

## MEANING AS A SOUND – PARAMETER IN LUIGI NONO’S WORK: A DIALECTICS OF ‘PHONETIC – SEMANTIC STRUCTURE’

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**SUMMARY.** In their text-music relationship, Luigi Nono’s compositions, as early as the late 1950s, integrate words as a full-fledged sound parameter, in their capacity as sounds laden with sense and according to a gradual variety from the pure phoneme to the pure moneme to ambivalent formants. In the light of the theory developed by the Venetian composer in his 1960 lecture ‘Text-Music-Singing’, and of some writings by Jacques Derrida with which this paper comes in resonance, the present study attempts to demonstrate the particular status of words in Luigi Nono’s vocal music, and the precise use of their senses as a sound parameter in itself, through the analysis of the *Cori di Didone* and the *Fabbrica illuminata*.

**Keywords:** Luigi Nono; Cori di Didone; Fabbrica illuminata

### Introduction (Meaning of sound / sound of sense)

Among its many lineaments, one of the (most) outstanding features of Luigi Nono’s music is his consideration that sense is a full-fledged sound-parameter.

When in some of his works for magnetic tape Nono summons, for instance, the sounds of a factory (as he did for *Fabbrica illuminata*) or a street protest in the sixties (as he did for *Non consumiamo Marx*) there lies in his work the will or the hope of getting hold of the emotion, the tension, and the meaning contained in these sound-objects which, then, become some material to work with in this specific context : sounds, laden with sense.

What must be understood in Nono’s approach, is that it’s not about using these sounds for a simple sound illustration that would be the obelus –*de facto* outside the musical material *per se*– of a message, here a political

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one, and would, only *indirectly*, commit his music: it is really a matter of using some full-fledged musical material whose peculiarity lies in the meaning and the emotion it contains (as well as in its poetical potential<sup>2</sup>).

So, in addition to such usual sound parameters as not only pitch and duration, but also, especially for Nono, timbre, dynamics, the acoustic space, later the mobility of sounds, there exists a further sound parameter which the Venetian composer comes to extort from the words, sometimes deriving from the political scene, but mostly from the poetry he uses in his works : this sound parameter is that of sense, or what he calls 'the phonetic-semantic structure of his compositional material'.

The topic I would like to broach in the following pages is the particular conception of the word-music connection in Luigi Nono's vocal work, first by introducing a 1960 text and commenting upon it; in this article the Venetian composer expounds his theoretical view of the *Text-Music-Singing*<sup>3</sup> relationship. I will then briefly put it in perspective with the reflections of Jacques Derrida on the same issue, previous to determining what, in concrete terms, the Nonian conception of the text-singing relationship is all about, by delving more particularly into one of the earliest compositions wherefrom Nono turned his theory into experiments, i.e. the *Cori di Didone* (1958), and a special passage of *La Fabbrica illuminata* (1964).

## **Text-Music-Singing**

### **A. A presentation and summary of the text**

'Text-Music-Singing' is a text in which Luigi Nono restores the stages of the historical evolution of the relation between text and music, from the Renaissance to his own experience, which integrates this history.

The text, which is divided into two great parts, first unfolds the process of this evolution<sup>4</sup>, before studying in greater detail the issue of how 'the relationship between the phonetic material and the semantic contents'<sup>5</sup> is integrated *within the composition*. Through the analysis of several of his own

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the two works quoted here, the sense and the emotion are linked to a political context into which Nono seeks to fit, to *commit* his music, guided by his sincere, strong beliefs as a musician-activist; but something else is at stake for him: drawing from these slogans or recorded testimonies a musical as well as poetical substance, which he aims at integrating as a compositional material.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nono, Luigi. *Écrits*. Ed. Bourgois, Paris, 1993, pp. 166-188.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-173.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

vocal works, Nono intends to demonstrate 'the immediate interaction between the meaning of the text and the musical composition'<sup>6</sup>. By more precisely explaining how he managed to merge for *La terra e la compagna* – a work he had written three years before – two distinct poems by Cesare Pavese (*Terra rossa terra nera* and *Tu sei come una terra*<sup>7</sup>), he shows how, within his composition, the issue, connected to the way of integrating the word to the weave of sounds, is *both* musical *and* literary, each operating in a relationship of mutual synergy.<sup>8</sup>

Nono then embarks on an exercise of re-reading several Renaissance and baroque works<sup>9</sup> in the light of the idea that there has existed, throughout the history of the relationship between text and music, a hunch that a *musical* emancipation of poetry is possible. It is a trend he specifically observes in the way some composers of the past have sought to untie the vowels of the words they make up, so as to contribute to the understanding of the text or even to reinforce it.

