

PRAISING THE SOUNDS - LUIGI NONO “OMAGGIO A GYÖRGY KURTÁG”

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SUMMARY. Luigi Nono's cultural creative ideas are recognized in the modern history of music. His works and thoughts on art and sound, his composing implies vision, a connection between science (electronic technology and spatial environment) and art (sound and performance). One of his latest works from 1983, reviewed in 1986, *Omaggio a György Kurtág* was composed in a period when Nono got a different, unique approach to composition regarding not only the attitude towards performance but also due to his continuous acoustic research.

Keywords: Luigi Nono, electronic music, *Omaggio a György Kurtág*, sound

Introduction

Luigi Nono was born in an artistic environment considering music an *art with no limits*. As a performer, he was first familiarized to classicism having a very narrow experience of the avant-garde music, later on discovering the works of Arnold Schönberg, Anton Webern, and so on. His mentor in achieving and extending his education was the Italian composer and conductor, great figure of the avant-garde - Bruno Maderna.² Interested in world's progress and the social and political events within his time, Nono developed a personal psychological perspective on things and became involved in diverse militant movements: he belonged to the communist party in Italy. This active life was not

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² Bruno Maderna was professor to many composers such as Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez or Luciano Berio.



an impediment from constantly searching of new sounds and transforming art in an avant-gardist way. Composing, making and publishing music represented for Nono a necessity to accomplish “full self-realization.”³

As a composer, Nono was equally involved in serial, aleatoric and electronic music. He wrote music pieces in a dramatic scenic way, for example *Intolleranza '60* (1961) dedicated to Arnold Schönberg and *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1975) based on the fragments from Bertold Brecht's plays and texts of Marx, Lenin, Guevara or Fidel Castro. Also, he used instruments and voices (chorus) on an emotional subject for *Il canto sospeso* named by Elliott Carter “one of the best works... that has been written since the war by a European.”⁴ Nono introduced recorded improvisations and anti-capitalist texts in a cantata for soprano and tape *La fabbrica illuminata* (1964), expressed his own political experiences and struggles in *A floresta è jovem e cheja de vida* (1966) and induced auditive experience of the music sound and silence fusion searching metaphysical, contemplative resonances in the extraordinary *Prometheus - 'tragedia dell'ascolto'* (1984).

The composer was undoubtedly fascinated by the sounds, his endless study scores of old and new schools' composers helped him to reinterpret tradition and to create an innovative sound and musical language that fulfilled his visionary ideas. For example, his creativity did manifest development regarding the flow of music: *turning points* that appear as abrupt ruptures. In 1987, Nono himself summarized his attitude towards composing: “My works proceed at irregular intervals, that they group themselves in threes or fours. This discontinuity, this change, is even more evident after a theatrical composition... I could say, as Schoenberg did, that at the conclusion of each work I wish more than ever to breathe the air of other planets. When people ask me if I have changed my mind, changed direction, and so on, I say yes. I hope to change every morning when I wake up, to continually seek something different. Concepts such as continuity and consistency are to me incredibly banal; you have continuity in spite of yourself, with it often working against you.”⁵

Each one of Nono's works is a manifestation of not solely inspiration but intuition as well, and a perfect union between experienced and innovative techniques and compositional structures that he called “new routes” in order to find the meaning of sound.⁶ His music addressed social and political

³ Luigi Nono, *Nostalgia for the Future - Luigi Nono's Selected Writings and Interviews*, volume edited by Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi, University of California Press, 2018, pp.9-10.

⁴ Laura Emmery, “Workshop Minnesota”: Elliott Carter's Analysis of Luigi Nono's *Il canto sospeso* volume 3 2018 after Guberman, *Daniel A. Elliott Carter as (Anti-) Serial Composer*. American Music 33(1). 2015. p.78. Retrieved 20.03 2025.

⁵ Idem, p.2.

⁶ Ibidem, pp.2-3.

messages to the public,⁷ but there was so much more than this.⁸ His legacy involved a reflection on the *act of listening* considered a place to be heard oneself and its connection with the rest of the world, and a *musical fullness* of his compositions characterized by being truthful to his beliefs and accepting the uncertainty.

