

ELECTRONICS AND INDERMINACY IN THE MUSIC OF LUIGI NONO

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SUMMARY. Rather than having a specific discussion on the electronics used by Nono in the general span of his production, I prefer to refer to the latest works of the 80s, to focus on his poetics, his way of thinking and my personal vision relating to that period, in relation to the current moment.

Keywords: Luigi Nono, electronics

Luigi Nono made extensive use of electronics in his compositions, first in works for solo magnetic tape, such as “Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz”, and in many works with magnetic tape as an integral part, including orchestral compositions, such as “Per Bastiana - Tai Yang Chen”, or solo vocal and instrumental works, for example “La lontananza nostalgica, utopica, futura”. Only in the last works did his use of electronics include the transformation of sound in real time, involving a separate performer in charge of the electronics, acting as a complementary ‘instrument’ of equal importance compared to instrumental performance. The reason for this late choice is easily explained by the fact that the technology for live electronics was only developed from the end of the 70s onwards.

We can say that electronics for Nono were an essential component of many of his works, a means used for an expressive and, I believe, emotional function. The works with magnetic tape include both synthesized sounds and “musique concrète” - today we would say sampling - to give space to sound elements that cannot be represented with traditional instruments, but often combined with the latter, thus creating a composite fabric of different and multiple sounds that contribute to a result rich in expressiveness and meaning.

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Regarding the word meaning, I add that in Nono's case it can be specified as "political", certainly also dynamic and stimulating, perhaps less in an "aesthetic" sense although in my opinion this last attribute is certainly not foreign to Gigi's music. The use of electronics in all cases was an essential component for his work and for the communicative force that pervades the sound of his music.

So, we are talking about an expansion of the sound world, capable of representing innovative situations on a sonic and formal level, equipped with a complexity which, by expanding the musical parameters, also adds an important one: space. Among the considerations that I listened to and discussed with Nono when I attended his seminars, held at the Experimental Studio in Freiburg, one of the many concerned the space and diffusion of sound through amplification and transformation, in environments suited to the needs of a particular listening situation and designed for a type of music, which involved the movement and non-unique direction of sounds.

Among the technical possibilities envisaged in the early 1980s in the Freiburg Studio, the Halaphone was the instrument for diffusing sound in movement. At the time, the programming of this instrument could act on the sound by moving it only in a circular direction at a constant speed, and not with differentiated geometries as would later be possible, but already with this possibility, aided by a particular arrangement of the speakers, significant results could be achieved. Nono often cited the use of "cori battenti", practised in the Basilica of San Marco in Venice by Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli in the 16th century – a stereophony ante litteram, which gave dimensions and listening different from the normal practice of that time. From here, he reiterated the importance of the place in which to perform music that includes sound in movement, both in terms of dimensions that allow this, and in terms of a sound environment capable of accommodating this type of diffusion in a satisfactory manner. From these ideas, but not only, the architectural idea created by Renzo Piano for the diffusion of sound in "*Prometeo*" was born.

It should be noted that Nono's artistic career is a differentiated one, in the sense that it differed from the way of doing things of many composers who wrote and still write uniformly today. This uniformity leads to continuous replication of style and craftsmanship, to always achieve more or less the same result, conventional and repetitive; perhaps due to lack of ideas or confidence in routine. Gigi has always been a committed researcher, and his style has undergone considerable changes, from his initial compositions, of a serial and systematic nature such as "Il canto sospeso", up to his latest works, some of which are random and partly improvisational. All this was part

of continuous research on sound, through attentive listening to the sound phenomenon as such, moving further and further away from a structural and constructivist mentality, to enter a dimension of formal freedom all aimed towards sound: see “Risonanze erranti”.

Electronics, and in particular live electronics, have constituted an indispensable element in the sound and formal research that Gigi has carried out in his latest works. I personally witnessed Gigi's work in Freiburg to create “Das Atmende Klarsein”. The continuous rehearsals with the instrumentalists, supported by Hans Peter Haller and his assistants in the Studio, were always sound experiences in progress, continually rethought and refined, to find the desired dimension of sound. Never a search for beauty, but certainly a commitment to the desired sound.

I also find it singular how sound research led Nono to find himself in ideal harmony (certainly on a subliminal level) with another Italian composer, who like him distanced himself from artisanal routine to dedicate himself to pure sound, namely Giacinto Scelsi. I have always thought I was faced with two contiguous phenomena, even if unknown to each other, in terms of the way of thinking and conceiving music; even if in Scelsi's case there was a rejection and ferocious hostility in Italy, which Nono has never known and from which he has always been exempt.