This is precisely what, in the last paragraphs, brings him to refer to his *Canto sospeso*, as a reminder that, in this work dated 1956, 'the principle of merging the musical and the semantic contents of the sung word makes us realize the new division in syllables [...] as well as the categorization of the sound-units in speech into vowels and consonants'.<sup>10</sup>

The lecture then closes with listening to the *Cori di Didone*, about which Nono explains that, with reference to the new technique he develops therein, 'the principle of composition of the text, such as it is actualized up to the distribution into vowels and consonants, has not removed its meaning from the text, but has musically expressed the latter as a phonetic-semantic structure'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> 'Red earth dark earth' and 'You are like an earth'. In Pavese, Cesare. *Travailler fatigue* [Hard Labour, 1936], *La mort viendra et elle aura tes yeux* [Death Will Come and Have your Eyes, 1951]. Ed. Gallimard, col. « Poésie », Paris, 1979, pp. 189-191.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nono, Luigi. *Op. cit.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>9</sup> In the following order, Bach's *Mass in B minor*, Mozart's *Requiem*, the motet *O magnum mysterium* by Gabrieli and the 20<sup>th</sup> *Madrigal* in Gesualdo's *Madrigali, Libro V*.

<sup>10</sup> This way, he challenges the reductive vision, even the clearly erroneous interpretation given by Stockhausen in one of his analyses. Cf. Stockhausen, Karlheinz. 'Sprache und Musik'. In *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik*, 1, 1958, pp. 66-67, from which Nono quotes quite a long passage; in this article Stockhausen blames him for having, in the *Canto sospeso*, 'emptied some precise parts of the text [from letters of partisans sentenced to death] of their diverse meanings.' Cf. Nono, Luigi. *Op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

### ***B. Issues and problems raised by Nono's text***

Before analyzing the *Cori di Didone*, let us consider for a moment this complex, densely written text by Nono, the issues and problems it raises. First comes, in the opening paragraph, a long quotation by Schoenberg, in which the Viennese composer sustains the thesis that music could possibly, *by its own medium*, not only 'do justice' to the poem but also express its content more deeply than its words on their own would do – a position that is not accepted by Nono<sup>12</sup>. While praising Schoenberg's decisive contribution in the evolution of the text-music relationship, Nono does not believe it is possible 'when it comes to grasping and understanding some music with text, to do without the intelligibility of the text itself, both from the phonetic and semantic standpoints', for 'speech takes on characteristics and proper features which cannot under any circumstances be discarded and, on the contrary, significantly contribute to enriching the musical structure.'<sup>13</sup>

These characteristics and properties of words lie in their *semantic* nature; therefore, it is by first conveying its *sense* to the composition (in addition to its acoustic peculiarities) that the material derived from the words – what Nono calls the 'phonetic material' – enriches this composition.<sup>14</sup> So much for the first issue.

As for the second issue, which derives from the first, it lies in the decision to regard the word as a component, among others, of the musical grammar, i.e. as a full-fledged element of the composition, and not as an

