

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84534-2 - Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context
Carola Nielinger-Vakil
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

Music and Memory

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84534-2 - Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context
Carola Nielinger-Vakil
Excerpt
[More information](#)

1 Political and musical premises

A remarkably bold story, ‘Impiccagione di un giudice’ (‘The Hanging of a Judge’) by Italo Calvino, was first published in 1948 on the condition that its title be changed to ‘Il sogno di un giudice’ (‘The Dream of a Judge’).¹ The story describes the trial of a fascist accused of participation in one of the brutal reprisal actions that shook northern Italy throughout the partisan war. The crime is mentioned only in passing, however, as the story is told from the perspective of the judge Onofrio Clerici, whose sympathy for the former fascist regime is made clear from the outset. Within the realms of the judicial system the judge feels completely at ease, confident in the knowledge that the law was written by people like him and may be turned in any direction. But gallows are being constructed in the courtyard, and Onofrio’s confidence is undermined further by three characters hitherto unknown to the court: a clerk and two guards. The mob at the back of the court room, too, is unusually silent. ‘Stupid and ignorant people, – thought judge Onofrio, – they believe the accused will be condemned to death. That’s why they have erected gallows.’² And to teach them a lesson the judge proposes that the accused be absolved, a sentence that is unanimously approved by the magistrates of the court. Onofrio then signs the acquittal and another document, slipped in by the clerk: his own death sentence, condemning him to die ‘like a dog’.³ Without protest, the judge succumbs to this sentence and, following the orders of the two guards, hangs himself on the gallows in the now deserted courtyard.

Calvino’s references to Kafka are obvious: gallows of dimensions just as intimidating as those of the apparatus in *The Penal Colony*, the Kafkaesque clerk and the two ‘door keepers’ and the allusion to *The Trial*, in which Josef K., too, is condemned to die like a dog. Recourse to Kafka’s modernist world of abstraction and its recurring theme of inescapable dependence on a higher law not only transcends the neo-realist setting, but also emphasises Calvino’s biting social critique, the complete loss

¹ Calvino, ‘Il sogno di un giudice’, *Rinascita*, 5:2 (1948).

² Calvino, ‘Impiccagione di un giudice’, in *Ultimo viene il corvo*, 231; unless stated otherwise, translations are my own.

³ *Ibid.*, 232.

of faith in the judicial system in the given historical context. Without doubt Bruno Maderna drew on *The Trial* for his *Studi per "Il processo" di F. Kafka* (1950) for similar reasons.⁴

Such modernist social critique has to be understood in the context of the Italian amnesty laws after WWII. The first amnesty was passed in 1946 by none other than Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Communist Party and Minister of Justice of the newly founded Republic.⁵ Approved in the name of 'national pacification' but perceived by many as a first betrayal of the Resistance, this amnesty was primarily aimed at the large number of citizens who had served the fascist regime in administration and public services. Excluded were those who had held positions of higher command and those involved in war crimes. The amnesty was applied with greatest leniency, however, especially by the appeal courts which, according to Woller, had hardly been affected by the half-hearted purge under Marshal Badoglio.⁶ Doors thus opened for fascist ministers, state officials, chief editors and judges alike. Of the 12,000 fascists under arrest in 1946, only 2,000 were still in prison the following year. By 1952 this figure had dropped to just 266. In 1953, a further amnesty extended the benefits to fascists who had been forced to leave the country and by the mid fifties virtually everybody had been absolved.⁷

A wave of releases of high-ranking fascists occurred almost immediately after the Communists and Socialists had been ousted from government by the Christian Democrats under De Gasperi in 1948. Prince Junio Valerio Borghese, for example, ex-commander of the infamous X^a MAS division, accused of ferocious attacks during the partisan war and personally responsible for forty-three murders, was initially sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment in February 1949.⁸ With support from the Vatican, the prince was absolved, however, and immediately released. Behan describes a courthouse scene not dissimilar to that in Calvino's story:

⁴ On Maderna's *Studi per "Il processo" di F. Kafka* (1950) see Borio, 'La tecnica seriale'; and Dalmonte, 'Lecture maderniane'. Nono himself would later turn to Kafka in the context of *Frammente – Stille, an Diotima* (1979–80).