The freedom and fluidity achieved in Gigi's compositions in recent years is characterized by the minimal and essential use of the sound material in the score. A few indispensable notes, combined with live electronics and the fundamental use of space, contribute to the creation of suspended sound worlds. Broken by silences and breaths, the sound waves of these compositions unfold without creating boundaries and without suggesting a priori dimensions. It is an Atman that mutably pervades the sound space, enveloping the listener and involving him in an almost metaphysical listening. The refinement of the sound and the electronics, calibrated to the maximum so as not to invade the musical expression with excessive artifices, enhance the transparency of the sound volumes, very evident compared to Gigi's previous works. I am referring not only to “Das Atmende Klarsein”, but also to “Omaggio a Kurtàg”.

Of this last score, I attach to this report a photocopy of a page of the manuscript, which gives the idea of the sound fluidity conceived by Nono much better than the printed edition. (E.g. 1)

Handwritten musical manuscript extract for Luigi Nono's "Omaggio a Kurtàg". The score is written on five staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and Double Bass (DB). The manuscript includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key annotations include "FATO", "APPROCCIO", "TUBET", "ADIN - PIATO", "DIVISO", and "DEUX LA CROIX". There are also circled numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4, and a large wavy line at the top right. The manuscript is numbered 170, 130, and 135.

Luigi Nono: "Omaggio a Kurtàg" – manuscript, extract

In the original writing of "Omaggio a Kurtàg" and even more so in "Post-Prae-Ludium per Donau" for tuba and electronics, one notices a rarefaction of graphic signals, together with a musical breath entrusted to the performers, often also due to the type of emission requested, controllable up to a certain point and with more or fewer margins of variability within it.

Returning to "Post-Prae-Ludium per Donau", this piece, composed in close collaboration with Giancarlo Schiaffini and created with many of his suggestions, provided for some timbral paths, which the performer could choose as he pleased through a "controlled improvisation" as it was defined by Dieter Schnebel. Even the live electronics in the manuscript do not appear in an organized way, but some effects are indicated only on a general and approximate level. Only in the final edition does a precise indication of the live electronics appear, corresponding to the instrumental sounds, which in reality was never written in this way by Nono. Electronics, in the first performances, were managed by the performers of the Freiburg Studio in a fairly fluid way, and only, as already mentioned, did they appear systematized in the final edition. Nono indicated separately the electronic instrumentation to be used, together with the type and regulation of the effects, without indicating a rigid and fixed application in the score to be combined with the instruments.

These types of freedom, entrusted to the instrumentalists, are highlighted even more in pieces such as "La lontananza nostalgica, utopica, futura" where the magnetic tape was created from free improvisations by Gidon Kremer, sometimes in gypsy style, which were later chosen, partly electronically modified and superimposed, to create the definitive six-channel tape. The length of the tape was about 60 minutes, then later shortened by about 15 minutes. To this type of work on tape, Nono added a precise instrumental score, where the interpreter had six entries, spaced out in time, which were added from time to time to the continuous sound of the tape, and were managed freely by the instrumentalist, who was moving within the room in turn. I performed this piece on electronics together with Irvine Arditti on violin, in Milan in 1991, in the full version, as a tribute to Nono following his death the previous year. Personally, I prefer the full 60 min version where immersion in sound is less dynamic and more ecstatic. Perhaps - again as a personal observation - this type of composition could also be compared, due to the type of continuous envelopment of sound, to the last great works of Morton Feldman.

All Nono's latest works are characterized by a continuous search for sound, explored both at the level of individual instruments and of the voice, as well as electronics. The choice then of electronics in direct transformation of the sound, and no longer fixed on a tape - or audio file as we want to define it - indicates a need for fluidity of sound and form, which through the mutability of the various performances and the space in which it is diffused, acquires meaning in the moment of each performance, no longer rigid, but adaptable

to the needs of the place and the versatility of the performers, especially with regard to the particular types of sound emission required.

The adaptation of sound diffusion in spaces different in shape, size and reverberation problems of the place has always been present in performances with electronics. The problem occurs very often that some indications for live electronics are nullified by the place of performance. For example, in a particularly reverberant location, the indications in the score of this parameter are inevitably subject to change, as is the spatialization system, which must be verified from time to time, to be implemented effectively in different places, hence the need for general indications in the score with the necessary principle of variations during the work. In the case of Nono's works, the established typologies were adapted according to needs by Hans Peter Haller.