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<sup>12</sup> Thus, Schoenberg explains, about Schubert's *Lieder* whose accompanying texts he had never read: 'I realized that I was none the wiser after reading them, that they had not suggested the slightest change in the notion I had formed beforehand of the way to interpret them. Much to the contrary, I had the feeling that, without knowing the poem, I had gone deeper and deeper into the true content of the music than if I had stuck to the simple ideas suggested by the words.' Cf. Schoenberg, Arnold. « Das Verhältnis zum Text ». In *Der blaue Reiter*, edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, Munich, 1912, p. 30 *sqq.*; resumed in *Style and Idea*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1950, p. 144; translated into French under the title 'Des rapports entre la musique et le texte'. In *Le style et l'idée*. Ed. Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 1977, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> Nono, Luigi. *Op. cit.*, p. 171. It is to be specified here that Nono and Stravinsky are not of the same mind either; for the latter, musique is, by its very essence, 'unable to express anything whatsoever: a feeling, an attitude, a state of consciousness, a natural phenomenon, etc. ». Cf. Stravinsky, Igor. *Chroniques de ma vie*. Ed. Denoël, Paris, 1935, pp. 63-64.

<sup>14</sup> As emphasized by Nono in his analysis of Giovanni Gabrieli's motet *O magnum mysterium*, 'The multiple overlays of words and the combinations of syllables, in this example from the *alleluia*, create a kind of phonetic and acoustic field, in which the initial semantic character of the words widens into the musical semantic character all the way through the rich phonetic constellations of the material. The phonetic material composed this way makes an active contribution to the semanticity of the whole composition.' Nono, Luigi. « Texte-Musique-chant ». In *Écrits*. Ed. Contrechamps, Genève, 2007, p. 94.

attachment ; and this, both for what concerns its physical-acoustic structure –the sounds that make up the word (what linguists call the phoneme)– and for what concerns its strictly semantic dimension (the moneme). What distinguishes Nono's standpoint lies above all in the idea of a phonetic-semantic pervasion of the word and the sound (in the context of a musical composition): the only strictly musical part of the work is accordingly unable to carry everything in itself.

Besides, the main thrust of Nono's lecture is his assertion that the semantic element is contained in the very depths of the phonetic structure of the word, and that, as a result, each element in this word, what Nono calls the 'sound units', is sort of *laden* with the sense of the word it contributes to making. This is where we reach the third issue: the possibility for any sound *element* derived from the phonetic structure of a word to contain sense. In other words, for Nono, the link between *phōnē* (φωνή) and expression exceeds the word taken in its entirety to be deposited in the very depths, i.e. in each of its constituent fibres and in its whole weave, based on the principle that such a phonetic structure, however minute it may be, can still contain sense.

To support his point, Nono, in his lecture, refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, arguing with him that, in his words, 'no property or sensation is so bare that it cannot hold any meaning of any sort.'<sup>15</sup>

Such a standpoint has numerous consequences. In the first place, by using words from a poetic text, or *simple elements* from these words, the composer deals with a particular sonic material which is more than a simple sound; it becomes accordingly impossible to integrate the elements of a text as a pure meaningless sound, even though they could be reduced to a few vowels or consonants. Besides, music will not be able to really express the sense in a text without precisely resorting to these words, and this, in a consistent musical relationship, even if it means re-considering the order of these words and re-handling the acoustic structure.

Another outcome of Nono's concept of the text-music-singing relationship is not only of an aesthetic order, but linguistic too. Indeed, if the 'sound units' contained in the words cannot be musically handled without taking into consideration the sense they are laden with, the composer will, however, be in a position to have an impact on the sense of the words, and musically re-compose a poem, not only through the textual editing he engages in, but also through the interaction between the words and the musical work itself. Thus, in the relationship he establishes between his music and the text he has chosen, the composer too builds sense, i.e. literary sense, and, doing so, opens the way to a new kind of expression, a 'multi-dimensional rhetorical, phonetic, and declamatory expression'<sup>16</sup>, in other words an unprecedented

<sup>15</sup> Nono, Luigi. *Écrits*. Ed. Bourgois, 1993, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

linguistic-literary world. Accordingly, as Nono writes, 'a whole world made up of new possibilities of combining the phonetic and semantic elements opens up for language, in musical composition.'<sup>17</sup>

**'Semanticity' as transmitted by voice and by the 'phonetic structure' of words: sense and phōnē (φωνή) with Derrida**

Before presenting, through the example of the *Cori di Didone*, what effect Nono's theory had over his compositions, I would like to focus for a short time on the idea of a sense that would be inherent in phoneme itself, or even in only one element of it (in that following the third thrust previously exposed), by mentioning what Jacques Derrida said about it in *La voix et le phénomène* [*Speech and Phenomena*]. In that book dated 1967, the philosopher states there exists, below the word, 'an essential link between expression and phōnē [φωνή]'.