⁵ See Cooke, *Legacy of the Italian Resistance*, 19–28; and Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 114–18.

⁶ Woller, "'Ausgebliebene Säuberung'?", 148–91.

⁷ Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 29.

⁸ Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 29. The X^a MAS division, which was 'deployed specifically to combat partisan actions', 'had 800 documented murders to its name, as well as the looting and burning of entire villages, and the torture of hundreds of partisans'; Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 118.

Political and musical premises

5

The appeal court that released Borghese was presided over by a family friend and ex-fascist, and many jurors were known to be former fascists too. When the decision to release him was announced, it was greeted in the courthouse by fascist salutes.⁹

Borghese went on to become a member of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) and later joined the clandestine 'Gladio' army, secret military units funded by the CIA and trained by the British Intelligence Service to overthrow the Communists, should they take power.¹⁰ In 1970, just after the 'hot autumn' of student and workers protests, Borghese even attempted a military coup, with fifty former parachute regiment members invading the armoury of the Ministry of the Interior. The coup was swiftly aborted, however, due to there being insufficient support within the state machinery.¹¹

Another extremely high-profile trial was that of Field-Marshal Graziani (1882–1955), commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Mussolini's Italian Social Republic (RSI), also known as the Republic of Salò. Graziani, who had initially been named by the British to be tried by the Allies, stood trial in Rome (1948–50).¹² He was sentenced to nineteen years of imprisonment but remained in prison for only a few months. After his release he was made honorary president of the MSI and his autobiographical *Ho difeso la patria* (1948) was a bestseller.¹³ Primo Levi, on the other hand, was struggling to find a publisher for his now famous Auschwitz account *Se questo è un uomo*, which first appeared with a print run of just 2,500 in 1947.

At the same time another important case was being heard at the courts in Rome: the trial of the partisans responsible for the attack on the Via Rasella that killed 33 Germans and led to the brutal reprisal shooting of 335 Italians at the Fosse Ardeatine in 1944. Although they were acquitted,

⁹ Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 118. Borghese was initially saved from execution by the US Proconsul in occupied Italy. Other former X^a MAS officers were trained in the USA for the so-called Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA. *Ibid.*, 138–39.

¹⁰ The earliest official reference to 'Gladio' is found in a US National Security Council document of 1954. A formal agreement with the USA was signed by the head of the Italian secret service, Giovanni De Lorenzo, but kept secret from parliament in 1956. De Lorenzo, too, was an ex-fascist of the highest rank, having served as a career officer under Mussolini. The existence of 'Gladio' (with 139 arms caches) was finally admitted in 1990. Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 141.

¹¹ See Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 144–45.

¹² Overly, *Interrogations*, 29. 'Graziani had been sentenced to death by a partisan court in 1945, but luckily for him surrendered to the Allies'; Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 140.

¹³ Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 20–21.

the fact that partisans, the liberators of the country, were being tried and held responsible for such reprisal actions left an indelible stain on the Resistenza. As both Behan and Cooke have shown, trials of partisans increased sharply after the Togliatti amnesty and continued throughout the 1950s.¹⁴ Especially after the Communists and Socialists had been ousted from government, increasing numbers of partisans were questioned and subjected to months, in some cases years, of preventative detention, while ever more fascists were absolved of their crimes. Understandably, the morale among former resistance fighters was such that the partisans from the Veneto, for example, staged a demonstration and publicly burnt the Alexander award they had each received for their service to the country.¹⁵ Long before the Tambroni affair in 1960, when the Christian Democrats relied on MSI support to stay in government, Nono wrote to Alfred Andersch: 'Attempt by the Christian Democratic Party to form a government of our republic together with Nazis and Monarchists????? . . . restoration is everywhere!!!!!! today the Resistenza is increasingly portrayed as a criminal deed! by permission of the government (???) and not too much reaction from the public!'¹⁶

Throughout the years of the Cold War, the legacy of the Resistenza with its undeniable roots in the predominantly communist anti-fascist movement was centre stage to the growing rift between right and left. Naturally, the Christian Democrats tried to play down the significance of the Resistenza and even attempted to criminalise it. The political left, on the other hand, mobilised the memory of the Resistenza, its immense sacrifices and loss of life in support of the liberation, to demand a progressive kind of socialism modelled on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, whose prison notebooks and letters took Italy by storm at this time. To the left, the Resistenza signified not only the heroic anti-fascist partisan movement, but also the ongoing struggle for a democratic and just, socialist society, and this understanding would later be shared by Nono.¹⁷ The socialist dream, however, suffered a hard blow with the election defeat of the

¹⁴ Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 114–18; Cooke, *Legacy*, 22–23.