In 1970s a shift in sound exploration could be seen that involved electronics, a mixture of instruments and individual voices, new methods to exploit imagination and to alternate rhythm and music-silence passages. The relationships between sounds extend beyond discursive music, and there are no boundaries for Nono's writing, just a whole spectrum of possibilities.⁹ His compositional approach is based on technology – innovative devices and techniques that reflects a syncretical thinking, elaborate, theatrical, sound – space interests and a revelation of music as a *pragmatic tool* not as an *abstract language*.¹⁰ Moreover, Nono's music appears as a structural complex concept of *rising and falling* strata of sound mixed together apparently with no effort, while the speediness fluctuation creates waves of sound often indistinctive. From the start Nono defined his idea of "how the image of inner torment was to become music, and different timbres or sound qualities to be used."¹¹

Although, inspired by Webern's final works, the composer wanted to reintroduce in his pieces the core of the single tone,¹² the perception of it was of little to no importance to Nono. He considered more important the diverse dimensions of complex structures and the rhythmic streams of simple proportional correlation between the duration values¹³ which denote a "transposed concept of the former polyphonic *line* or *voice* and they can be shaped to serve many compositional requirements."¹⁴

⁷ See for example *Intolleranza* (1960), *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1975), *Il canto sospeso* (1956) *La fabbrica illuminata* (1964), *A floresta è jovem e cheja de vida* (1966).

⁸ Luis Velasco-Pufleau. *On Luigi Nono's Political Thought: Emancipation Struggles, Socialist Hegemony and the Ethic Behind the Composition of Für Paul Dessau*. University of Michigan, 2018.

⁹ Carola Nielinger-Vakil. *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima: World of Greater Compositional Secrets*. (2010). *Acta Musicologica* 82(1) pp. 116.

¹⁰ Andrea Santini. *Multiplicity — Fragmentation — Simultaneity: Sound-Space as a Conveyor of Meaning and Theatrical Roots in Luigi Nono's Early Spatial Practice*. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. 2012.137(1), p. 73.

¹¹ Gundaris Poné. *Webern and Luigi Nono: The Genesis of a New Compositional Morphology and Syntax. Perspectives of New Music*. (1972). 10 (2) p. 116.

¹² The single tone four prime dimensions are: pitch, duration, dynamics, and timbre.

¹³ Sometimes Nono uses Fibonacci numbers (1,2, 3,5, 8, 13, etc.) as a series of factors whose basic duration values are multiplied to obtain durations that are statistically controlled. (G. Poné, op cit., p.117)

¹⁴ Gundaris Poné, *Webern and Luigi Nono: The Genesis of a New Compositional Morphology and Syntax. Perspectives of New Music*. (1972). 10 (2) p. 117.

Some of the works of Luigi Nono are considered *experimental*, mostly the live electronics which basically use electronics to combine vocal and instrumental sounds to achieve expressive music. The composer showed his interest in finding new ways of making people listen to his music and to perceive his music by taking into account the spatial dimension and also the performer's perspective which includes: studying the score, a thorough dissemination of archival materials and the integration of electronics into the musical realization.¹⁵

In performing Nono's works of importance are the performer's knowledge and his vision on the score¹⁶ that will help the performer to find his voice. Helmut Lachenmann, one of Nono's few students, explained that *the tradition* should not be taken as granted, thus, should be stripped of all assumption and questioned, this being the condition for the musician to evolve and be free of "intellectual paralysis."¹⁷

Nono's musical language is shaped by the distinguished use of electronics embedded in his progressive-constructive thought. The steps include (i) from the choice of sound material to be used to (ii) testing and discussing the chosen sound presented in a catalog. Moreover, there were studies of the scores of the performances and computer sketches (real-time synthesis). If the source analysis is not enough to make known the compositional/research project, musical assistants clarify through memory the electroacoustic technological developments, the problems that came across and the found solutions. Also, the outputs of harmonizers or delay lines as well as motion of sound in space might be represented by special software tools for analysis and visually determination of how sound is distributed in time.

Luigi Nono's "*Omaggio a György Kurtág* for contralto, flute, clarinet in B \flat , tuba, and live electronics"

Nono considered György Kurtág¹⁸ a great musical personality, a reflection of many cultures, a model for those who considered themselves "exiles in their own homeland...",¹⁹ He perceived Kurtág's music as innovative,

¹⁵ Warnaby, John. *Only Travelling Itself: Reflections on Luigi Nono (1924-1990)*. (1991), Tempo - New Series, Cambridge University Press 176. pp. 2-5.

¹⁶ Bill Hopkins. *The Individuation of Power and Light*. (1978) The Musical Times, 119 (1623). pp. 408.

¹⁷ Presentation of Nono, Iannotta and Lachenmann's concerts in *Festival d'Automne à Paris, 2014*.

¹⁸ Measuring the greatness of a composer by the number of works dedicated to him, György Kurtág is without a doubt an important composer.

