

Section III

Contemplating Memory through the Arts



Chapter 10

The Impact of Listening to Luigi Nono's // Canto Sospeso

The Impact of Listening to Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso*

Emily MacCallum is a versatile Canadian violinist, comfortable in both the classical canon and a variety of genres (including folk, Celtic, Scandinavian, and Québécois). She was a member of the North Shore Celtic Ensemble for seven years, and recorded three albums with the group. She has travelled on tour across Canada and Scotland and participated in both solo and chamber competitions. MacCallum studied music at the University of Victoria where she started working with composers and quickly became an avid interpreter and performer of new music. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Musicology at the University of Toronto.

Introduction

Luigi Nono composed *Il Canto Sospeso* in 1955/56 during the Cold War as a creative tool to respond to the 1950s' social and political environment of Italy and Germany. Both countries were emerging from the horrors of WWII and from fascist regimes. This was an environment of mistrust and rapid changes of allegiance and political power, as well as a musical world that was emerging from being controlled and regulated by militant forces (Thacker 2007, 1-30).¹ Young Venetian Luigi Nono became a member of the Communist party, along with many other Italian artists, and was living in Venice at the time. "Nono's experiences of the war, of

¹ Music in Germany was emerging from the process of denazification, which was approached in different ways by the Allied forces controlling regions of Germany. These differences were especially noticeable between East and West Germany. Musical control offices were established, and performances had to be approved by military authorities. A high priority was creating programs for anti-fascist music and ensuring that the musicians did not support of the Third Reich in the past (although this was not strictly enforced, as many musicians who were supporters of the Nazis continued to work after the war).

the Nazi occupation, and the Resistance movement were fundamental to the development of his world perspective and political ideology, while musically his meeting with [Bruno] Maderna was critical” (Borio 2017). Both Maderna and Nono later studied with Hermann Scherchen, who recommended that Nono attend the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music in 1950 (Iddon 2013, 149-51).² Nono’s time in Darmstadt was highly important for him as a composer, and in the successive years he became one of the key members of the so-called “Darmstadt School” and a leading avant-garde composer.

Integrating politics and music became very important to Nono in the early 1950s; yet this pairing was not always met with approval. For instance, in West Germany “the idea of music as an abstract art form, resistant to and free from political manipulation, was strongly upheld” (Thacker 2007, 3). Nevertheless, Nono continued to pursue integrating politics and music to give voice back to the victims.

The social environment of uncertainty and mistrust in Italy and throughout Europe was still present³ as Nono used his music as a tool to contextualize and honour the memories of the recent past, and, in particular, the crimes of fascism. But, while contextualizing the political in new music, Nono was also committed to forging an innovative, new compositional aesthetic, which led to new employment of space and silence, new sounds, and “new methods of organizing experience and memory” (Koestenbaum 2005, 591). Nono used his music as a way to personally and uniquely define history (Guerrero 2010, 580). This is also evident in his music of the 1950s, which integrated historical documents of the fascist period (Guerrero 2010, 578). The text used in his compositions *Il Canto Sospeso* and *Intolleranza* (1961) “revealed the extent of the political conflict in which the composer felt himself involved” (Borio 2017). In *Il Canto Sospeso*, Nono integrated texts from letters of condemned European resistance fighters. The initial response to the music with this text was powerful for audiences from the past as well as

2 Darmstadt International Summer School for New Music was held annually in Darmstadt, Germany. Lectures and lessons were offered, which were valuable for emerging composers. They had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with others and to have their compositions performed. Nono was first a student at the Darmstadt Summer School and then came back as a lecturer and teacher. He had many of his compositions performed there over the years, such as *España en el Corazón*, *La Victoire de Guernica*, *Canti per 13*, *Il Canto Sospeso*, and more.

3 The complex physiological condition that post-war German society was facing is discussed by Toby Thacker (2007) and Christopher Fox (1999). People were starting the lengthy process of dealing with the past while coping with hardship and immense loss. Society was facing opposing ideologies while emerging from political and social upheaval.

today. Over time, the response to the music transformed as the memories it evoked changed with different audiences; yet this piece remains part of the modernist canon because it forces the listener to remember the horrors that past societies faced, and apply them to current injustices and possibly deal with these issues through musical means.

In a 1964 interview, the author and political theorist Hannah Arendt stated that in 1933 “it was impossible to be a bystander.” This claim continued to be true throughout the horrors of Hitler’s power and the years after. Nono’s composition, with its chosen text, presents itself as a protest against the persecution of innocent people in the fascist regimes of the immediate past, and how this relates to the continuing problems within post-war capitalist Europe. This chapter discusses the compositional techniques employed within *Il Canto Sospeso*, the historical situation of the listeners’ experience, and the past and current effectiveness of the piece as a musical commentary on politics and society at the time of its premiere in Cologne on October 24, 1956, and beyond (Nielinger 2006, 3).⁴ I also discuss the context in which this piece was composed and the political environment of its creation and reception.

