

## Luigi Nono

The anti-fascist cantata *Il canto sospeso*, the string quartet *Fragmente – Stille, an Diotima* and the ‘Tragedy of Listening’ *Prometeo* cemented Luigi Nono’s place in music history. In this study Carola Nielinger-Vakil examines these major works in the context of Nono’s amalgamation of avant-garde composition with communist political engagement. Part I discusses *Il canto sospeso* in the context of all of Nono’s anti-fascist pieces, from the unfinished Fučík project (1951) to *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz* (1966). Nielinger-Vakil explores Nono’s position at the Darmstadt Music Courses, the evolution of his compositional technique, his penchant for music theatre and his use of spatial and electronic techniques to set the composer and his works against the diverging circumstances in Italy and Germany after 1945. Part II further examines these concerns and shows how they live on in Nono’s work after 1975, culminating in a thorough analysis of *Prometeo*.

CAROLA NIELINGER-VAKIL is a freelance flautist and musicologist based in London. She has published widely on the music of Luigi Nono. In collaboration with Martin Brady, she has also written on film music by Paul Dessau.

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# Luigi Nono

## A Composer in Context

Carola Nielinger-Vakil



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*In memory of my parents, Christa and Horst, and to my musical  
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## Preface and acknowledgements

In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Thesis XVIIa (1940)

Among the most important composers to emerge from the ‘Darmstadt School’, Luigi Nono (1924–90) stands out for his unique combination of avant-garde composition with political commitment. With reference to Sartre’s manifesto of committed writing *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (*What is Literature?*), Nono hailed Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* as the ‘musical aesthetic manifesto’ of his epoch and, throughout his career, sought to discern the ‘moral imperative’ at the heart of his aesthetics in order to disclose the injustices of this world as ‘abuses to be suppressed’.<sup>1</sup> The expressivity of his uncompromisingly avant-garde idiom is a moving testament to the sincerity with which he continued to seize his ‘revolutionary chance’ as a chance, too, for completely new problems and resolutions in music. Yet his fervent belief in communist ideals has also alienated many, and this, I suspect, is probably the primary reason why, despite Stephen Davismoon’s invigorating attempt to stimulate ‘greater awareness of Luigi Nono’s massive contribution to music and to art in general’,<sup>2</sup> Nono’s work never entered the cultural consciousness in Great Britain and America in the same way as that of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez.

Compared with the substantial body of secondary literature in German, Italian and French, the number of English-language articles, let alone books, on Nono is still extremely small. In part, this book is an attempt to address this gap. However, it is also an original contribution, based on more than a decade of research, to Nono studies in general. Since Nuria Schoenberg-Nono opened the Archivio Luigi Nono in Venice in 1993, scholars have been able to access a wealth of manuscript materials, much of

<sup>1</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 46–47; cited in Nono, ‘Text – Musik – Gesang’ (1960), *Texte* 47; *Scritti*, I, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Davismoon (ed.), ‘Luigi Nono: the suspended song’ and ‘Luigi Nono: fragments and silence’ (1999).

it still awaiting detailed analysis. Until then broader overarching claims must remain tentative. Having set out to write a synthesis, my focus gradually narrowed to a selection of key works. The discussion is all the richer, however, for the analytical and contextual detail made possible by these materials.

The book is structured in two parts. The first is dedicated to Nono's anti-fascist works, from the unfinished Fučík project (1951) to *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz* (1966) with a particular focus on *Il canto sospeso* (1956). The context of anti-fascism ideally lends itself to introducing Nono's musical and political foundations. Not that he ever was the 'young partisan fighter' Taruskin imagines, who 'courageously joined the Italian Communist Party during the last days of Mussolini's dictatorship, when membership was a crime'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Nono joined the PCI together with Maderna in 1952 on the condition that composition of twelve-tone music was acceptable to the party leadership.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Maderna, Nono remained a life-long member, was elected to the central committee in 1975, and often served as the party's 'cultural ambassador' on his many trips to the Eastern bloc and Latin America. This does not mean, however, that he uncritically subscribed to the party line. On the basis of Nono's activism, texts and letters and, above all, his music, it may be argued that, unlike so many others, he did not abandon the party precisely because he saw the need for debate and change from within. As one of his fellow Western European activists, Konrad Boehmer, repeatedly emphasised, Nono never sided with 'Stalinism or its satellites', but rather with some of Stalin's most severe Marxist critics: 'amongst others Gramsci, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre'.<sup>5</sup> To Boehmer, the question is therefore not whether Nono was a communist, but rather what kind of communist Nono was. What being a communist meant in practice for Nono as a composer will have to be asked anew for each piece, because, just as his compositional technique evolved in tandem with the current state of ideas and technology in music, his political and philosophical perspectives changed and developed in the context of unfolding political events: the Algerian War of Independence, the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War, the student

<sup>3</sup> Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 88.