¹⁹ Carola Nielinger-Vakil. *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima: World of Greater Compositional Secrets*. Acta Musicologica. 2010. 82(1) pp. 116.

looking for *the unknown*, considering that "it is not the sounds that are special, but rather the way they are invented, used, told, made to vibrate."²⁰

From their first meet, in 1978, Luigi Nono and György Kurtág showed closeness, respect and admiration towards each other, both creating a work in the other's name: György Kurtág composed "*Omaggio a Luigi Nono per coro a cappella (mixed voices) op. 16*" between 1979 – 1981, and Luigi Nono wrote "*Omaggio a György Kurtág for contralto, flute, clarinet, tuba and live electronics*" in 1983, completed by a revised final version in 1986.²¹²²

In Nono's "*Omaggio a György Kurtág*" the central role is attributed to the *continuous sound* derived from unnoticeable sources resounded *electronic* into *noise* to only melt into hefty *silence*. The composer admitted having learned through Kurtág's music "to not produce sounds for its own sake but to explore new ways to invent sounds and to make them come alive."²³

In Nono's compositions after 1980, mainly for instruments and live electronics, the electronic sound processes are written as depiction of the process with charts (separate from the score) and additions of inputs and outputs which makes the score valuable in the act of performing. It is in contrast with traditional instrumental scores and "it does not allow one to build a complete mental representation of what actually happens in sound, since the score has to give an exact prescription of what the performer has to do rather than what the heard sound has to be."²⁴

The listener's view is subjective according to the complexity of the sounds. For example, in the case of contrabass instruments, conscious listening is influenced by the *pitch, timbre and rhythm* produced by various methods. Voices are transformed by their characteristic spectral peaks (timbres) showing numerous opportunities of change by live electronics. Thus, there is "a continuum between compositional technique and electroacoustic transformation."²⁵

²⁰ Luigi Nono, *Nostalgia for the Future - Luigi Nono's Selected Writings and Interviews*, volume edited by Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi, University of California Press, 2018, pp.344-345.

²¹ <https://www.newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue/hommage-a-kurtag/>

²² There were other young composers from the "Hungarian Studio for New Music" who composed an *Omaggio a Kurtág* to only name a few: Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Jürgen Ruck, Movses Pogossian.

²³ Retrieved from the site of *Festival d'Automne à Paris*, 2014 in 25.05.2025.

²⁴ Anne C. Shreffler, Joseph Auner. *Utopian Listening: The Late Electroacoustic Music of Luigi Nono*. 2016, p.20.

²⁵ Jonathan Impett. *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought*, Routledge Publishing, New York, 2019, p.440.

Nono characterized *Omaggio a György Kurtág* it as “infinite breaths—feelings—thoughts—tragedies”²⁶ continuing by saying that includes prolonged techniques, timbres, and a structure that appoint the parts of noise or silence.²⁷ The score clarifies the idea of collective work, both technical and artistic. The composer identifies not only the “wave-like components of vocal or instrumental sound (with the help of the *sonoscope*,) but also the role of noise in timbre and articulation, that of the overtone in timbres blending and the fine modulation of intonation”²⁸ to which he refers as ‘*suono mobile*’. Moreover, instructions about performing (e.g. breath noise, or pitch) and indications of ‘microintervalli’ or ‘aperiodico’ are noted on the score.

Omaggio a György Kurtág is a work of two-part counterpoint. The 1986 version contains fourteen sections (149 bars) with duration of approximate 18 minutes. One third of the composition is silent, the longest parts of silence last for more than a minute – a 9 bars passage of continuous sound. At its finale the alto outlines a fifth G# - C# - G#. It emphasizes the sonic palindrome of the text: Gy-ö-rgy with vowels that provide phonetic material for the contralto, but the diverse ways of producing sound with air by the instruments is vague, not distinguished as they move gradually from pure sounds through the noise of breath to silence.²⁹ So, the music is given life by the smallest modulation of pitch or dynamic.

On the other hand, the performers explore the full range of techniques and live electronics with which they had been experimenting in the studio.³⁰ The phrase finishes sharply looking like an interruption or suspension of the music reverberation.

The pitch range is notated in the low mid register, only tuba slopes lower from time to time. Sounds mostly have an independent move between the edges of the *physical acoustic space*. There are rhythmic reappearances and changes of intonation and rare melodic passages, often of merely two notes.³¹

Regarding the intensity there is indication of a single forte (*f*) moment (in bar 21) the rest of the nuances are mostly moving between *p/ mp* and *ppppppp*, with few *mf*. These nuances are leading the focus of the performers and listeners towards the corporeal actions, so, they get real and reduced

²⁶ See Nono’s notes - Conversation Nono-Boulez.