¹⁵ Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 115.

¹⁶ Nono, letter to Andersch, 11 June 1957 (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach; copy at ALN, Andersch/A 57–06–11 d): 'Versuch von demo-christliche Partei hier zusammen mit Nazi und Monarchisten eine Regierung von unsere Republik zu bilden????? [. . .] es ist überall Restaurationszeit!!!!!! heute und immer mehr wird hier die Resistenza als Banditentat gezeigt! mit Erlaubnis von Regierung (???) und nicht so starke Reaktion von Opinion!' On the Tambroni affair see Cooke, *Legacy*, 84–93. The MSI joined Berlusconi's coalition government in 1994.

¹⁷ Nono, 'Musica e Resistenza' (1963), *Scritti*, I, 144.

Political and musical premises

7

Communist and Socialist alliance in 1948. That year the parliamentary decision was taken to join NATO and the papal ‘avviso sacro’ decreed that Communists and all members of Communist organisations such as trade unions or youth clubs be excommunicated from the Catholic Church. A further attempt to incapacitate the political left was the introduction of a new electoral law, according to which any alliance of parties that gained more than 50% of the votes would receive two thirds of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Communists and Socialists immediately dubbed this law of 1952 ‘la legge truffa’ (‘the swindle law’) and saw in it a dangerous parallel to Mussolini’s ‘Acerbo Law’ which had consolidated the fascists in power in 1923. As it happened, the centre coalition missed the 50% mark by a fraction in 1953 (49.85%) and the law was annulled a year later.

It was precisely during these ‘hard years’ of Cold War persecution that Nono and Maderna decided to join the PCI in 1952. Both composers grew up under Mussolini and both had supported the Resistance. Maderna was twenty-three years old when he was conscripted in 1942, but lucky to serve a colonel who allowed him to take occasional leave for concerts and study. After 8 September 1943, Maderna joined the anti-fascist ‘Fronte di liberazione’ in Verona. Escaping arrest by the SS in February 1945, he subsequently joined partisans in the Veneto.¹⁸ Nono was lucky not to be conscripted. The Socialist radiologist Vespignani (whose sons attended the Liceo Marco Polo with Nono) intervened on his behalf and ‘emphasised’ a minor medical condition.¹⁹ Bowing to his father’s wishes, Nono thus began to study law at Padua University in 1942, while continuing his external studies with Gian Francesco Malipiero and Raffaele Cumar at the Venice Conservatoire.²⁰ In Venice, Nono had been in contact with anti-fascist circles since his late teens. At Vespignani’s house he met the writer and music critic Massimo Bontempelli and the sculptor Arturo Martini, who provided the Resistance with clay for counterfeit stamps. Carlo Cardazzo’s gallery Il Cavallino was another cultural haven free of fascist ideology. Equally formative was the encounter with the painter and

¹⁸ See ‘Guerra e Dopoguerra’ in Baroni and Dalmonte (eds.), *Bruno Maderna: documenti*, 49–61; and Stenzl, *Von Giacomo Puccini zu Luigi Nono*, 194.

¹⁹ Gennaro, ‘Per un ritratto’, 6.

