STUDIA UBB MUSICA, LXX, Special Issue 3, 2025 (p. 11 – 19)
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI: 10.24193/subbmusica.2025.spiss3.01

SCHOENBERG AND NONO. COMPOSITION IN CONFLICT WITH IDEOLOGY AND WAR

CHRISTOPH VON BLUMRÖDER[1]

SUMMARY. In the bloody twentieth century, both Arnold Schoenberg and Luigi Nono were faced with various political, sometimes quite toxic ideologies; during their lifetimes, both composers had to experience the devastating impact of wars, with Schoenberg additionally becoming a victim of anti-Semitic Nazism. The central question of this article will be how these circumstances influenced their personal lives and were reflected in their musical works, thematically covering a period from the beginning of the First World War to the various revolutionary ideologies of the late 1960s.

Keywords: Arnold Schoenberg, *Drei Lieder* op. 48, *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* op. 41, *A Survivor from Warsaw* op. 46, Luigi Nono, *La victoire de Guernica*, *Il canto sospeso*, composition and ideology, engaged music, war

Considering the work of Arnold Schoenberg as well as that of Luigi Nono within a broader historical context (a detailed study on special musical relations was published by Joachim Junker[2]), one can identify certain resembling aspects. And such parallels stem from the fact that both had to experience the bloody twentieth century, which was governed by ideological manipulation, political fanaticism, revolution, dictatorship, barbaric terror, and war. Inevitably bound to this – often dangerously culminating – historical context, Schoenberg and Nono came in touch with various ideologies which influenced – and at worst destroyed – the societies they were living in, disrupted their personal lives and sometimes also conflicted with their musical composition; of course, each experienced these situations within unique and historically distinct dimensions, as it applies to all of the particular moments to be discussed further in this article.

[1] *Institute for Musicology of the University of Cologne, Germany, alm20@uni-koeln.de*
[2] Junker, Joachim. "Arnold Schönberg und Luigi Nono. Spuren einer außergewöhnlichen Beziehung zweier Komponisten". In *Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Center*, vol. 12, 2015, pp. 251–263.

More than that, Schoenberg even had to suffer two horrific World Wars, anti-Semitic persecution, and exile. And over time, these events taught him a harsh personal lesson. As at the onset of the First World War, Schoenberg initially embraced the widespread Austrian-German chauvinistic ideology, probably not least motivated by his Jewish heritage and a desire to prove his unquestionable German character. A letter to Alma Mahler, dated August 28, 1914, may serve as a paradigm of this attitude: Schoenberg expressed extreme hostility towards so-called 'foreign music', pretending he always had felt that it was 'insipid, void, disgusting, mawkish, mendacious, and imperfect'; and he therefore suggested that all the French, English, Russian or American 'mediocre trash producers' should be thrown back into 'slavery' by the glorious German army, learn to adore 'the German genius', and worship 'the German God'.[3] Reading these most disturbing insults, credit must be given to Schoenberg's daughter Nuria Nono-Schoenberg, for not yielding to the temptation to conceal – or even destroy – this dubious letter in order to supposedly protect her father's moral integrity; instead, she followed the principles of true and honest research by including it in a book documenting significant encounters, events, and specific personal relationships in Schoenberg's life. This letter underscores the tragedy that, unfortunately, highly educated individuals like Schoenberg and many of his contemporaries were not immune to the nationalistic hysteria which was responsible for the outbreak of the First World War.

However, disillusionment quickly followed when Schoenberg began his military service in the Austrian army on October 20, 1915. Already less than one month later, on November 14, 1915, he wrote a desperate letter to Karl Kraus lamenting 'the time of unbearable depression, since the beginning of war'[4]. This veritable change of heart highlights the human tendency to perceive and judge reality differently depending on whether one is personally involved or observing from a distance; even though it may seem like a platitude to point out: discussing conflicts from a safe distance or experiencing them directly are, so to speak, two sides of the same coin. Some further peculiar situations, evaluated later in this article, will show similar problems of implication, which, while not ethically excusing, may rationally explain any comparable strange behaviors or awkward opinions, occasionally exhibited by Nono too.

Despite having lived through the First World War, the concept of nationality with the idea that the German tradition from Johann Sebastian Bach through Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner had been the driving

[3] See *Arnold Schönberg 1874-1951. Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen*, ed. by Nuria Nono-Schoenberg, Ritter, Klagenfurt 1992, pp. 132–33.