Here is what he also says:

'Between the phonic element (*phonic* in the phenomenological sense and not in the sense of intra-mundane resonance) and the expressiveness, i.e. the logical essence of a signifier that is *animated* with, as an end-in-view, the ideal presence of a *Bedeutung* [meaning] (itself referred to an object), the idea is that there is a necessary bond.'<sup>18</sup>

For Derrida, the 'phōnē (φωνή)' –in other words, 'the phonic element of the voice'– is 'immediately present in the expression of the sense'. Now, this passage from Derrida's text sounds as an appropriate echo of Nono's when it seemed to him that, within a word, parting its sonic form from its sense was not an option.<sup>19</sup> Mind you, it's not for Derrida –and here again the philosopher and the composer are of the same mind– a question of the sole material dimension of the voice, of its merely physical being-in-the-world, in short what Derrida calls 'the body of the voice', the question is that of the bond between this acoustic materiality and the sense it accompanies, or rather contains *as a sound entity*. Thus, about the phōnē (φωνή) –as a voice carrying a logos, therefore a voice that expresses itself– Derrida evokes a 'spiritual flesh'<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *La voix et le phénomène*. Ed. Quadrige/PUF, 1967, repr. 2003, Paris, p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Luigi Nono, « Texte-Musique-chant ». In *Écrits*. Ed. Contrechamps, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> 'Comme chair spirituelle, elle [la phōnē (φωνή)] ne cesse de s'entendre, même en-dehors du monde. [As a spiritual flesh, it (the phōnē [φωνή]) continues to speak and be present to itself –to hear itself– in the absence of the world.]' Derrida, Jacques. *Op. cit.* [Engl. transl. by David B. ALLISON, 1972.]

The 'spiritual flesh' specific to the *phōnē* (φωνή) is indeed the presence of sense in the voice itself, what Derrida also names the transcendence of the voice, paradoxically contained in its very appearance.<sup>21</sup>

So the voice is everything that, while distinguishing itself from the concept to which speech connects it at the moment it utters it, nevertheless contains sense; its presence in the world, although it is material, then exceeds its sheer materiality. It is what Derrida points to with his notion of 'apparent transcendence' and it is what gives the voice a particular ontological status, as a well as a paradoxical presence in the world whose effect is that it fades away as a 'phenomenological body' with the very moment it produces the sense it expresses.<sup>22</sup>

The words set to music by Nono in his vocal compositions work on the same premise: despite the diffractions that the interplay of musical rhetorics will have imposed on their phonetic-semantic structure, they tend to keep their semantic properties all the better since they are borne by the voices that sing them, *understand* them and strive for their transmission.

## ***Cori di Didone***

### ***A. Introducing the work***

With the aim of observing the effects of Nono's theory on the compositional level, let us consider now the *Cori di Didone*, one of the first works in which he applied his innovating conception of the text-music-singing relationship.

The *Cori di Didone* are a work for voice and percussions written in 1958, based on poems taken from *La Terra Promessa* [*The Promised Land*] by

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<sup>21</sup> 'Let us try, then, to question the phenomenological value of the voice, its transcendent dignity with regard to every other signifying substance. We think that this transcendence is only apparent. But this "appearance" is the very essence of consciousness and of its history [...]. It can therefore not be called "appearance" or be named within the sphere of metaphysical conceptuality. One cannot attempt to deconstruct this transcendence without descending, gropingly across the inherited concepts, toward the unnamable.' *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> 'The "apparent transcendence" of the voice thus results from the fact that the signified, which is always ideal by essence, the "expressed" *Bedeutung* [meaning], is immediately present in the act of expression. This immediate presence results from the fact that the phenomenological "body" [of the signifier] seems to fade away at the very moment it is produced; it seems already to belong to the element of ideality. It phenomenologically reduces itself, transforming the worldly opacity of its body into pure diaphaneity. This effacement of the sensible body and of its exteriority is *for consciousness* the very form of the immediate presence of the signified.' *Ibid.*

Giuseppe Ungaretti, within which Nono's favorite poetic *topoi* are concentrated: the sea, water and its echoes, the sky, the stars ('constellation', cf. [4]), silence or anything which comes close to it ('*sussurio*' [whisper] [1] ; '*tutto tace*' [everything is silent] [2] ; '*muta*' [dumb] [3] ; '*sussura*' [whisper] –cf. Finale).