How have Gigi's compositions influenced younger generations of composers? Have chance and guided improvisation, together with electronics, had an impact on the education of the younger generations? Obviously, I am not talking about my generation, but that of my numerous students, who followed one another during my time as a teacher of composition and at the same time also of live electronics techniques at the Milan Conservatory and on other occasions, such as seminars and masterclasses held by me over time in Italy and abroad. The answer to these two questions is unfortunately negative. From their considerations, resulting from listening to and analyzing Nono's music, I summarize some concepts, which made me understand how musical events follow one another quickly and appear differently depending on the generations. These are some of the most common and shared observations among young people. How have Gigi's compositions influenced younger generations of composers? Have chance and guided improvisation, together with electronics, had an impact on the education of the younger generations? Obviously, I am not talking about my generation, but that of my numerous students, who followed one another during my time as a teacher of composition and at the same time also of live electronics techniques at the Milan Conservatory and on other occasions, such as seminars and masterclasses held by me over time in Italy and abroad. The answer to these two questions is unfortunately negative. From their considerations, resulting from listening to and analyzing Nono's music, I summarize some concepts, which made me understand how musical events follow one another quickly and appear differently depending on the generations. These are some of the most common and shared observations among young people:

- Nono's music is too intellectual and does not communicate emotions.
- Working with live electronics in a large studio, reserved almost exclusively for his own production, is snobbish and self-referential.

- No colors are perceived in his music, on the contrary a leaden black and white prevails, with rare exceptions.
- His work is praised by intellectuals, but this is a far from common perception.
- His music, always performed in important contexts and even in specially constructed spaces for the occasion (see: "Prometeo"), make him almost a "State composer" with obvious political support.
- His musical perspectives are perhaps worth studying, but they are not viable.

I find it important to mention the most frequent observations and criticisms that I have encountered among young students because, whether true or not - and I won't go into the merits - they represent reason for reflection on Nono's persona and his artistic career, which coincided with a moment of great change in musical thought, not only in Italy but also in much of the Western world.

After the Second World War of the last century, we witnessed a change in mentality in conceiving music. On the one hand, the production of chamber music was proposed, with an exclusively artisanal and not very artistic mentality, with clear references to "historical" ways of doing things. And this way of doing things was pursued by many in Italy until today. But on the other hand, there were composers who did not like conventionality, and were inclined towards a different type of musical art. Among the most suitable innovations for composers aimed at research and new forms of musical expression were: the influence of jazz or better still of free jazz with the rediscovery of improvisation, a practice that had become obsolete until the early 1900s, but was indeed recovered by musical practices that did not rely on writing, the advent of Aleatoric music - as an open work and not only - of electronics and mixed genres.

In Italy, beyond Luigi Nono, who immediately knew how to sense the different and new air brought by innovative techniques for creating and realizing music, we find Franco Evangelisti, pioneer of new improvisation practices, and Giacinto Scelsi, among the first composers in Italy to put aside structural and constructivist conceptions, to orient themselves on the value and meaning of the single sound, as a sound world complete in itself. From this perspective, especially the last decade of Gigi's production, certainly makes its own the ability to perceive sound as a world to be explored, without organizational forcing, which could excessively compress it into predefined forms, but allowing the sound, very often slowed down and perceived analytically as a complete "monad", to be assimilated through listening freed from common formalisms and conventions.

Certainly, the advent of live electronics has made a great contribution to this timbral and formal research, to which Nono dedicated his last years, and with which he created many of his latest works. But more than technology, I would like to underline the new thinking and the personalized and innovative sound and expressive concept that his type of research has led to. Not the medium - technological or otherwise - but the idea of a new and different musical concept pervades the latest works that Gigi left us. The electronic medium has in fact evolved enormously compared to almost fifty years ago. These are the ideas that remain and testify to the exceptional nature of his works.

Today, many years after those compositions, some of which I listened to while being worked on in Freiburg, I can affirm that they do not suffer from the phenomenon of aging, which is common to many works by other authors from the same period. A freshness of intent and imagination that can be perceived when listening remains intact.

I would add one more consideration:

Nono's musical phenomenon constitutes an exception, together with very few other composers that I have already partly mentioned, in the Italian panorama. Most Italian composers, both in the period in which Gigi was alive and in the present day, have been and still are characterized by artisanal and replicative ways of composing, which have little to do with artistic creativity and inventive freedom. A vital and innovative creativity like that achieved by Gigi in his works cannot be replicated by imitators and followers, precisely because of his research peculiarities. Furthermore, his latest works can be analyzed for study purposes only up to a certain point, especially those with live electronics, given that the musical form and the sound fabric escape a structural analysis, where there is no structure. We can only find a sparse and extremely essential representation of the sounds, which will only be brought to life by a creative and committed performance. To paraphrase a statement by John Cage: this type of music cannot be represented on paper for how it will feel running. There is a decidedly perceptible gap between sign and sound, and no longer an exact correspondence, as in his previous works. The representation of sound is not exasperatingly distant and total from the sound result, as in some works by Cage, Cardew, Schnebel, Bussotti, to name a few; who within their production also offer totally graphic scores to the performers. However, his scores possess an interpretative force that needs to be unraveled and understood, in order to then be able to perform them at the level of the sound world that Nono has imagined.