[4] See ibid., p. 148.

force behind the historical development of music, continued to govern Schoenberg's thinking. A manuscript from February 1931 provides evidence for this: entitled *National Music*, Schoenberg emphasizes the past "hegemony" of German music "for 200 years"[5]. The significance of this statement becomes even clearer when considered alongside an earlier comment Schoenberg had made in the summer of 1921. During an evening walk with his pupil Josef Rufer while spending his holidays in the Austrian village of Traunkirchen at lake Traunsee, Schoenberg proudly claimed that his invention of the so-called "*Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another*"[6] had just 'ensured the predominance of the German music for the next one hundred years'[7]. However, Schoenberg's safe existence as a quite respected upright citizen and well-known professor at the prestigious Prussian Academy of the Arts in Berlin, where he taught a masterclass in composition, was abruptly overturned with the rise of Hitler's anti-Semitic dictatorship. Schoenberg's status was immediately transformed into that of a political victim who had to emigrate for the sake of saving his life and that of his family, losing his home and those relatives who remained in Europe and were later murdered by the Nazi regime.

The last composition that Schoenberg was able to finish in Berlin, just within the short time span of the first two tumultuous months of the year 1933, can be considered an impressive musical document of this pivotal moment in his life: *Drei Lieder* op. 48, for low voice and piano, based on some selected poems by the Austrian Jakob Haringer, written in 1915 under the dire conditions of the First World War. The choice of these poems was obviously influenced by their primarily dark themes, reflecting Schoenberg's own state of mind amidst the uncertainty of daily life in Germany. The first song, *Sommermüd*, composed on January 14 and 15, 1933, is characterized by melancholic existential weariness, nevertheless expressing an explicit Christian hope to survive the dark night. But after the political power had been handed over to Hitler with his proclamation as Germany's chancellor on January 30, the second song, *Tot*, dating from February 17 and 18, conveys the deep pessimism of someone who has lost all joy in life. Both songs, concise and transparent in form, display a laconic quality with a musical duration of less than two minutes each: depressed metaphors of an insecure and cruel reality, in which not much was left to say – or sing. Whereas

[5] Schoenberg, Arnold. "National Music (1)" (1931). In *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein, Faber & Faber, London 1975, p. 170.

[6] Schoenberg, Arnold. "Composition with twelve Tones (1)" (1941), ibid., p. 218.

[7] See Rufer, Josef. "Hommage à Schönberg". In Arnold Schönberg, *Berliner Tagebuch*, ed. by Josef Rufer, Propyläen, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, p. 48.

the third song, *Mädchenlied*, written between February 18 and 23, 1933, eventually could have been intended as an ironic cabaret performance with which Schoenberg pretended to have the sovereignty to keep the precarious contemporary situation under control; but in such a hopeless position of personal powerlessness, where it was no longer adequate to continue composing in a normal manner or to laugh out loud freely, the humorously designed topical song tends to decline into an aesthetical failure.

The profound unhappiness that dominates the whole composition is indirectly underlined by the relatively high opus number 48, which was assigned to *Drei Lieder*. Because it resulted from the odd circumstance that Schoenberg, after fleeing Berlin, completely forgot about these songs, and only when they were rediscovered in his Californian exile more than a decade later around 1950, he finally decided to include them in his catalogue of works with the next available number after his last composition *Phantasy for violin with piano accompaniment* op. 47, finished in 1949, and this was just: opus number 48. From a psychological perspective, Schoenberg's loss of memory suggests a clear repression of the sad and painful farewell to his European home: After the president of the Prussian Academy, Max von Schillings, during a session on March 18, 1933, had declared, similar to other ongoing oppressive arbitrary acts in many cultural institutions of Germany, that the so-called Jewish influence now should be eliminated from the Academy too, Schoenberg had left the room and requested suspension with a letter to the Academy dated March 20, 1933. As the Nazis continuously intensified their anti-Semitic threats in the following weeks, Schoenberg was forced to flee Berlin on May 16, first to Paris, where he officially reconfirmed his Judaism on July 24, and later emigrated by ship from Le Havre to New York on October 26, 1933.