<sup>4</sup> According to Nono, the PCI officially propagated 'social realism' but the party leaders in Venice replied 'if you think that this is important to you, you have to develop your struggle in this way'. Nono, 'Gespräch mit Hartmut Lück' (1972), *Texte* 289.

<sup>5</sup> Boehmer, 'Nono – a present future', Holland Festival 2014 (unpublished); in memory of Konrad (1941–2014) and with thanks to Robert Adlington.

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revolts of 1968, Italy's 'hot autumn' of 1969, Berlinguer's 'historic compromise' and Gorbachev's Perestroika, to name but a few.

If, as a 'composer *and* citizen',<sup>6</sup> Nono consistently felt compelled to take a stance, he did so also in order to transcend the historical moment and shift the perspective on the future. After actively engaging with the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, Nono would speak of his particular 'nostalgia for the future'. The key works at the heart of this book were chosen precisely because they transcend their historical context in exemplary fashion and stand out as musical jewels of 'now-time' with which Nono firmly secured his place in music history: the anti-fascist cantata *Il canto sospeso*, the string quartet *Framente – Stille, an Diotima* (1980) and the spatial 'tragedy of listening' *Prometeo* (1985).

This book is not, however, a mere collection of studies of individual works, but aims to provide a sense of the evolution of Nono's musical thought. For this reason, the focus gradually shifts from a more contextual approach to greater analytical detail. The four chapters on Nono's anti-fascist works in Part I provide much historical and political context while also discussing various musical influences, above all the teaching of Bruno Maderna and Hermann Scherchen, the influence of the Second Viennese School and Schoenberg in particular, as well as Nono's contacts at Darmstadt. This part is based on some of my earlier published work: the analysis of *Il canto sospeso* and my contribution to *Presenza storica di Luigi Nono*.<sup>7</sup> The contextualisation is much extended, however, and the analysis of *Il canto sospeso* in Chapter 2 is completely new. Nono's serial techniques are no longer dealt with in such detail. Instead, I focus on the compositional freedom with which they are employed, the perceptible large-scale processes of the work and the characteristic use of instrumentation which subtly works against the 'equality' of the serial system, creating a truly disconcerting dialectics between tradition and avant-garde: the musical past and its future.

Nono first addressed the holocaust with his *Composizione per orchestra n. 2: Diario polacco '58* (1959). In Chapter 3 this orchestral work is placed in the context of Nono's controversial Darmstadt lecture 'Geschichte und Gegenwart in der Musik heute' ['History and the Present in the Music of Today' (1959)] and his subsequent falling out with Stockhausen. Not unlike Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, *Diario polacco '58* requires a specific spatial distribution of four orchestral groups. However, Nono's advanced serial

<sup>6</sup> Boehmer, 'Nono – a present future'.

<sup>7</sup> Nielinger-Vakil, 'The Song *Unsung*' and 'Between Memorial and Political Manifesto'.

system, his use of space and, above all, the structural concept of this work are fundamentally different. In music alone, Nono here exemplifies what he meant by historically aware composition at the time. And precisely in this sense, the piece took on a model function for further work to come. Hence, when Nono next dealt with the holocaust in his music to *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*) by Peter Weiss (1965), I argue in Chapter 4 not only that he was inspired to revise and add a tape to *Diario polacco* '58, but also that this multi-layered orchestral work influenced the formation of a coherent musical discourse in the resulting solo tape piece *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz*.