²⁰ Malipiero introduced Nono to the music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries up to Monteverdi and theoretical works by Zarlino, Vicentino, Gaffurio and Doni. During their customary walks, Nono also first heard of the Second Viennese School and Béla Bartók. Cumar, a student of Malipiero, taught Nono counterpoint. Nono, ‘Un’autobiografia’, *Scritti*, II, 477, 483–84.

life-long ‘comrade’ Emilio Vedova.²¹ Padua University, too, was remarkably liberal. As Nono himself recounts in conversation with Restagno,

I have good memories of those years at Padua University because there was a very stimulating intellectual environment: just imagine, I studied philosophy of justice with Norberto Bobbio. I would have liked to write my final dissertation with him: I went and proposed one on Berdyaev, but he refused. He asked me why this choice, but evidently my reasons were not sufficiently convincing. Berdyaev, alongside other Russian works translated into Italian, fascinated me enormously: for me they were voices from afar, expressions of a different reality.²²

In the autumn of 1943, the Vice Chancellor of Padua University publicly encouraged students to take up arms against the government.²³ Nono chose not to follow this call and later insisted that he did not play an important role in the Resistance. His future brother in law, Albano Pivato, however, was an important liaison, and Nono and his sister Rina supported him in various ways: they helped to print and disseminate the clandestine publication *Fedeltà all'Italia*, hid arms inside a disused boat and once enabled ‘The Red Count’ of the Venetian Liberation Committee, Giovanni Tonetti, to escape Venice. Under Pivato’s leadership, Nono further assisted in the occupation of a hotel and a commissariat on the day of the liberation of Venice (28 April 1945).²⁴

Nono’s and Maderna’s paths first crossed in 1946. On expressing the wish to study Hindemith’s *Unterweisung im Tonsatz* (*The Craft of Musical Composition*), Malipiero referred Nono to the ‘young musician’ who had just arrived for a concert at La Fenice.²⁵ Their first encounter that evening was the beginning of Nono’s most formative musical education, Maderna’s ‘totally different manner’ of ‘living music’:

²¹ Nono, ‘Un’autobiografia’, *Scritti*, II, 482, 484.

²² Nono, ‘Un’autobiografia’, *Scritti*, II, 484–85. On Nono’s studies in Padua (1942–47) further see Pellegrini, ‘Musica o diritto?’.

²³ Welcoming first-year students, Vice-Chancellor Concetto Marchesi spoke out in support of the Resistance. ‘The effect of this speech was electrifying’ and ‘students threw out the armed fascist students who had also been in the main hall’. Marchesi was subsequently forced to resign and went into hiding; a hundred students from Padua University were killed in the Resistance. Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 53.

²⁴ See Gennaro, ‘Per un ritratto’, 6–8. Gennaro also discusses the anti-fascist roots in the family of Nono’s mother, Maria Manetti (1891–1976). One of Nono’s uncles was the former Socialist mayor of Limena and a friend of Matteotti, the Socialist deputy murdered by the fascists in June 1924.

²⁵ The programme included Maderna’s *Serenata per undici strumenti*, Riccardo Malipiero’s *Piccolo concerto* and Togni’s *Variazioni* for piano and orchestra (21 September 1946).

Political and musical premises

9

He did not teach recipes, he did not hand out catalogues of methods, above all he avoided teaching his own ideas or an aesthetic; his fundamental concern was to teach musical thought, in particular about music in different, combined tempi, like the enigmatic canons of the Flemish Renaissance, for example. Following this procedure, one already had to know what the last note would be while writing the first; that is to say, one knew that the same sound read with different proportions would have had different durations, and thus different harmonic and melodic relationships. This was not the mentality of *Gradus ad Parnassum*, of setting note against note, two notes against one note, three notes against one note, in which we find an undoubtedly important, but very academicised, historical mechanism.²⁶

Maderna's tuition further included prolonged periods of study at the Biblioteca Marciana:

Bruno read one theorist, I read another. We then exchanged the information acquired and our reflections. Then we took up scores, for example Ottaviano Petrucci's *Odhecaton*, with its collection of two- and three-part Chansons by the great Flemish masters, which we would transcribe, comparing the compositional practice with the theoretical discussion contained in the various treatises. [...] Other habitual reading for us was Zarlino's *Istitutioni harmoniche* and *Dimostrazioni harmoniche*, in which the debates which evolved in the semi-darkness of the church of San Marco among Zarlino, Francesco della Viola, who was a composer from Ferrara, Claudio Merulo and Adrian Willaert were reported.²⁷

Not unlike these Renaissance composers, Maderna taught a way of life:

