

LUIGI NONO'S *IL CANTO SOSPESO* – A MODERN REPRESENTATION OF SACRIFICE

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SUMMARY. In this article, we will explore Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso* as a modern representation of sacrifice, structured within the framework of total serialism. The piece highlights its textual foundation, which plays a central role in conveying the ideological message of the composition. The text is taken from *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza europea* (1954), a collection of letters written by those sentenced to death during the European Resistance. The work is divided into four literary sections, each representing a transformation of the concepts of death and sacrifice: literary, realist, transitional, and compassionate. Through its serialist technique, Nono adapts the thematic elements of the text to the rigid and fearful context of the 20th century. The music not only enhances the text's meaning but also provides a modern and emotional interpretation of sacrifice, focusing on its psychological and personal impact rather than a historical narrative.

Keywords: Luigi Nono, *Il Canto Sospeso*, total serialism, sacrifice

1. Introduction

Considered one of the greatest Italian composers of the 20th century, Luigi Nono is one of the quintessential figures that shaped music in the post-war era. His masterful blending of complex compositional techniques and strong socio-political messages makes his music, though multilayered and abstract, a very powerful tool for the transmission of ideology.

Luigi Nono had a very political personality all his life and career. In his university days, during the Second World War, due to his sympathy towards left-wing socialist ideas, Nono joined the Italian antifascist resistance. After the war, he continued with his strong political positions and activism, his ideology

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turning towards radical left-wing political philosophy after joining the Italian Communist Party in 1952. Most of Nono's compositions carry a left-wing political message, focusing on themes such as class struggle and anti-imperialism. Nono saw no difference between art and politics, going as far as to perceive music as only a means to an end for the transmission of his revolutionary messages³. However, some of Nono's works go beyond the level of strict political messages and can provide the listener with powerful insights into philosophy and culture, as perceived by Nono⁴.

The work discussed in this paper, "Il canto sospeso", is a perfect example of such a piece that carries meaning on multiple levels. Although it can be viewed as simply an anti-war "song", or just a serialist composition, in reality "Il canto sospeso" tells the story of how society in the post-war era would come to view the motifs of classical literature, especially the motifs of *death* and most of all *sacrifice*.

2. Overview of the Work

"Il canto sospeso" is a vocal-symphonic composition written by Luigi Nono between 1954 and 1956, which premiered on October 24, 1956, in Cologne, under the baton of composer and conductor Hermann Scherchen. The piece is scored for symphony orchestra, choir and three soloists: soprano, alto and tenor. The title of the piece, which can be translated into English as "song suspended" or "song interrupted", is inspired by the Italian translation of the poem "If we die" by the American communist activist Ethel Rosenberg, where the phrase "song unsung" was translated into Italian as "canto sospeso". The text of the work is based on a series of last letters of anti-fascist partisans in Europe during the Second World War⁵.

Luigi Nono and other musicologists who have analyzed the work have referred to it as a "modern cantata". Although in terms of sound material and compositional style the work is by no means neoclassical, its form is nevertheless reminiscent of a cantata of the Baroque period. The work consists of 9 movements each with a different orchestral texture. There are pure instrumental movements such as 1, 4 and 8, pure chorale movements such as 2, accompanied choir movements such as 6 and 9, and accompanied solo voice movements such as 3, 5 and seven.

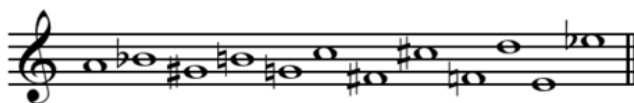
³ Velasco-Pufleau, Luis. *On Luigi Nono's Political Thought: Emancipation Struggles, Socialist Hegemony and the Ethic Behind the Composition of Für Paul Dessau*. University of Michigan, 2018.

⁴ Impett, Jonathan. *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought*. Routledge, 2019.

⁵ MacCallum, Emily. *The Impact of Listening to Luigi Nono's Il Canto Sospeso*. University of Toronto, 2019.