Regarding the compositional technique, the method is that of twelve-note composition. Right from the first bars, the dodecaphony expands relatively to space: the piece departs from one note, then the chorus densifies by gradually adding the pitches nearby, the intervals getting then wider and wider, somehow in the style of the *Allen Intervallen Reihe* used by Alban Berg in his *Lyric Suite*.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, as far as the orchestration is concerned, the mixed choir (8 altos, 8 tenor voices, 8 basses) is accompanied by six percussionists. It is worth noticing here that Nono often plays on the density of his choir, varying the distribution of the voices of the four groups, over a combinatory play cutting through the whole mass of the voices combined in a variety of ways that sometimes differ from one bar to another. So, with Nono, through such variations of the vertical distribution of voices, an elaboration of the density of the choral fabric adds up to the other parameters, whether they be compositional or serial.

## ***B. What is the musical treatment of the text?***

### **1. Spatialisation**

As the work unfolds, an important work in voice-spatialization is noticeable, then, through this work, an entire spatialization of the text.

The words, their syllables and often their vowels only –sometimes even the mere consonants (cf. example 3 hereafter)– are distributed from one voice to another, according to an important ambitus, and outside like inside each vocal group. This is what can be visually followed on the score according to a kind of 'marked route' indicated by dot lines which link the various syllables together and whose technique seems to consist in a kind of *Klangfarbenmelodie* of words and of their formants. (E.g. 1)

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<sup>23</sup> To put it simply, the first bars of the piece are organized from the overlay of two opposite chromatic movements: the first being C, C sharp, D, D sharp, [E, F, F sharp], while the second is C, B, B flat, [A, A flat, G] (clustered). Let us specify here that the twelve-tone writing used for *Cori di Didone* is by no means systematic (for instance, p. 20, the serial is made up of eleven notes only, for 'nella tenebra, muta', a verse in which B flat is missing).



E.g. 1

Handwritten musical score for Luigi Nono's *Cori di Didone*, bars 141-144. The score is written for a mixed choir with parts for Soprano (Soprano), Alto (Alto), Tenor (Tenor), and Bass (Bass). The lyrics are "FU GOLFO CONSTELLATO, O". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "mf" and "ppp". There are also handwritten annotations and markings above the notes, including "A", "O", "LLA", "TO", "STE", "FU", and "CON".

Luigi Nono, *Cori di Didone*, [4] bars 141-144 (a detailed excerpt).<sup>24</sup>

What can also be observed is a spatialization of vowels through the splitting the choir sometimes undergoes. Thus, in the fifth part of the work, with its initial unison on the vowel 'a', the collapse of the sound block following this unison does not only lead to a space-based diffraction-pattern of the same vowel, but to a time-based one too, respectively according to the various heights used and also to the play on the lengths and series of consecutive notes. (E.g. 2)

<sup>24</sup> Nono, Luigi. *Cori di Didone* (1958), for mixed choir and percussions. Ed. Ars Viva AV 54, p. 28.

## E.g. 2

Luigi Nono, *Cori di Didone*, [5] bars 168-171 (a detailed excerpt).<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Sound-densifying and intensifying the text

In addition to his spatialization work, Nono focuses on sonically densifying and intensifying the words and vowels he uses.

First, as could be seen with the beginning of the 5th part of the work (bars 168 *sqq.*), having the vowel 'a' sung on the same note by the whole choir, he imparts to the vowel immediate thickness.