Therefore, Nono's latest works, in addition to approaching freer and more fluid ways of thinking, have given stimuli and authoritative impulses to the composers of subsequent generations, for a creativity different from the academic one, still widely practiced in Italy. It opened new horizons for

composers focused on researching and listening to sound phenomena. We can always discuss the quality of the results, with different and motivated opinions, but we can hardly deny the importance and musical value that these compositions, together with the artistic figure of Nono, represent for all of us.

For reasons of synthesis I have not delved into the philosophical motivations that drive the latest works, especially "Prometeo", of which Gigi's illustrious son-in-law - Massimo Cacciari - was the inspiration and suggester of lyrics and meanings. Furthermore, some explanatory considerations in this regard would deserve separate space, which here would be too limited and not in keeping with the subject matter discussed.

However, some reflections must be made, not only about "Prometeo" but also on Nono's way of conceiving and realising musical art, and like him by other important composers of his time: for example, Stockhausen and Boulez, who, although in different ways, present similar character characteristics and peculiarities.

Currently it can be said that the era of "leading" composers has (fortunately) passed, not because there is a lack of strong and significant personalities, but because the indispensable supports for the affirmation of similar phenomena are missing. Nono's connection with the Italian Communist Party, not as a simple member, but also as a member of the Central Committee, was certainly a strong commitment of a political nature, but also combined with a strong network of supports and knowledge that allowed him to build solid foundations to carry out his work.

"Prometeo" was a sort of synthesis of Nono's thoughts: the lonely man, the hero who brings light to his peers. I don't know if Nono had a psychological symbiosis with the mythological character, but I perceive it on an unconscious level, as a sort of personality cult that hides behind this intellectual construction, presented with quite evident mystical implications. It will be said that like all Nono's works it is an ideological work, strongly imbued with more or less symbolic meanings, but from today's perspective, it seems to possess something more than simple ideology, now relegated to a historical and anachronistic level.

The implementation of such work was assisted by the construction of a sound arch, which could contain instrumentalists and the public, structured on several floors and designed by the architect Renzo Piano. The cost at the time was very considerable; in addition, there was the participation of the entire Freiburg electronic studio with its equipment and full staff, not to mention the orchestra and soloists. In short, a pharaonic operation which, in addition to Venice, was subsequently transferred to Milan, to be carried out with the same installation methods (including dismantling and reconstruction of the sound ark) in one of the pavilions of the Spazio Ansaldo.

After the performances in Venice and Milan, the sound structure was abandoned for a few years - the author of this article was able to revive it for a short time, organizing two series of electronic music concerts within it, in the years 1990 and '91 with the collaboration of the Teatro alla Scala - subsequently the structure was demolished, to make room for an exhibition of vintage cars in the same pavilion of the Spazio Ansaldo. Of course, in life the ephemeral is always lurking, especially when we convince ourselves of the opposite. After all, Nono's was a generation of European composers who cared a lot about ideology, the cultural mission embodied by themselves, the posthumous legacy of their undertakings (see Boulez and IRCAM, Stockhausen and the "Licht" cycle of seven operas), visions shared by many other composers of that period, although in the latter case, these ambitions corresponded to means and possibilities not comparable with the three characters just mentioned. It was an era of affirmation of one's personality, with large doses of vanity and exhibitionist narcissism in constant competition, and only a few composers were exempt from it. On the other hand, however, taking oneself very seriously and considering one's music an important message entails risks, certainly not foreseen even by the authors we are talking about, because in their music and in their character, the slightest sense of humor was totally or almost missing, being also devoid of a graceful irony, which often serves to better focus on the sense of proportion.

The subtitle of "Prometeo" reads "tragedia dell'ascolto" (tragedy of listening). In addition to the sudden ironies that may come to mind with such subtitles, it seems clear that with this caption the intention is to underline the dramatic and committed aspect towards a conception and spirit of struggle, in which literary texts play an equally significant part in relation to music. However, I am convinced that the passage of time can put works of this type in a different light.