The piece is composed in the integral serialist style. For this, Nono uses a symmetrical series (tone row) containing iterations of all-interval series, also called a wedge series. This is made up of the sounds A, B \flat , G \sharp , B, G, C, F \sharp , C \sharp , F, D, E, E \flat . This series forms a mode with the elements: {9, 10, 10, 8, 11, 7, 0, 6, 1, 5, 2, 4, 3} and with the structure: [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11].

E.g. 1



Tone row in "Il canto sospeso"

Being a symmetrical series, it can be divided into two chromatic hexachords, one ascending and one descending, both based on the first sound. Throughout the work, Nono employs all the variation procedures of the series, such as inversion, retrograde, retrograde-inversion, or fragmentation of the series into tetrachords, pentachords, or hexachords. The series is rarely deployed in its original complete form, with most sections of the work using permutations of the series as a basis⁶.

The dynamics are also serial, each section utilizing permutations of the dynamic series:

E.g. 2

<i>ppp</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>mp</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>ppp</i>	<i>ppp<f</i>	<i>f>ppp</i>	<i>ppp<mf</i>	<i>mf>ppp</i>	<i>p<f</i>	<i>f>p</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

Dynamics series in "Il canto sospeso"

The note values are also serialized, but the form of the series of durations changes from section to section, with some sections dividing the instrumental vocal ensemble into several groups, each with its own series of durations. Luigi Nono also employs the technique of *klangfarbenmelodie*, or timbral serialism, in this composition, the melodic series being divided among several instruments, often resulting in a very airy orchestral texture. This serialization is also affected by the division of the ensemble into several voices, creating dense orchestral textures in the middle of the work, but still keeping the timbral series in each orchestral group.

⁶ Bailey, Kathryn. "'Work in Progress': Analyzing Nono's 'Il Canto Sospeso.'" *Music Analysis*, vol. 11, no. 2/3, 1992, pp. 279–334. doi: 10.2307/854029.

Although Nono enjoyed great success following the publication of the work, and was praised by the publications of the time, his critics were in particular Theodor Adorno and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Both judged negatively the association of the text with the serial style of composition, Adorno likening the structural strictness of integral serialism to that of totalitarian ideologies, and Stockhausen believing that the writing of the work did not enhance the text and thus did not valorize the legacy of those cited either. Also, he argued further that Nono treats the text as a series of sounds rather than a libretto.

At first glance, “Il canto sospeso” may appear to be a highly fragmented work, a kind of 'suite of songs' with little connection between them, signifying a simple homage to the fighters of the anti-fascist resistance in Europe. But such a view risks losing sight of the subtext of the work. In order to reveal its subtext, the work must be seen as a whole, because it is not just a series of last words from one end to the other, but the very transfiguration of the motif of sacrifice in modern art.

3. Text Analysis and the Formation of Narrative Sections

As with most programmatic music, the text represents the main point of emphasis and in the case of “Il canto sospeso”, the text is the main element responsible for carrying the ideological message of the piece. The text of “Il canto sospeso” is based upon a book published by the Italian author and publisher Giulio Einaudi in 1954 called “*Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza europea*”⁷. The book was originally published in Italian and the text used by Nono in the piece was originally also in Italian, however in the piece’s premiere in Cologne, the texts were translated in German.

To serve as the piece’s libretto, Nono selected fragments from ten letters, written by one member of the Bulgarian anti-fascist resistance, named Anton Popov; three members of the Greek anti-fascist resistance, named: Andreas Likourinous, Elefthérios Kiossès, and Konstantinos Sirbas; two members of the Ukrainian resistance, named: Ljubka Schewtzowa and Irina Malozon; one member of the Italian resistance, named: Eusebio Giambone; and three Jewish Holocaust victims named: Esther Srul; Elli Voigt and Chaim. At first glance, Nono’s usage of these fragments of text might seem inconsistent, as some movements of the piece use the text of only one letter, such is the case of the second movement, while other movements use the text of multiple letters, such as the case of the 9th, where three letters are used. However, this

⁷ Einaudi, Giulio, *Letters from Those Condemned to Death of the European Resistance*, Einaudi, 2017.

strange usage is clearly intentional, because the fragments of text are grouped according to their themes and meanings, not necessarily according to their authors. The amount of text used from every letter might also appear inconsistent, because while none of the letters are fully presented, Nono uses more lines from some of the letters than he does from others, but the amount of text that is used from every letter is chosen according to its meaning as well. Nono tries to create a uniform libretto, a universal letter based upon all the letters written, a letter, not necessarily about death, but more about the meaning of sacrifice.