With the collapse of the sound block that follows, the same vowel assumes a new dimension not only in terms of density, but of intensity too, with not only the change, but also the splitting of the nuances with which it is pronounced. (Indeed Nono uses simultaneously, within his chorus, the *mf*, *fff*, *ppp*, *p* nuances.) (Ex. 2)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

He also plays on the sonic density of one word by having it sung by several non-simultaneous voices that do not pronounce together the whole of the formants of this word, like, for instance, p. 8, with the words '*il sussurro*'. (E.g. 3)

**E.g. 3**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Luigi Nono's *Cori di Didone*, specifically bars 29-31. The score is written for 11 voices, divided into Tenors (1-8) and Basses (1-3). The notation is complex, featuring many rests, dynamic markings (p, mp, mf, f, pp, ppp), and phonetic annotations (IL, SU, SI, I, S+, S, L, U, Ri) that suggest the fragmented pronunciation of the word 'il sussurro'. Dashed lines connect notes across staves, indicating the flow of the word's formants through the ensemble.

**Luigi Nono, *Cori di Didone*, bars 29-31 (a detailed excerpt).<sup>26</sup>**

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

### **3. Interlocking the different constituents of the word (vertical integration of their horizontal order)**

Another characteristic of Nono's technique is an occurrence of various syllables, or simply vowels, from Ungaretti's words that are somehow mutually interlocked, due to being simultaneously sung by the various singers. This happens page 8 (bars 31-32), where the 'o' of '*sussurrio*' is pronounced at the same time as the 'Si' in '*Sino all'ebro*', by the bass voice; immediately afterwards, the 'e' and the 'o' of the word '*Ebro*' are similarly uttered together (by the bass voice again, bar 32).

### **4. The question of isolated vowels: drawing the line between those laden with sense and those that would be de-semanticized**

Finally, I would like to deal with the question of isolated vowels, distinguishing those that are laden with sense from those that are *a priori* not. If for instance one takes the example of bar 20 (p. 5 of the score) and the sentence *Lunare allora inavvertita nacque* [Mooned, then, [Echo] was born unnoticed], what can be seen is the way Nono atomizes the text, not only into syllables but also into isolated vowels ('ER', 'AV', 'i' and 'a' of '*inavvertita*', then 'u', 'a', 'e' of '*lunare*').

Apart from the new sound relief that focusing on these 'sound units' brings to the acoustics of the word, it is noticeable that –although they are slightly isolated, however connected they are to their word of origin– these syllables and vowels retain a little of their sense. (E.g. 4)

E.g. 4

Handwritten musical score for Luigi Nono's *Cori di Didone*, bars 17-20. The score consists of eight staves. Various notes and rests are circled in different colors (blue, purple, orange, green) and labeled with phonetic symbols like 'LUNA', 'U', 'CRE', 'AL', 'LO', 'RA', 'NAV', 'VER', 'TA', 'E', 'A'. Dynamic markings such as 'pp', 'p', 'mp', 'ppp' are present. At the bottom, the words 'LUNARE ALLORA INAVVERTITA NACQUE' are written.

Luigi Nono, *Cori di Didone*, bars 17-20.<sup>27</sup>

But if some of these 'sound units' are immediately and exclusively connectable to the words they have been detached from, some can be ambiguous. For instance, the 'a' and 'e' from the same passage can equally belong to '*nacque*' and '*(lu)nare*'. Therefore, it can be said that Nono here causes an acoustic and semantic mix-up of the words '*nacque*' and '*(lu)nare*' [*was born* and *moon*ed].

Whether ambiguous or clearly laden with a given sense, these vowels are in any event distinct from those that would apparently be de-semanticised. If we revert to the [letter] 'A' that opens the fifth part of the work (bars 168-169), we are indeed dealing with a vowel deprived of any sense, unlike the other phonemes of the same passage.

So it seems the question is to distinguish the vowels of this kind from those that are used elsewhere in the work, so as to very concretely and without falling into mysticism, understand Nono's theory, by telling the difference between the formants that stem from a word and those that do not.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

This way the de-semanticized [letter] 'A' adds up to the composer's sonic acoustic-semantic palette that could be presented as follows:

- . full-fledged monemes,
- . phonemes still laden with sense,
- . vowels or consonants in the ambiguous sense,
- . vowels or consonants deprived of sense and regarded as sheer sonic phenomena.