Composing was Nono’s means of political participation, and his artistic endeavors involved integrating texts to allow his listeners to confront and remember events of the recent past. As Nono commented on these texts via new methods of musical composition, he showed the relevance of recent movements within politics and history to a larger society. Nono succeeded in forging politically motivated text with a new serialist musical language, and he was passionate that contemporary music ought to directly relate to historical struggle (Fox 2007, 18). Nono played a key role in the development of the 1950s musical world of Italy and Germany (Fox 1999, 18),⁵ and especially at the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music in West Germany. His integration of integral serialism with text-setting and vocal writing set him apart from other dodecaphonic serialist composers such as Webern and Boulez (Iddon 2013, 149-51). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Nono did not reject political themes in place of “rigid and abstract

4 *Il Canto Sospeso*’s premiere was initially a success, but soon after it became veiled by Adorno’s and Stockhausen’s critiques.

5 Nono became a key figure at the Darmstadt International Summer School for New Music, and while *Il Canto Sospeso* was not premiered there (but rather in Cologne), it was commissioned by the school and was discussed and analyzed there during the summer sessions.

formalism” (Guerrero 2010, 575). Rather, he employed serialism to express political ideas, creating uniquely profound and complex serial works, as exemplified in his composition *Il Canto Sospeso*. During the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music, Nono’s use of motifs and texture through instrumentation and silence was discussed thoroughly by his colleagues (Iddon 2013, 149-51).⁶ By using all interval rows, serializing dynamics and pitch together, and by using wedge rows, Nono continued to expand his serialist techniques and increase their complexity. For Nono, it was the permutations and architecture of one or two rows that created the music (Iddon 2013, 143).

While Nono’s music daringly confronts critical social and political issues, his musical interpretation of these ideas is not presented as overt or grandiose, but rather he presents musical ideas for the listener to contemplate (Hewett 2007). *Il Canto Sospeso* is viewed in many ways as one of the highest achievements in this regard.⁷ Nono’s use of serialism in setting text is vital to the emotional qualities evoked in this composition, as they create determinations for musical interpretation of the texts. *Il Canto Sospeso* features musical and political ties that continue to manifest a certain power over the listeners throughout time. This is in part due to the compositional techniques described below.

Compositional Techniques

Il Canto Sospeso employs a compositional technique “as it was practiced in post-Webern style ... and is built on an expanding all-interval series” (Bailey 1992, 2-4) (see fig. 10.1). The essential element of the serialist techniques used in *Il Canto Sospeso* lies in the malleable qualities of Nono’s row usage. Nono uses the row in multiple inversions, permutations, and rotations (Bailey 4) and he treats the pitch series differently in each movement, presenting the full form of the row only in the ninth

6 Composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen, as well as political theorist Adorno, were discussing Nono’s works, paying specific attention to his use of serialism and texture, and his treatment of voice. For example, at Darmstadt in 1957, Stockhausen gave a lecture in which he discussed the use of Nono’s chosen text in *Il Canto Sospeso* and its comprehensibility, and later in 1988, Adorno discusses it in his essay “The Ageing of the New Music.”

7 Many scholars, such as Carola Nielinger (2006), John Warnaby (1991), and Gianmario Borio (2001), have noted the importance of *Il Canto Sospeso* within the canon of Nono’s compositions. Its importance can also be inferred when Nono returned to the piece later in the 1960s while composing *Intolleranza*.

movement (Bailey 45). He uses different permutations of the series throughout the different piece. For example, in movement 5, Nono uses three versions of the pitch series in many different fashions, including prime, retrograde, and retrograde inversion, to generate pitch material (Bailey 22). While movements 3, 7, 8, and 9 are based on permutations of the series, movements 2 and 4 use cyclical rotation of the series, and movement 6a is based on neither a permutation nor a rotation of the series (Bailey 4). Yet this is juxtaposed with the little details, such as texture, that connect movements together. Using serialist techniques, the composer was able to use a complex musical language to create a piece that has received considerable attention in terms of in-depth music analysis. “[Serialism] — which to Nono was but a means, not an end — is used to express the work’s urgent message” (Nielinger 2006, 3).

vibr	m240	m250	m254	m259	m262	m265	m270	m271	m273	m278
	<i>ppp</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>mp</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>ppp</i>
trp 2	m246	m247	m252	m258	m260	m262	m265	m269	m270	m284
	<i>ppp</i>	<i>mp</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>ppp</i>
bass clr	m244	m247	m253	m255	m257	m261	m262	m271		m278
	<i>ppp</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>mp</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>mp</i>		<i>mp</i>

FIGURE 10.1. Pitch series from Nono’s *Il Canto Sospeso*.
(Hyacinth, Wikimedia Commons, 2010.)