Culminating in the longest and most philosophical chapter on *Prometeo*, Part II picks up on many of the compositional characteristics exposed in Part I. Fragmentation and compositional layers are shown to be at the heart, too, of the string quartet *Frammente – Stille, an Diotima* in which Nono first makes use of the scala enigmatica from Verdi's *Ave Maria*, pitch material to which he would repeatedly return throughout the 1980s. Precisely because the quartet is of great relevance in the context of *Prometeo*, my already published analysis is included here with minor revisions as Chapter 6.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I regard this analysis as my most important, as it explains the hitherto enigmatic use of the scala enigmatica and thus also clarifies the logic behind the distribution of the Hölderlin fragments in this score. In analytical terms, this chapter is the most detailed and the reader will benefit greatly from reading it with reference to the score.

The scala enigmatica continues to be of interest in the concluding discussion of *Prometeo* in Chapter 7. However, the focus here primarily falls on the philosophical conception of this extraordinary work of spatial music theatre, its perceptible large-scale processes and the use of live electronics, in terms both of sound transformation and of the dramatic movement of sound in space. Analytical detail is provided to elucidate certain lines of thought that pervade the work as a whole and reveal the music to be as politically charged as it always was. Inspired by the philosophical thought of another unorthodox Marxist intellectual, the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, *Prometeo* is shown to integrate the political as an intrinsic element of the most abstract of musical thought. As such, this masterpiece may serve as a 'musical-aesthetic manifesto' for generations to come.

<sup>8</sup> Nielinger-Vakil, 'Frammente – Stille, an Diotima'.



## Preface and Acknowledgements

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To a large extent the completion of this book is due to the continued support of my family: my husband AbdoolKarim and my daughters Nuria and Sabira, who, each in their very own way, encouraged me with their love and commitment. The project was initially funded by a generous research grant from Trinity College of Music, London, and was academically supported during my research fellowship at Goldsmiths College. At the Fondazione Archivio Luigi Nono in Venice, I particularly want to thank Nuria Schoenberg-Nono for her unique readiness and determination to answer all queries, even after normal working hours, and for her boundless enthusiasm and energy devoted to keeping the archive running. Many thanks are due also to the two directors Erika Schaller and Claudia Vincis for their professional assistance over the years and to Giovanna Boscarino for dealing with all administrative issues. Thank you, too, Erika, for an unforgettable tour of San Marco without the customary herds of tourists. Research in Venice was all the more pleasant due to the hospitality of my friends Sara Gennaro and Stefano De Rossi. Besides our stimulating discussions on music and architecture, and a football game, which luckily was lost by the Germans, I will never forget our trip in the old 'Ferrari' to the Brion-Vega Cemetery designed by Carlo Scarpa. Thank you, too, to my Venetian host Renata Marzari for patiently improving my Italian by refusing to speak English. Undoubtedly, one of the most exciting events in Venice was the International Interpretation Course of Luigi Nono's Works with Live Electronics (2007) under the direction of André Richard. I here had the pleasure of being taught by Roberto Fabbriciani. Thank you, Roberto, for your excellent tuition on the 'Hölderlin' section of *Prometeo* and parts of *Das atmende Klarsein* as well as your riveting accounts of working with Nono. Thank you, too, David Ogborn for an expert 'navigation' of the tape in our performance of the Finale of *Das atmende Klarsein*. Within the Nono-research community I thank Angela Ida De Benedictis for lively discussions on *Intolleranza* and *Il canto sospeso* and countless informative e-mails. Thanks are due also to Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Christoph Neidhöfer and Erik Esterbauer for their valuable feedback. Above all, however, I want to thank three people whom I now regard as friends rather than colleagues: André Richard, Jürg Stenzl and Paulo de Assis. Thank you to all three of you for believing in my book. I would not have finished it without you!

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Laurent Feneyrou (ed.), *Luigi Nono: Écrits* (Paris: Editions Bourgois, 1993)

Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi (eds.), *Luigi Nono: Scritti e colloqui*, Le Sfere, 2 vols (Milan: Ricordi and LIM, 2001)

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Matteo Nanni and Rainer Schmusch (eds.), *Incontri: Luigi Nono im Gespräch mit Enzo Restagno* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2004)  
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Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi (eds.), *Nostalgia for the Future: Selected Writings and Interviews of Luigi Nono* [working title], trans. J. O'Donnell (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016)

I generally refer to the complete Italian edition of 2001, henceforth abbreviated as *Scritti*. However, whenever the source texts are translated from German or French, I also refer to the German and French editions (abbreviated as *Texte* and *Écrits*).