musical space for *Prometeo*¹⁰.

3. NONO'S COMPOSITIONAL METHODS

[Composition] is not about a kind of artisanship, but about a consciousness of technique which is made possible by a transformation of thinking. (Nono 1975, 15.)

The idea of openness and continuous questioning are at the centre of Nono's musical thought. As André Richard has explained, 'Nono was not aiming at, a creation of a perfect or complete music, for instance, as Boulez was, His music was always in transition was not intended to become a monument' (Covell 2004). 'Don't write, listen', Nono urged. In search of transforming and bringing together different sounds in the composition of music, Nono explained: 'I never went with a ready score to a studio, as many did. I had at most some ideas before, and I saw immediately it would be better if I didn't bring any ideas into the studio'. The studio itself offered the opportunity to transform the sounds of the real world, to integrate different sounds together so that recordings of people and the places where they lived and worked could be incorporated into the domain of music.

Nono's experimentation with innovative technologies — which enabled sound to circulate in space — focused on new dimensions of sound in space and time: combinations of chamber ensembles and live electronics expand the movement

⁷ <<http://www.rpbw.com/project/19/prometeo-musical-space/>>.

⁸ 'Nono: PROMETEO in Parma. Interview with André Richard'.

<<http://www.ricordi.com/en-US/News/2017/05/Prometeo-Richard-new-edition.aspx>>.

⁹ <<http://www.rpbw.com/project/82/prometeo-musical-space/>>, accessed 29/06/2023.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

of sound in space. Nono's music enhances the continuity of space and time in and through sounds.

As Mário Vieira de Carvalho has explained, the processes of quotation concerning the sound material, the compositional techniques, and the text components as well as their associations with the usage of montage on macro and micro structural levels are central in Nono's music (Vieira de Carvalho 1999a, 37–85; 1999b, 127–35). Montage and quotation established a continuum of significance and understanding of the original context of a musical theme. Nono's arrangement of montage enhances our capacity to comprehend the dynamic unfolding of the musical structures (Hall 2010).

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 'To Restore Infinite Possibilities in Listening'

The composition of music that wants to restore infinite possibilities in listening today, by use of a non-geometrised space, also runs up against the dissolution of normal time, of the time of narration and of visualisation. (Nono quoted in Phillips 2009, 163.)

Nono's composition of music which seeks 'to restore infinite possibilities in listening' transcends the boundaries of tonality and atonality. In a letter to Berio Nono wrote:

You are talking about using the series rigidly; I am speaking instead of using the series with liberal fantasy. Bruno [Maderna] and I used to be perfectly convinced of this necessity. (Nono 2001, letter from 27 July 1982.)

In exploring the possibilities of musical expression beyond the prevailing twelve-tone compositional approaches, Nono's music articulated the major concerns which contemporary music has come to acknowledge: musical time and space; the relation of composition to social reality and musical performance; the nature of musical material, its representation and listening; and the significance of the musical event (Impett 2004, 29–36).

Nono's significant contribution to the development of contemporary music has been widely acknowledged (Deliège 2003). *Prometeo* continues to be a significant influence in the areas of experimental music theatre, concert music, sound installations, musical spatial collage, and sound art.

4.2. 'Intervention in the Sonic Reality of Our Time'

The battle against fascism and imperialism is my purpose in life. I am only coincidentally a musician. (Nono 1970.)

Nono affirmed the simultaneity of musical invention, moral consciousness, and political action. Emphasising the necessity for contemporary music to 'intervene' in the 'sonic reality of our time', Nono's 'critical composition' resonates with active moral and political engagement in the historical conditions of the present (Mahnkopf, Cox, and Schurig 2006; Mahnkopf 2006 and 2015). Nono's political commitment led him to explore the possibilities of music for the integration of the activities of music, ethics, and politics.