We remained shut up in the attic to study, copy and write music for hours on end, then we went out to walk and eat. Bruno, I and the other students (Gastone Fabris and Renzo Dall'Oglio, who are nowadays working in the management of the RAI) went to the Lido together to swim with our girlfriends. We got totally plastered and had the most euphoric escapades. We moved with great ease from the most rigorous discipline of our studies to this incredibly entertaining atmosphere, and in every circumstance the same desire to participate in life affirmed itself in us.²⁸

Maderna, in turn, later praised Nono's commitment:

Nono [...] realised that he had studied music badly and began all over again, literally with the bass-lines and chords in thirds and fifths. But he applied

²⁶ Nono, 'Un'autobiografia', *Scritti*, II, 477–78.

²⁷ Nono, 'Un'autobiografia', *Scritti*, II, 478–79.

²⁸ Nono, 'Un'autobiografia', *Scritti*, II, 487–88.

himself with such rigour [...] that in a few years he had covered all aspects of counterpoint with me and was in possession of a fabulous technique.²⁹

As shown by Schaller, Nono covered modal, tonal, atonal and dodecaphonic counterpoint. In addition, Maderna would engage his students in the comparative study of music of all ages with a specific compositional problem and its contemporary solutions in mind. On the topic of song Nono recalls that they began with Francesco Landini, studied the function of the tenor in *L'Homme armé* and Ockeghem's masses and then moved on to songs by Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Webern and Dallapiccola.³⁰

Dallapiccola, who had witnessed the first Italian performance of *Pierrot lunaire* under Schoenberg in Florence (1924) and had also met Berg and Webern in person, was another decisive influence.³¹ As early as 1946 or 1947, Nono sent Dallapiccola the now lost score of his first work, *La discesa di Cristo agli inferi* (1945). Dallapiccola, who was working on his opera *Il prigioniero* at the time, replied 'I understand that here you have a lot in your heart you wish to express, but you still have to study a great deal in order to be able to do so'.³² The study and adoption of dodecaphonic techniques attained further musical and political impetus in the summer of 1948, when Nono and Maderna both attended Hermann Scherchen's influential conducting course in Venice. More than thirty years later, Nono still attested that 'the new "rhetoric" of Luigi Dallapiccola's musical thought' was first introduced to him by Scherchen.³³ Indeed, Nono and Maderna both began to compose their own *Liriche greche* during or soon after this course.³⁴ Also Nono's first musicological essay, 'Luigi Dallapiccola e i *Sex Carmina Alcaei*', attests to the importance of Dallapiccola's dodecaphony at this time.³⁵

²⁹ Maderna, interview with Leonardo Pinzauti (1972), in Schaller, 'L'insegnamento di Bruno Maderna', 109. On Nono's courses at the conservatoire (1947–49) also see Pellegrini, 'Musica o diritto?'.
³⁰ Nono, 'Un'autobiografia', *Scritti*, II, 489. On Maderna's teaching also see de Assis, *Luigi Nonos Wende*, 150–52.

³¹ Borio, 'L'influenza di Dallapiccola', 357–87. On the adoption and dissemination of dodecaphony in Italy also see Stenzl, *Von Giacomo Puccini zu Luigi Nono*, 183–91.
³² Dallapiccola, letter to Nono, cited in De Benedictis, 'Nono', ALN website.

³³ Nono, 'Con Luigi Dallapiccola', *Scritti*, I, 483.
³⁴ A facsimile of Nono's *Due liriche greche* (1948–49) has only recently been published by Edizioni RAI Trade. The work is the first surviving composition by Nono. On Nono's and Maderna's *Liriche greche* see Borio, 'L'influenza di Dallapiccola', 358–69. On Maderna's *Tre liriche greche* see the critical edition by Caprioli (Milan: Zerboni, 2002) and Conti, 'Le *Tre liriche greche* di Maderna', in Dalmonte and Russo (eds.), *Bruno Maderna*, 275–86.

Like Dallapiccola, Nono and Maderna used the Salvatore Quasimodo translation of 1944.
³⁵ Nono, 'Luigi Dallapiccola e i *Sex Carmina Alcaei*' (ca. 1948), *Scritti*, I, 3–5.