In Federico Fellini's entourage the opinion circulated that: Ogni film drammatico si avvia lentamente a diventare comico (E. Flaiano) (Every dramatic film starts slowly to become comic) and this phrase can certainly also apply to serious opera with some exceptions. The listener, and perhaps the public in general, distinguishes in his heart when a work contains an absolutely convincing spontaneity and purity, which binds the listener to the work and the author in a clear and direct way, because it is devoid of artifice, but in the specific case of "Prometeo", the listener is burdened through a political, ideological rhetoric, pre-established by stereotypes that are as old and vague as they are conventional, in their attempt not to be so and to appear new.

I recognize that I have expressed a merciless opinion, and I dedicate a few lines of clarification in this regard:

I have already written previously how important and significant Nono's presence was in the unfortunately excessively academic, Italian panorama. Listening to sound – in strong relationship with the thought of Giacinto Scelsi; the refined use of live electronics, supported by the wisdom of Hans Peter Haller, but certainly original; instrumental research with performers capable and available to new sound needs make him a pioneer in many ways, as does his relationship with musical form, fluid even if controlled by rigid boundaries. In my opinion, "Prometeo" despite containing these peculiarities, takes on a completely different aspect.

The Promethean myth has messianic implications, albeit secular, but which refer to the hero man, perhaps also definable as "superman" – a pagan mythological character, who spreads neo-paganism in his various perspectives, highlighted by Nono's work. I find no ideal in such a representation, but only a faith in man, the bearer of an asphyxiated and self-destructive knowledge to his peers: the desert is his destiny. A message that happily combines with Nietzsche's theories and which has already had previous pseudo-messianic musical creations in Europe; by Wagner with the Tetralogy, who however ultimately destroyed his gods, separating himself intellectually and spiritually from Nietzsche. And also, by Stockhausen, with the Licht cycle of seven works, in which he abundantly mixes myth, religion, superman and personality cult, and where a pagan world is represented, devoid of logical sense, invaded by self-satisfaction, narcissism, presumption.

The musical qualities of an author and the awareness of possessing them do not automatically imply for him the right to be able to arbitrarily extend his thoughts to universalistic themes and present them as if they were pearls of wisdom. We can certainly appreciate or not appreciate the musical work, according to our personal judgment as musicians, but not adhere to a thought if we believe that it is distorted, misleading and superbly self-referential. It would be like believing in television preachers and their personal visions of the world, artfully constructed to captivate the simplest minds. It is strange how often the so-called culture, cloaked in intellectualistic and refined texts and ways of doing things, can hide pitfalls and dangerous ideological assumptions, and at the same time, acquire high regard among cultured and perceptive people, who instead could easily attribute the appropriate proportions to the nature of the phenomenon.

On an ideological level I find a lot of difference between "Al gran sole carico d'amore" and "Prometeo". Personally, I see it as a journey from Marx to Nietzsche, and I don't agree with the final destination at all.

In conclusion, certainly every strong personality is made up of lights and shadows. Criticism is often greeted with annoyance, and we tend to belittle it as much as possible. However, let us consider that the vision of subsequent generations does not and cannot have the same perspective as previous ones; what is considered important before may not be important afterwards; culture as it appeared fifty years ago no longer has the same value today. Ideologies have collapsed, politics today has very different connotations from then; the myth only concerns pop/rock singers and footballers; Western society is aimed at consumption and drugs of various kinds, but not at thought; faith is then placed in GDP and not in religion; the shows, now mass, have an increasingly circus character - all that is missing is the free distribution of food, as in ancient Rome; the past is no longer teaching, today we look at AI. Isn't the Western world in an era of low-imperial decadence? More than rereading the Greek myths, perhaps there is a need for an awakening of the spirit, which enlightens our minds and allows us to avoid immanent catastrophes of an epochal nature.

With the new millennium the mentality of the young generations has changed radically. With the advent of social media, of virtual sensations, of loneliness artificially filled by the media, of the hikikomori phenomenon, of incommunicability. We are in a society where we talk much less and communicate more and more through chat lines. Where in trains and subways the vast majority of people isolate themselves, dedicating themselves full time to the screen of their smartphone. We are witnessing not so much a change in mentality, but a biological mutation of the individual and society, where there is no space for reflection and a certain type of culture is not perceived, both at the level of mentality and because it is offered by almost obsolete means. Furthermore, the speed of change is much greater than in the past. No wonder therefore if culture (a term used in a historical sense) is affected by these mutations and can no longer represent certainties, but perhaps only represents illusions, relative and limited to the moment.

REFERENCES

This is an original research study with no references.