In *Il Canto Sospeso*, Nono serializes various musical parameters. For instance, dynamics are serialized and most movements incorporate independent dynamic series. The colours and textures in this piece are created through different pitch permutations, cycles of dynamics, and many different groups of durations, all of which change throughout each movement. Orchestration, instrumentation, and density are often structured in an interdependent manner, allowing for the creation of many complex layers of musical meaning within the composition. Such serialization of dynamics allows for moments of grand dynamic contrast, which proves effective in terms of creating a sense of dramatic development. At certain moments in the composition, for example, at the end of movement 5 and the beginning of movement 6, dynamic tension is created, allowing for intense, seemingly emotionally charged sonorities to be heard. The dynamics used by Nono also complement the large-scale form within movements — as in movement 4, where the

arch form is accentuated by the movement from soft to loud and back to soft dynamics (Bailey 1992, 20) (see fig. 10.2). Many scholars have analyzed Nono's serialization and coupling of dynamics and durations, and how he determines where a dynamic marking falls in terms of the durations of sounds. The textures used by Nono become heightened through the serialization of dynamics as the increasing feeling of agitation coming out of the textural formations in movement 3 is accompanied by an increase in amplitude and structured in a serial manner.



FIGURE 10.2. Arch dynamic form used in movement 4. (Emily McCallum, 2017.)

While Adorno considered serialism as showing structural tendencies that resembled those of totalitarian regimes (Readhead 2015, 8) with its fixed rules and abiding techniques determining its use, Nono's use of serialism in *Il Canto Sospeso* displays a different path than that of the serialism described by Adorno (Nielinger 2006, 2). Nono's alternative concept of serialism incorporated a system so complex as to ensure the autonomy of the composer. He achieves immense expressive and musical qualities paired with a dazzling intricacy of the serial technique. The way Nono uses serialism to compose this piece "is ... powerful today because it forces us to slow down ... and tests our reflective abilities" (Biró 2007, 17). While certain perceptual aspects of the piece are not immediately attainable to the listener, the sonorous qualities lead the listener into a situation of close listening.

Simultaneously, moments of sudden contrast within the work can be startling for the listener. For instance, the texture of movement 7 is overflowing with lyricism harking back to the Italian tradition of *Bel Canto*. Nono's treatment of vowels that emerges from the text is intensified by the surrounding textural shimmer of the orchestra, with the glockenspiel playing a key role.

As material for the text of *Il Canto Sospeso*, Nono used the "letters written by people condemned to death for their resistance to Nazism and Fascism" (Fox 1999, 14). Within the post-war period, this decision can be seen as overtly political, as the text and its accompanying music forced listeners to remember the not-so-distant fascist past. In setting the text from the letters, Nono took the language apart, often using purely vowel

sounds as well as layering the syllables of the text amongst soloist and chorus parts. In the 1950s and beyond, much has been discussed about the comprehensibility of the text, and how such a politically charged text can still hold power if incomprehensible, but Nono knew that “in the world into which *Il Canto Sospeso* was projected ... it was surely unnecessary for every word of the text to be heard” (Christopher 1999, 127). This belief of Nono’s is also evident in movement 9 as he creates intricate layering and density with the voices.

A given listener of *Il Canto Sospeso* does not need to understand Italian to appreciate the emotional quality of this music, as the emotional experience is not exclusively bound to language, and the listening experience is substantially more than simply the translation of words. The structuring of textual syntax and sonority and their integration into the larger musical setting are essential for the impact of the music on the listener. The words, together with the music, create a story, and this, paired with the motions and nuances of each musical phrase, enables a larger instrumental and musical narrative, which serves to go beyond the realm of text-setting.

Text and Music: Structural and Semiotic Relationships

It is Nono’s structural combining of text and music that creates the possibility for an enhanced reflection on the part of the listener, as the music opens up the ability to “eliminate the mythical distance that separates [the audience] ... from the historical event” (Guerrero 2010, 575). Understanding the sung Italian of the piece reveals a secret window into the world of Nono’s composition — like looking through a keyhole. For an Italian, and especially one who was listening to this after the time of the Holocaust, in those sections wherein the text couldn’t be understood, the content would be filled in by the memory of the listener. For the listener of that time period who did not know Italian, such a process of remembrance would be quite different. These listeners might imagine the music with their own words and this personalized musical narrative could have evoked emotions leading

these listeners to a different kind of self-reflection (Assmann 2006).⁸ Such processes of self-reflection also relate to how the European listeners could have reacted emotionally during the 1950s, with the control of the Allied forces, the process of denazification, and the emergence of the Cold War creating immense psychological challenges in light of collective and individual memories of the recent past (Assmann 2006).