Nono manages to achieve this uniformity by treating the different letters as paragraphs and phrases of an overarching text which can be viewed as a multifaceted presentation of the narrative trope of a personal sacrifice. Also, the fragments of text that Nono chooses to have a stronger poetic lyrical content, rather than a narrative one. All the lines of text have as a central element the death of the narrator, but they present different views of *death* and *sacrifice* as concepts, borrowing from different philosophical and literary views of these subjects. Thus, the text can be divided into 4 narrative sections, superimposed over the piece's musical movements.

The first lines of text appear in the second movement, where the choir sings the words from the letter of the Bulgarian Anton Popov that say: *"I die for a world that will shine with light of such strength and beauty that my sacrifice is nothing. For that world millions of men have died on the barricades and in war. I die for justice. Our ideas will triumph"*. Then, in the third movement, we are presented with the words of the three Greek fighters, sang by a trio of voices: soprano, alto and tenor. Their words are as follows: *"...they are taking me to Kesariani for execution together with seven others. I die for liberty and country..."*; *"...today they will shoot us. We die as men for our country. Be worthy of us..."* and *"...they will hang me in the square because I am a patriot. Your son goes without hearing the bells of freedom..."*. These two movements can be seen as a narrative chapter, in all three fragments of text chosen so far, the motif of *sacrifice* is represented as heroic, as being a necessary evil for a greater good, a death for an idea that is bigger than the person being sacrificed, an idea such as freedom, country, beauty, etc. In this section, the motive of sacrifice is still in its original form that can be found in classical literature, a sacrifice of the hero. This section can be referred to as the **literary section**.

The second narrative section begins with the 5th movement, after an orchestral intermezzo. It is in this section that the libretto takes a darker turn in the form of a tenor aria that uses the text from a letter of a young Jewish boy of only 14 years of age named Chaim, who was killed in the Pustkow concentration camp. His words are: *"...If the heavens were paper and all the seas of the world were ink, I could not describe my sufferings and all that I see around me. I say goodbye to all and weep..."*. This harrowing narration continues into the next movement, movement 6a, where the choir sings the words of a Jewish woman

named Esther Srul, murdered in a synagogue in the Ukrainian town of Kowel. Her words, found on a letter under the floorboards of the synagogue are as follows: “... *the doors open. There are our murderers. Dressed in black. They chase us from the synagogue*”. These texts represent a second narrative chapter, where death is no longer presented as a heroic sacrifice, but as an intense wave of pain and suffering, of fear and horror. Death is inescapable and it is in no way heroic, all the great ideals of the first narrative section are gone and all that is left is terror and agony. This section represents the narrative apex of the piece, where death and sacrifice, as narrative tropes, complete a process of rationalization and are stripped of all their previous historical, philosophical and cultural symbolism and thus *sacrifice* becomes only *death*. This section can be referred to as the **realist section**.

The third narrative section that begins in the second half of the 6th movement, movement 6b, comes as a strong thematic contrast to the second section. The female voices of the choir sing another phrase of the same letter as the one used in movement 6a, but the new phrase comes with a complete shift in tone and character. The words say: “*How hard it is to say goodbye for ever to such a good life!*”. Unlike the previous sections, there is no break between the movements 6b and 7 and so the text seems continuous as well. Movement 7 represents a soprano aria that sings the words of the Ukrainian resistance fighter Ljubka Schewtzowa. Her words are as follows: “...*goodbye, Mother, your daughter Ljubka goes into the damp earth*”. This narrative section is one of transition, where *death* and *sacrifice* begin their transfiguration, from the rationalist view of pain and suffering presented in the second section, to a more profound personal drama, that resonates at a human level. This section can be referred to as the **transitional section**.

