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Prometeo, Tragedia dell'ascolto – ‘A new way of thinking music’ in Luigi Nono

ABSTRACT

Background

To wake up the ear, the eyes, human thinking, intelligence, the most exposed inwardness. This is now what is crucial (Nono [1983] 2001, 1:522).

Many islands of quiet sounds magically travelling through space (Abbado 1999).

Prometeo, Tragedia dell'ascolto, a ‘musica per drammatica’, is regarded as one of the most significant compositions of Luigi Nono (1924-1990) and among the most important works of contemporary music. The libretto by Massimo Cacciari incorporates texts from Aeschylus, Goethe, Hölderlin, and Walter Benjamin to create reflections on Hesiod’s narration of the Prometheus myth and an affirmation of the continuity of creative endeavours for freedom.

The insights of the pioneers of Critical Theory, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, on history, aesthetics, and music resonate in Nono’s music. Nono’s conception of ‘theatre of consciousness’ in *Prometeo* corresponds to Adorno’s understanding of historical consciousness as a ‘dynamic totality’ (Adorno 1977, 211). Nono’s conviction regarding the simultaneity of musical x of musical ideas and relations. Nono emphasised that it is the composer’s and the listener’s responsibility to recognise how every sound is politically charged by its historical associations. The idea of openness and continuous questioning are at the centre of Nono’s musical thought.

Nono’s exploration of musical material transcends the boundaries of tonality and atonality and his compositional methods of montage (Vieira de Carvalho 1999). Nono developed most completely the full implications of serialism – an approach to structuring every aspect of musical composition developed from Schoenberg’s ideas of order, structure, and completeness in the use of the chromatic scale (Iddon 2013). Nono understood the development of serialism as not only a revolutionary departure but “the result of a historical evolution of music, conditioned by the human and musical necessities of our time. Nono affirms the simultaneity of musical invention, moral commitment, 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; Mahnkopf 2015).

Affirming ‘the time continuum of permanence’ and “musical progress of time”, Nono’s *Prometeo* is a manifestation of Adorno’s conceptions of dialectical dimensions of temporality in music. Nono explained:

[T]he 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 visualization’ (Phillips 2009, 163).

Nono explains that mobile sound ‘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’ (Phillips 2009, 162). Nono’s conception of ‘musical space’ for the performance of *Prometeo* was realised within a colossal wooden structure for the listeners and the musicians, enabling a complete immersion in sound (Drees 1998). The music generated inside caused the immense soundboard to vibrate; the structure was built inside San Lorenzo in Venice, with the sound reverberating from the walls (Fondazione Renzo Piano 1985). Nono’s moral commitment to political action in his compositions is aligned with Adorno’s understanding of the social significance of music. Nono’s compositional procedures are autonomous in their construction of structures consisting of musical ideas and relations. Nono’s emphasis on the necessity for contemporary music as “interventions in the sonic reality of our time” creates an impetus in the process of listening as thinking. Nono’s music urges the listeners to direct themselves *inwards* – toward a simultaneous renewal of listening, perception and reflection.

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’s lecture 1983 in Assis 2014, 205).

Nono’s understanding of musical thought as a human activity which is essential to the individual, culture, society, and their transformation corresponds to Adorno’s belief that art reflects the complexity of human history.

Aims and repertoire studied

Seeking to discover ‘a new way of thinking music’ and ‘a transformation of thinking’, Nono explored the possibilities of new modes of listening and re-awakening active listening. *Prometeo* is a realisation of listening as thinking. In *Prometeo* the music was intended to surround the listeners from various locations. Nono’s conception of ‘musical space’ for the performance of *Prometeo* was realised within a immense wooden structure for the listeners and the musicians, enabling a complete immersion in sound. This ‘musical space’ was designed as if it were to be a gigantic lute, a wooden musical instrument of enormous proportions. The structure was built inside the sixteenth century Venetian church of San Lorenzo.

Nono speaks of a ‘mobile 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’ (Phillips 2009, 162; Pape 1999, 62). In presenting a ‘mobile sound’ *Prometeo* provides immersion in a ‘multi-directional listening’.

Prometeo comprises shifting microtonal chords in the chorus (*cori spezzati*, split choirs of the polychoral singing in Venice in 16th century), the 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. In presenting a ‘mobile sound’ *Prometeo* provides immersion in a ‘multi-directional listening’. Nono explored the possibilities of the timbre of instruments in

relation to the potentials of resonance of space (Pape 1999, 59-60).

Nono's conception of composition as 'a consciousness of technique which is made possible by a transformation of thinking' expands the understanding of the aims of music analysis in exploring the syntax and the semantics of musical text and performance. In *Prometeo* immersion in the text and music is directly generated by quotation and montage. 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:

[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).

Nono held that in the production of musical time, the spatial characteristics are not separate from the temporal dimension. The exploration of the relation between chronometric time and musical time in *Prometeo* creates 'a passage of time that is holding its breath'.

As W. Phillips has explained, 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).

In *Prometeo* immersion in the text and music is directly generated by quotation and montage. Montages of fragments from Italian, German and Greek literary and philosophical texts are integrated within new sonorities. 'The fragmentary figurations of *Prometeo* - of the texts, the music, the text-music - are absorbed into its spatial singularity (Phillips 2009, 132).

Methods

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 association with the usage of montage on macro and micro structural levels are central in Nono's music (Vieira de Carvalho 1999a, 37-85; 1999b, 127-135). Montage and musical quotations in Nono's compositions enhance dialectical listening by calling forth the critical capacity to explore the dynamic interweaving of discrete contextual musical material in the unified configurations of present sonority. Montage and quotation establishes a continuum of significance and understanding of the original context of a musical theme. Nono's arrangement of montage facilitates dialectical listening with a critical capacity for perceiving the dynamic unfolding of the musical structures (Hall 2010).

Implications

Engaging with Nono's music expands the methodology of music analysis to integrate interdisciplinary methods of exploring the cognitive and social dimensions of music. Nono's musical thought articulated the major concerns which music has come to acknowledge subsequently: the relations between the composition

and social reality, the nature of musical material, representation, listening approaches, musical time and space (Impet 2004: 29-36). Nono's music, in the process of listening as thinking. With the conception of opera as 'azione scenica', stage activity, Nono's music urges the listeners to direct themselves *inwards* – toward a simultaneous renewal of listening, perception and reflection creating an impetus towards musical cognition and epistemology of music.

Nono's 'critical composition' emphasises the simultaneity of musical invention, moral commitment, political action and the necessity for contemporary music to 'intervene in the sonic reality of our time'.

Keywords

dodecaphony and serialism, musical epistemology, music aesthetics, musical language, structure

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