Unlike *Drei Lieder*, which reflect Schoenberg's expulsion from Berlin and present him as a more or less passive victim of Hitler's regime, the increasing Second World War marked a shift to a more active position against the aggressive Nazism. This change is exemplified by his work *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte (Lord Byron) for String Quartet, Piano, and a Reciter* op. 41, realized between March 12 and June 12, 1942, in fulfilment of a commission by the American League of Composers to contribute a piece of chamber music for their concert season. In a later manuscript from 1943, Schoenberg explained that the composition originated for a very special reason: "I had at once the idea that this piece must not ignore the agitation aroused in mankind against the crimes that provoke this war. I rememberd Mozart's Mariage of Figaro, supporting repeal of the jus prime noctis, Schiller's Wilhelm Tell, Goethe's Egmont, Beethoven's Eroica and Wellington's Victory and I knew it

was the moral duty of *intelligencia* to take a stand against tyranny"[8]. With this typical orientation towards a very notable Austrian-German cultural heritage, Schoenberg's composition manifests a significant political attitude: a sharp polemic alluding to Hitler arose via a contemporary parody of Lord Byron's pamphlet against Napoleon Bonaparte, woven into a brilliant musical substance full of symbolic allusions and historical citations. The explicit political statement that premiered at two concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York on November 23 and 24, 1944, received a quite positive resonance and was followed by a nationwide radio broadcast on November 26. And this marked a rare historical moment in which Schoenberg's condemnation of Hitler's barbaric dictatorship, culminating in a final plea for democracy and freedom, was distributed to a wide audience.

So, looking back at Schoenberg's life during the period from the beginning of the First World War to the end of the Second, one can see a highly changeable chronicle of a person who initially embraced German chauvinism, then became a Jewish victim of just the same toxic ideology, but finally emerged as an artist who actively resisted Nazism through his music. And in this context another composition should be highlighted, which seems almost like a kind of climax. It was elaborated by Schoenberg in the summer of 1947 after he had read the first reports about the Nazi pogroms. By combining the suffering of the Jews in the ghettos and in the concentration camps into an imaginary report of a man who narrowly escaped a massacre when German soldiers thought he was laying dead on the ground, *A Survivor from Warsaw for Narrator, Men's Chorus, and Orchestra* op. 46 transcends all previous musical experiences, established genres, and human imagination. Hardly any other musicologist than Alexander L. Ringer, himself a survivor of the holocaust, could have been destined to summarize this extraordinary work better with appropriate empathy: "Schoenberg poured all his sorrow and the full measure of his Jewish pride into a unique mini-drama, a relentless crescendo from beginning to end of unmitigated horror defeated by unyielding faith"[9]. The 'heart-rending musical document of its time'[10], which erected 'for millions of methodically murdered people an unexpected as well as overwhelming monument'[11], serves up to this very day as one of the most outstanding, emotionally touching compositions of commemoration in the entire history of music.

---

[8] Schoenberg, Arnold. "How I came to compose the *Ode to Napoleon*" (1943). In Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, vol. 2, no. 1, October 1977, p. 55.

[9] Ringer, Alexander L. *Arnold Schoenberg*. *The Composer as Jew*, paperback edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 1993, p. 203.

[10] See Ringer, Alexander L. *Arnold Schönberg*. *Das Leben im Werk*, J. B. Metzler and Bärenreiter, Stuttgart and Kassel 2002, p. 285.

[11] Ibid, p. 291.