The fourth and final narrative section is the one that coincides with the 9th and final movement of the piece. This is another a cappella choir movement, just like the second and it presents the words of the Italian resistance fighter Eusebio Giambone and of the Jewish German resistance fighter Elli Voigt. Their words are as follows: “... *I have no fear of death (...) I shall be calm and collected in front of the firing squad. Are they as tranquil as those whom they have condemned?*” and “... *I go with faith in a better life for you ...*”. This fourth narrative section represents the completion of the transfiguration of the previous narrative motifs. With this section, *death* becomes *sacrifice* again, by gaining a new meaning, a human meaning. It is no longer a death for grandiose ideals, but a death for someone else to have a better life. This section can be referred to as the **compassion section**.

The transformational perspective on the concepts of *death* and *sacrifice* is particularly fascinating, especially in how these two notions intertwine to shape the atmosphere following World War II. This fusion of death and sacrifice became central to the rebuilding of identities and cultures in post-war Europe.

These two concepts have been explored throughout the history of art, reflecting the evolving understanding of human suffering, devotion, and the pursuit of a better world⁸.

4. The Connection Between the Text and the Music

Although serialist compositions can very rarely be described as descriptive, preferring abstract constructs to clear musical images, in the case of “*Il canto sospeso*” the music manages to work together with the narrative, striking the perfect balance between abstract and descriptive while also providing a new perspective on the message. Each of the piece’s movements treat the connection between music and text in a different manner.

Movement 1 represents an instrumental introduction into the piece’s atmosphere. In this section, Nono uses a very light orchestral texture, an orchestral *lontano* of sorts with long musical breaks in between the iterations of the series.

For the orchestration, Nono uses the technique of *klangfarbenmelodie*; instruments never play at the same time, their timbre being one of the serialized parameters. However, due to the short note durations and due to how quickly instruments follow one another, it creates an illusion of polyphony. This technique is used in multiple movements within the piece. This helps to create a sense of aimlessness, of a lack of clear musical direction. Musical time slows down and the listeners are left in a state of wandering, as they are about to witness the unfolding narrative.

Movement 2 is the first movement with text, reading from the letter of the Bulgarian Anton Popov. It is a purely vocal movement as the choir sings without any orchestral accompaniment. The mixed choir, composed of four voices: soprano, alto, tenor and bass, has each voice divided into two or three, thus creating a choir of 8, or even 10 voices. The *klangfarbenmelodie* returns in vocal form, as the timbre of the voices is serialized, however this section presents a very strong heterophonic aspect as well, sometimes multiple voices beginning a phrase on the same beat but singing with a slightly different rhythm.

Movement 3 features three solo voices (soprano, alto and tenor), integrated into the orchestra and used more as instruments than soloists, orchestration technique reminiscent of Gustav Mahler’s later symphonies; however, in this piece the serialist technique is still preserved. The section maintains the same orchestral texture as the previous two, and the three voices sing fragments from the letters of the three members of the Greek resistance.

⁸ Hughes, Derek, *Culture and Sacrifice*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Movement 4 represents the second purely instrumental movement, and it is similar in its sound and texture to the first, with only the addition of percussion instruments, such as the xylophone.

Movement 5 represents the beginning of the second narrative section and can be considered an emotional apex of the piece. The section represents an aria of the tenor soloist, who sings words from the letter of the young Holocaust victim Chaim. The orchestral part maintains the timbral serialism and texture of the previous section, but it is much quieter from a dynamic point of view, amplifying the tragic character.

Movement 6 is usually divided in two sections, due to its contrast of character. Movement 6a, beginning directly after movement 5, is in complete dynamic and textural contrast to the previous movements, the choir sings in fortissimo, accompanied by orchestral blasts of brass and timpani. In this movement the motif of death is reduced to its most visceral expression, as the choir sings the words of the holocaust victim Esther Srul.

In contrast, movement 6b almost seems as if it brings the piece to a standstill, through a subito piano of both the voices and orchestra. Almost like an echo, the voices sing a phrase from the same letter as before, the phrase: *"How hard it is to say goodbye for ever to such a good life!"*, with which the third narrative section begins.