But we might as well, to conclude, and to grasp again the subtlety of the sound-sense relationship with Nono, consider a passage from *La Fabbrica illuminata*. (E.g. 5)

Thus, in the finale, one notices in the intermediate staff, an isolated vowel and an isolated consonant, [letters] 'A' and 'M':

E.g. 5



Luigi Nono, *La Fabbrica illuminata*, Final<sup>28</sup>.

If we were to enter them into one of the classes I have just listed, chances are we would be dealing with 'vowels or consonants devoid of sense and regarded as sheer sonic phenomena' since they do not seem to belong to any of the words surrounding them.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Nono, Luigi. *La Fabbrica illuminata* (1964), for soprano and magnetic tape. Ed. Ars viva/Ricordi 131242, p. 8.

But if we take into account an interaction between the melodic line and the words it carries, the matter is clearly more complex than it seems.

In the overall economy of this particular passage of the score, the [letters] 'A' and 'M' visibly rest upon a descending fourth: A E. Now, if we observe the first line in the same excerpt, a fourth-interval has already been used for the same letters, but in the ascending direction. Therefore, Nono has chosen to reverse [letters] 'A' and 'M' as he has done for his fourth-interval, thus creating a chiasmus between [letters] 'MA' ascending fourth, and 'AM' descending fourth —both fourths belonging at the same time to a more extensive mirror game, starting from a four-note motif (E-flat, A, B-flat, F/F, B-flat, A, E-flat), corresponding respectively to the words '*I mattini*' and '*le angosce a-m*', which this musical symmetry allows Nono to put in resonance with one another, which the poem cannot do.

It is clear here how subtle this writing is, which, rather than being inscribed in a process of de-conceptualization, or even de-semanticisation of the formants of the words set to music, or better, literally musicalized, stands on the watch between the two dimensions of the word (sound and sense) whose constitution it questions and exploits, according to a dialectic apprehension, placing the consonants and isolated vowels on the breach, on the borderline between two territories, between *concept* and *percept*, between sense and sound.

## Conclusion

Over the years that followed the composition of the *Cori di Didone*, while maintaining the technique displayed in this choral work, as theorized in *Text-Music-Singing*, Nono prolonged his work on modelizing this diffraction of words, those of street language as well as the more academic poetry that he associated with his music, regarding this 'soon-to-be-born music' as their necessary, inevitable fulfillment. The partial de-conceptualization, coextensive with the operation undergone by the literary text at the time of its musical exploitation, is however not tantamount to a loss in its power of expression.

As for the later compositions, this process will be brought to a climax without the truth dimension of the texts being totally glossed over. This way, even if the text from time to time becomes almost imperceptible to the listener it will remain, in the words of Nathalie Ruget-Langlois, 'a vibrant compendium of meaning' [*une condensation vibrante du sens*]<sup>29</sup>. Between the phoneme

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<sup>29</sup> Ruget-Langlois, Nathalie. 'Luigi Nono : la résonance sémantique à travers l'électronique, remarques sur *Quando Stanno morendo*' [Semantic resonance through electronics, notes on *Quando Stanno morendo*]. In *Musica Falsa* N°18, Spring/Summer 2003, pp. 68-69.

and the sense that is no longer immediately attached to it, a new relation is established and defined as a 'semantic resonance' by the musicologist –a phrase that brings into play the ambivalence of sound and meaning, and that the technical applications of the research in acoustics will make it possible to actualize.

Though consisting in a sonic reassignment of the words that are integrated into a score and will be resized in space and time by their musical treatment, Nono's compositional approach will however always attempt to contribute to revealing some hidden buried truth, obscured by common sense, and will renew, through this distancing gesture, the very expression of the words either sung or set to music. For it is also through the recovered materiality in music and by music that the word, so far a prisoner of a univocal concept and phrasing, can thrive and open up to the field of the possible.

*(Translation of Michel Gouverneur reviewed by the author)*

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