²⁷ Luigi Pizzaleo, *A Three-Dimensional Representation of Sound and Space: The Case of Omaggio a György Kurtág*, 2016, p.22.

²⁸ Jonathan Impett. *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought*, Routledge Publishing, New York, 2019, p.345.

²⁹ Idem p.346.

³⁰ As examples we note: *shadow* sounds, *Aeolian* sounds (whistle-tones), *Tibet* sounds (filtering by changing mouth-shape), pitched breath, whistling, so on.

³¹ Jonathan Impett. *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought*, Routledge Publishing, New York, 2019.

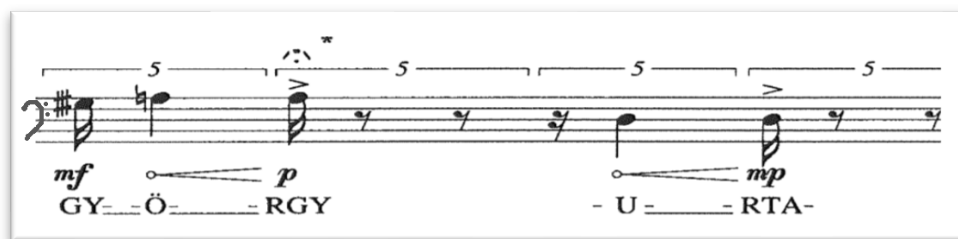
perception, the act of listening coming before it connects with emotion and memory. The extreme dynamic levels are perceived sometimes as silence making the listener unclear, confusing regarding the distinction between timbres. When the listener begins understanding the music, he engages in « écoute attentive »³² that implies attention and focus and a sense of belonging.

In *Omaggio a György Kurtág*, as Impett says "the flute and clarinet become real-time, acoustic filters, working through the harmonic potential of an underlying series of low fundamentals."³³ The flute and the clarinet are in a spectrally harmonic relation. For example, the contrabass clarinet role is vivacious, it moves from C in bar 31 (anticipated in bar 30) to its lowest in bars 49–51. Also, the clarinet appears as a high harmonic suggested on the B \flat sounding length. (e.g. bars 24–25)

Omaggio a György Kurtág is presented by the composer as a chance to show his longtime research, his improvisations and musical experiments in the studio. The musical fragments inhabit their own acoustic space, translated in manipulation of interchangeable instrumentation, consistency and electronic processing.

At means of emission this work requires an ordinary tone, a mixture of tone and breath proportioned according to the proximity to emission and a prevalence of breath noise with or without pitch. The composer indicates the transition from breath (air) to tone and vice versa. The sounds alternate with silence. For **contralto**, the sonic palindrome provides phonetic material. There are indications of *molto soffio* or *molto fiato* (only breath noise colored by the emitted vowel, *aria intonata* (less percentage of breath more percentage of pitch), *suono* (singing with ordinary emission. The vowels are attacked differentially, for example the transition from the vowel U to A is done in crescendo.

E.g. 1



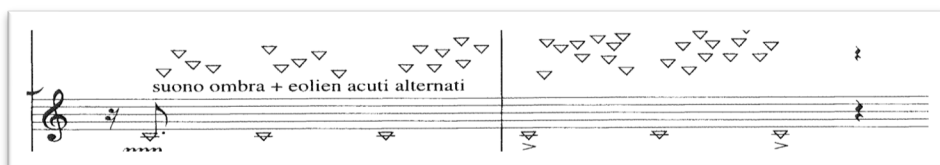
b. 32 Isolated phonemes of: Gy-ö-rgy (*Omaggio a György Kurtág*, Casa Ricordi, 1996)

³² <https://brahms.ircam.fr/en/composer/luigi-nono>, retrieved 25.05.2025.

³³ Jonathan Impett. *The tragedy of listening: Nono, Cacciari, critical thought and compositional practice*, Radical Philosophy 125, 2004.

Regarding the **flute**, the *eolien* (whistle tones) are upper partials isolated and intensified within a given sound spectrum with high pitches, the fundamental note (C) appears and disappears occasionally like a shadow (*suono - ombra*).

E.g. 2



bb. 1-2 (*Omaggio a György Kurtág*, Casa Ricordi, 1996)

The **clarinet** is written in B \flat and presents trills with slight, high, random partials harmonics resulting from the fingerings used as seen in examples below.