Less than a decade later, Luigi Nono also intended to honor the anti-fascist resistance in Europe between 1933 and 1945 with his work as a composer, but unlike Schoenberg, he was not at the end but only at the beginning of his life and musical career. Having experienced political and cultural oppression during his youth under Italian Fascism, Nono had developed a deep sympathy for socialism and the ideals of the resistance, and he had joined the Italian communist party in 1952. With this historical background in mind, one can choose two of Nono's earlier compositions as ideological paradigms for analyzing the unique way in which he tried to link a determined political commitment with his music. So, on one hand, inspired by Pablo Picasso's iconic painting *Guernica*, related to the brutal German air raid against the Basque city during the Spanish Civil War in April 1937, and in combination with the poem *La victoire de Guernica* by Paul Éluard, who had been also a member of the French communist party and the resistance, Nono created a work of the same title for chorus and orchestra in 1954. It is significant – as emphasized by the lyrics – that the subject of *La victoire de Guernica* is not only the pain and the suffering of all the innocent civilian victims but also the eventual triumph of international solidarity over the fascist murderers; and with an approach quite similar to Schoenberg's *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, Nono included in his music, preponderantly dominated by harsh metallic sounds and sections of military drums, a hidden semantical symbolism, as its interval structure is derived from *The Internationale*, the hymn of the socialistic workers movement. On the other hand, the second composition *Il canto sospeso* for soprano, alto, and tenor soloists, chorus, and orchestra, dating from 1955–56, is perhaps one of Nono's most renowned works. Based on fragments of farewell letters that European resistance fighters sentenced to death had written to their families before their execution, *Il canto sospeso* represents a very sensitive reflection of the sacrifice of these heroes. The music, containing soft and desolate as well as loud and shrill passages, certainly conveys impressive emotional effects to any listener, particularly through the intense vocal qualities Nono was able to realize in the composition. Once again, invincible hope and the belief in 'a beautiful future' – according to one of the cited documents – are articulated versus the horror of fascist inhumanity.

It is a well-known fact that Nono embraced an optimistic communist ideology, bound to the dogma that political progress could be achieved by fighting for the liberation of mankind worldwide; in fact, communism, given the fundamental faith it demands of its followers, in principle touches on religious dimensions. And it is not very hard to find various remarks which reveal Nono's conviction that the former anti-fascist resistance had to be continued in the form of a socialist revolution in the present; connected with

the idea of the composer taking part in this historical movement[12], this challenge determined his musical activities and motivated his engaged compositions. In the same context, Nono's international journeys, beginning with his first visit to East Germany in 1958, can be understood as acts of practical solidarity, followed by his participation in the Warsaw Autumn festival of contemporary music in 1958. While his subsequent orchestral work *Diario polacco'58* (1959) – reflecting reminiscences of Polish friends, the country, and the devastating past history of war – exemplifies the special kind of relationship between Nono's personal experiences and his compositions, which quite often might be characterized as a kind of musical diary. In 1962, Nono travelled to the USSR for the first time, and in 1967 and 1968 he undertook two journeys to South America, including Cuba. During this period, his compositions often included programmatic allusions to current political events and issues; such as the atomic warning sign of Hiroshima, the Nazi-crimes in Auschwitz, the fight of the communist liberation army in the Vietnam War, or the student revolt in Paris in May 1968. And, not to forget, exemplified by his composition for soprano and tape *La fabbrica illuminata* (1964), Nono was actively engaged in fostering vibrant cultural and political dialogue with workers and students by presenting many concerts, including discussions, in factories and social unions all over Italy.

However, as Nono's political engagement became more explicit, increasingly precarious and questionable aspects began to emerge. For instance, his work for orchestra and tape *Per Bastiana – Tai-Yang Cheng* (1967), derived from a Chinese folk song meaning 'the east is red', provoked dubious sympathies for the mass murderer Mao Zedong when its original meaning of daybreak was transformed with flaming pathos into a political metaphor for a new era of mankind under the Marxist-Maoist communist ideology. In another case, it seemed as if Nono's personal fascination with and influence of the eloquent dictator Fidel Castro led him in 1969 to seriously refer to Cuba as 'the first free land of America'[13]. Or at the same time, while he indeed acknowledged the 'huge cultural bureaucracy' in the German Democratic Republic, Nono quite uncritically praised the 'good results in economy and education'[14] completely ignorant of the hardships faced by those citizens, who lived in political opposition to the governing Socialist Unitary Party and therefore had to endure constant surveillance by the Stasi – the state security service and secret police – and the danger of being killed if they attempted to escape across the heavily fortified borders of the state.

[12] See Nono, Luigi. "Musik und Resistenza" (1963). In *Texte*. *Studien zu seiner Musik*, ed. by Jürg Stenzl, Atlantis, Zürich and Freiburg i. Br. 1975, pp. 101–103.
[13] Nono, Luigi. "Musik und Revolution", ibid., p. 115.
[14] Ibid., p. 109.