'Critical music' explores the relations between musical (and textual) material and the political, historical, economic, and sociological contexts from which that material derives, or in which it is situated. It is the composer's and the listener's responsibility to recognise how every sound is politically charged by its historical dimensions. Nono's 'critical composition' is guided by the conception of music as a reflection of

human history and contemporary society and the conviction that the task of the composer is to actively engage the political and moral dimension essential to the individual, culture, society, and their transformation (Impett 2004).

The continuum of endeavours for freedom emphasised in *Prometeo* enlivens Adorno's clarification of the comprehension of historical consciousness in art as a 'dynamic totality' reflecting the complexity of human history. Nono's moral commitment to political action in his compositions is aligned with Adorno's understanding of the social significance of music.

Tracing the development towards the autonomy of art, Adorno acknowledges that laws pertaining to works of art are products of historical developments within society (Adorno 1977, 211).¹¹ Similarly, while Nono believed that all music came from formulae, he also recognised that works of art have social and historical dimensions insofar as they are produced not in isolation but in specific lived circumstances. Since the laws governing works of art are products of history and undergo transformations throughout history, Adorno concludes that works of art are to be understood by their relation to the social whole in which they exist. The context of works of art is the social totality determined by the historical contingencies of the past, present, and projections into the future. Art 'becomes social by its opposition to society, and occupies this position only as autonomous art' (Adorno 1984, 225–6).

Not only in his own work, but also in the activity of the musicians with whom he worked closely, Nono recognised the simultaneity of musical and moral commitment. Regarding the collaboration with Claudio Abbado and Maurizio Pollini for the composition of *Como una ola de fuerza e luz*,¹² Nono explained:

Claudio Abbado and Pollini: their new music activity is the development of an artistic partnership into the acquisition and adoption of musical responsibilities that result from the human necessities of our time. (Stenzel 1975, 143.)

Nono and Adorno are in accord regarding the possibility of affirmation of freedom in art in unity with society. Adorno invokes the utopian potentiality of art:

As a musical composition compresses time, and as painting folds spaces into another, so the possibility is concretised that the world could be other than it is.¹³

Committed to the concept of criticism as that which saves or preserves,¹⁴ Adorno seeks to overcome the prevalent 'regressive listening' in passive consumption of music and to initiate 'thinking with ears'. Adorno affirms the hope for musical listening to 'leave the road of the always identical' and to align itself with the idea of 'progress in the consciousness of freedom'.

¹¹I am indebted to Professor Taruskin for his comments on clarifying Adorno's views on the autonomy and social dimensions of art. I am grateful to Dr. Anne Bongrain for her stimulating ideas on music which encouraged me to work on this paper in the shade of the linden tree her garden.

¹²Begun in 1971, for piano, soprano, and tape.

¹³Adorno, Theodor W., 2003. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 138.

¹⁴Peter Bürger (1984, 40 and 46) has noted that Walter Benjamin upheld this concept of criticism. This positive view of the task of criticism is also sustained by Adorno as well as Ernst Bloch in *Geist der Utopie*, 1918.

As little as regressive listening is a symptom of progress in the consciousness of freedom, it could suddenly turn around in art, in unity with society, should it ever leave the road of the always identical. (Adorno 1982, 314.)

This hope resonates in Nono's music.

4.3. Listening to Silence

I find silence full of voices.

To listen to music – that is very difficult. I think it is a rare phenomenon today. Perhaps one can change the rituals; perhaps it is possible to try to wake up the ear. (Nono, 2001.)

We conclude with Nono's reflections on silence:

The silence. Listening is very difficult. Very difficult to listen to others in the silence. Other thoughts, other noises, other sounds, other ideas. When one comes to listen, one often tries to rediscover oneself in others. To rediscover one's own mechanisms, system, rationalism in the others. Instead of hearing the silence, instead of hearing the others, one often hopes to hear oneself.

It is the inaudible, the unheard that does not filled the space but discovers the space, uncovers the space as if we too have become part of sound and we were sounding ourselves.

KEYWORDS

Mobile Sound, Musical Space, Silence, Sonic Reality, Benjamin, Adorno.

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