E.g. 3



bb. 95-97 (*Omaggio a György Kurtág*, Casa Ricordi, 1996)

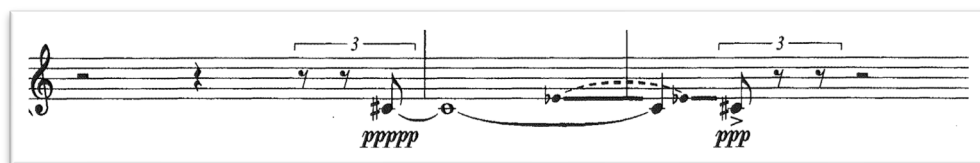
E.g. 4



bb. 130-132 (*Omaggio a György Kurtág*, Casa Ricordi, 1996)

Tuba requires a change in timbre obtained by continuously varying during the emission of the sound, the shape of the oral cavity as if articulating different vowels - *iaouiin* (method called +Tibet). The notes therefore must be sung in a throat voice at the same time as the note played.

E.g. 5

b. 22 and bb. 50-52 (*Omaggio a György Kurtág*, Casa Ricordi, 1996

The **conductor** (often the composer and/or the sound director) **has** to pay attention to the dynamics, the duration of notes and pauses, the sounds of the voice and each instrument, the beating of each bar (in strict time or not), relating to the live electronics. The electro-acoustic sound is controlled by the interpreter. The outputs of the electronic sound merge with the volume of the original sound of the ensemble. Furthermore, the performers explore what they had been experimenting in the studio.

Parts of live amplification (noted as *ad libitum*) should be weak in order to correspond to the general dynamic of the work (*ppppp* – *ppp*) Other indications include *accelerando*, *rallentando*, *subito*, *rapidissimo*, *crescendo*, *so on*.

The accessed score (1996, Casa Ricordi) presents other indications about the Halaphon (digital specializer), reverb, harmonizer, delays, and so on. Although Nono leaves to the performer 's preference and appreciation *the scheme of an implementation of the live electronics* (often being the composer – performer- conductor,) he continuously added indications on the scores. Every creative impulse, sudden or studio experimentation was carefully expressive noted and explained.

Omaggio a György Kurtág is a composition that burdens the performers asking for creative roles, both, individual control and exercise in ensemble and a profound focus to the act of music making.



A working page with the composer's notes (*Omaggio a György Kurtág*, Casa Ricordi) - Retrieved from *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought*, Routledge New York, 2019 – Pitch material

Conclusion

Nono's compositional approach is characterized by a deep fascination with the sound, a musical instinctiveness and expressiveness, a profound knowledge abundant creativity, and revealing his own truth, his beliefs. In *Omaggio a György Kurtág* movement of sound and spatiality are architectural and could be understood on numerous levels. It is another example of balancing the time of human experience, sensibility, culture and art.

Considered an avant-garde leading composer, Nono offered interesting subtle music to his audience and asked for nothing more than careful, attentive listening. Thus, the listener is invited to observe the influence of space on the prolonged silences, to distinguish microtonal intervals, to differentiate refined textures, to understand the variable, yet unpredictable harmony and the 'color' of the various timbres. For Luigi Nono "sound is never a note" [...] though inner lives of sounds become compositional material."³⁴ He also said:

*"A musical thought that transforms the thought of the musicians, rather than offering them a new profession of making so-called contemporary music [...] the work of research is infinite, in fact. Finality, realization, is another mentality. [...] Often conflicts break out during the research process or rehearsals. But these are very emotional moments. Then there is the ritual of the concert. Perhaps it is possible to change this ritual. Perhaps it is possible to reawaken the ear. To reawaken the ear, the eyes, human intelligence, the maximum of externalized interiority. That is what is needed today."*³⁵

His works, mainly the instrumentals with live electronics ones, are acknowledged for turning steady technical equipment into musical instruments, been recognized as challenging to those who want them performed in a musically rewarding way which implies authentic acts of music, professionalism, interaction between musicians and choosing "strategies for time synchronization, fader mapping, audible feedback and examples of microphone technique."³⁶

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³⁴ Jonathan Impett. *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought*, Routledge Publishing, New York, 2019, p. 390.

³⁵ Idem pp. 389-390.

³⁶ Carola Nielinger-Vakill. *Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context*, Research Gate, 2016, no page.

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 (Retrived 25.05.2025)
- www.festival-automne.com (Retrived 20.04.2025)
- <https://www.newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue/hommage-a-kurtag/>
 (Retrived 26.04.2025)