It seems neither necessary nor possible to arrive at a single, completely convincing answer to the question of why Nono sometimes held such awkward opinions. The reason may lie in a combination of naivety, opportunism, and ideological blindness, traits common to individuals who identify too exclusively and unconditionally with a particular belief; whatever the spiritual implications may be, such convictions often lead to a selective disregard for aspects of reality that do not align with one's perspective. Of course, Nono was not at all the only one who gravitated towards radical positions and extreme solutions during the increasing political struggles of the late 1960s. And when this turbulent period with all the competing different ideologies historically came to an end, Nono appeared to distance himself from his earlier habit of composing music with explicit political functions, orientating instead towards lighter textures, subtle sounds and dynamics; according to a common musicological interpretation, his string quartet *Fragmente – Stille. An Diotima* (1979–80) marked a paradigmatic turning point.[15]

But again, it would be pure speculation – and seems unnecessary – to decide definitely whether this obvious change in behaviour was driven by political disillusionment, or personal resignation, or self-critical judgement, or even the so-called mellowness of age. Later in his life, when looking back at his emblematic political work *Il canto sospeso*, Nono lamented the 'superficial effect' caused by the prevailing 'typical ideological reading'[16], which now he felt prevented an adequate perception of its musical qualities. This sheds significant light on the dilemma that engagement may overshadow aesthetics. And generally speaking, the comparison between critical phases in the lives and creative activities of Schoenberg and Nono, which was unfolded here, brings to consciousness the great danger that ideology, regardless of its origin or aim, can pose not only to individuals, but also to music. More than that, honorable engagement can turn out to be quite naive and does not make a person immune to errors and faults. However, it's hardly possible to assert definitively whether the best option to avoid any ideological missteps is, consequently, to refrain from engagement altogether and remain silent, especially when you are talking about composers who feel genuine responsibility for the development of a human, free society.

[15] See the extensive monograph by Junker, Joachim. *„Die zarten Töne des innersten Lebens". Zur Analyse von Luigi Nonos Streichquartett ‚Fragmente – Stille. An Diotima'*, Pfau-Verlag, Büdingen 2015.

[16] Nono, Luigi. "Eine Autobiographie des Komponisten. Enzo Restagno mitgeteilt, Berlin, März 1987". In *Dokumente*, *Materialien*, ed. by Andreas Wagner, Pfau-Verlag, Saarbrücken 2003, p. 76.

REFERENCES

*** *Arnold Schönberg 1874–1951*. *Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen*, ed. by Nuria Nono-Schoenberg, Ritter, Klagenfurt 1992.

Junker, Joachim. "Arnold Schönberg und Luigi Nono. Spuren einer außergewöhnlichen Beziehung zweier Komponisten". In *Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Center*, vol.12, 2015, pp. 251–263.

Junker, Joachim. *„Die zarten Töne des innersten Lebens". Zur Analyse von Luigi Nonos Streichquartett ‚Fragmente – Stille. An Diotima'*, Pfau-Verlag, Büdingen 2015.

Nono, Luigi. "Musik und Resistenza" (1963). In *Texte*. *Studien zu seiner Musik*, ed. by Jürg Stenzl, Atlantis, Zürich and Freiburg i. Br. 1975, pp. 101–103.

Nono, Luigi. "Musik und Revolution" (1969). Ibid., pp. 107–115.

Nono, Luigi. "Eine Autobiographie des Komponisten. Enzo Restagno mitgeteilt, Berlin, März 1987". In *Dokumente*, *Materialien*, ed. by Andreas Wagner, Pfau-Verlag, Saarbrücken 2003, pp. 34–138.

Ringer, Alexander L. *Arnold Schoenberg*. *The Composer as Jew*, paperback edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 1993.

Ringer, Alexander L. *Arnold Schönberg*. *Das Leben im Werk*, J. B. Metzler and Bärenreiter, Stuttgart and Kassel 2002.

Rufer, Josef. "Hommage à Schönberg". In Arnold Schönberg, *Berliner Tagebuch*, ed. by Josef Rufer, Propyläen, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, pp. 47–92.

Schoenberg, Arnold. "National Music (1)" (1931). In *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein, Faber & Faber, London 1975, pp. 169–172.

Schoenberg, Arnold. "Composition with twelve Tones (1)" (1941), ibid., pp. 214–244.

Schoenberg, Arnold. "How I came to compose the *Ode to Napoleon*" (1943). In *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, vol. 2, no. 1, October 1977, pp. 55–57.