Movement 7 represents a continuation of movement 6b, the orchestral texture and dynamics remain the same, as they do for the female voices of the choir. They all accompany a solo soprano that sings the words of the Ukrainian resistance fighter Ljubka Schewtzowa. As it was the case with the tenor aria in movement 5, the soloist uses a classical bel canto vocal technique, rather than the more modern sprechstimme.

Movement 8 is the third and final instrumental movement that brings back the dense texture and militaristic character of the 6th movement, to represent in a way a new wave of fear, brought by death, as the motif of sacrifice has not reached its transfigured form yet.

Movement 9, the finale of the piece is an a cappella choral movement, similar to the second, with only a slight instrumental accompaniment from the timpani. This provides a rather subdued symphonic conclusion, especially following a much louder section 8, thus harkening back in a certain way to Tchaikovski and his 6th symphony, where the subdued finale brings a human element to the tragic theme. It is in this section that the motif of sacrifice gains its transfigured meaning, its human meaning, with the phrase: *"... I go with faith in a better life for you ..."*. By using just, the sound of the human voice, Nono amplifies the element of human connection, and thus the piece ends in a quiet diminuendo.

5. The meaning of “Il canto sospeso”

At first glance, the music might appear somewhat disconnected from the text, as its precise serialist structures seem to diminish the raw emotion of the words. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the serialist technique serves to highlight the limitations imposed by fear and the phenomena surrounding death and sacrifice. The use of dynamics, timbres, shifting simultaneities, sound rarefactions, and their accumulation effectively gives voice to the thematic transformation of the text, allowing it to gain a musical meaning. Nono does not aim to provide an introspective musical portrayal of the minds of those who wrote the letters, but rather one of the minds of the witnesses. The emotions conveyed through the piece—restlessness, fear, and even anger—reflect those of the observer, not the executed, who seem to come to terms with their impending death. The suspended song is sung not by the ones who die, but by the ones who remain.

This work does not aim to present a programmatic portrayal; however, it does feature musical elements that can be interpreted as descriptive, adapted to the musical language of the 20th century. As an example, the heterophony of the voices evokes the sound of a funeral lament, in which all mourners grieve the same death, yet express their sorrow in distinct and individual ways. The timpani in the final section reinforces the slow, solemn rhythm of a funeral procession, further immersing the listener in the ceremonial atmosphere. As we bear witness to this funeral, we are invited to engage with the concept of sacrifice on a deeply personal, human level. By shifting away from a grand historical perspective, we can connect emotionally with the theme, ultimately respecting the significance of sacrifice. In line with Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran's assertion about modern music—that it represents "the secularization of the transcendent in a human drama"⁹—this piece can be understood as a reflection of this idea. Consequently, its overarching theme becomes the transfiguration of sacrifice within the framework of our own psychology.

6. Conclusion

In his essay "*Culture, Critique, and Society*"¹⁰, the German philosopher Theodor Adorno asserted that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism," arguing that such an immense crime against humanity leaves no space for art in the traditional sense. From this perspective, any cultural archetype might

⁹ Cioran, Aurel. *Cioran și muzică (Cioran and Music)*. Humanitas Press, 2016.

¹⁰ Adorno, Theodor, *Prisms*. The MIT Press, 1983, p. 34.

appear obsolete in the modern era. However, Luigi Nono succeeds in "*writing poetry after Auschwitz*" by transfiguring the meaning of a poetic motif and aligning it with a modern musical language. His adoption of serial techniques contrasts with both classical and romantic musical traditions, and it stands in direct opposition to the music used by totalitarian regimes of the 20th century for propaganda purposes. The use of serialism serves to underscore the themes of death and sacrifice, as these concepts are brought to life through the composer's innovative approach, presenting a modern representation of sacrifice. A post-Romantic or neoclassical composition centered on the same subject would likely have struggled to convey the message as powerfully as it would have been limited by the inherent sentimentality of those styles.

As this analysis has demonstrated, Nono's work can be interpreted on multiple levels, with its central theme offering a profound exploration of human psychology. This theme remains strikingly relevant today, as many cultural archetypes are either undergoing transformation or are in the process of being redefined. Understanding the transfiguration of these archetypes is crucial for comprehending humanity's trajectory moving forward, from a literary perspective to a compassion one, learning from reality and suffering.

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