The process of orchestration in the composition, alternating from chorus to solo voice and orchestra to only orchestra, also contributes to the linguistic aspects of the piece. The textual narrative does not cease with the sung word, but rather the instrumental sections carry the meaning of the text forward. The tranquility of movement 7 is then painfully broken with the opening of movement 8. This section is an excellent example of how Nono uses the phasing in and out of notes within different instrumentation groups to create varying textures and colours. Neilinger (2006, 35) labels this technique the “structural use of density.” Nono’s vast palette of textures within the piece is critical to the success of the creativity of perceptive reflection for the listener. While Nono sometimes depicts tranquility and delicacy through his textures, he also employs violent changes of texture and dynamics where “*pp* is omitted in order to include *fff*” (Neilinger 2006, 39). Such changes prove to be shocking and often present a musical analogy to the content of the text.

The text travels throughout the piece in different states of comprehensibility, which adds to its range of colours, that in turn enhances the setting. Non-Italian speakers would have had a different approach to the text, as it was most likely first received through reading a translation, the meaning of which would enhance their listening and the corresponding musical ideas. This connection is vital for a better understanding of the text, the music, and how they interplay, but it is not vital for the appreciation and resounding impact of the piece.

8 Aleida Assmann (2006) explains that people acquire memories “not only via lived experience, but also via interacting, communicating, learning, identifying, and appropriating” (211). As a listener of Nono’s *Il Canto Sospeso*, one finds oneself transforming the history that accompanies the music “into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation” (216). Nono’s ability to take the listener into deep self-reflection makes this piece one that interacts with both individual and collective memory. It can be used as the “third category [of cultural memory], which is the combination of remembering and forgetting” (220) as well as the impulse needed to reawaken “buried” (220) individual memories.

The care Nono takes in text-setting is matched in his orchestration (Bailey 1992, 37). Nono's overlaying of the texts in movement 8 "is an 'intensification' of the original texts since it draws three separate experiences into a shared expression and, at the same time, creates new 'symbiotic' meanings" (Bailey 1992, 16). In movement 3, Nono combines compositional elements, such as the different pairings of voices and instruments with each instrument serving to uniquely represent each voice (Bailey 1992, 26). He creates a musical force for different vocal parts, which, in contrast to his shared expression of the voices, can represent the individuality of each author within the collection of suffering. This careful treatment of the text is one main reason why this piece is remarkable even for contemporary listeners, as it compels the listener to react emotionally within a situation of complex compositional structure. For its original audience, it would have been "a litany of suffering to which most members of the audience would have been able to add verses of their own" (Fox 1999, 18).

Nono builds towards a climax in movement 7, which coincides with the power of the text of a young Russian resistance fighter in a letter to her mother. "Her short testimony, representative of the fate of so many of those cited ... lies at the heart of the conception of *Il Canto Sospeso*" (Nielinger 2006, 5). This is a beautiful use of the text, as its essential rawness is highlighted so that the power of it is felt by the listener in current times, just as it was experienced at the time it was written. Nono builds to this climax through the use of layers of contrast in dynamics, texture, and structure. "This aesthetic process is perhaps the literal 'song unsung' in this work: the ability of the music to express the inexpressible is what cannot be discovered by formalist analysis" (Redhead 2015, 6).

Nono: Then and Now

Many different interpretations of the actual text of *Il Canto Sospeso*, and of the setting, have been published (Nielinger 2006, 9), but what resonates is how Nono's text is still relevant at our time in history. The theme of *Il Canto Sospeso* is just as essential for today's audience in the current political climate of ever-increasing intolerance and division. The Italian musicologist and critic Massimo Mila states that this "music is worthy of its texts and that, within its own sphere, it manages to recreate the dramatic moral depth of the letters of the Resistance

fighters” (Nielinger 2006, 11). The memories of the past are integral to the steps that music and society must take towards progress, resolution, and evolution. Memories create a place from which music can emerge, and music helps memories create a narrative to follow. There is a lasting relevance for all listeners as they are still captivated by Nono’s music and placed in a state of awe and remorse. “*Il Canto Sospeso* is political not only in its materials but in the listener’s relationship to them, and in this respect, it is also beautiful” (Redhead 2015, 6). Nono’s music isn’t attached to a “time-specific” definition of beauty, which enables it to be timeless. This piece resonates with “Plato, [for whom] the ideal form of the beautiful was conceived as being of the intellect rather than of the senses” (Biró 2007, 4). The beauty that emerges from *Il Canto Sospeso* is not exclusive to the sounds it creates with voices and orchestra. It emerges from the way these sounds intertwine with each other and with silence. The beauty stems from its ability to create deep self-reflection in the listener and its ability to eloquently address pain and suffering. The beauty is not superficial; it is deeply embedded in the music, which ensures its endless significance. This music is able to make people feel uncomfortable, to make them question and think about what they are listening to and how it makes them feel. As Biró (2007, 16) states, “music refuses to present the answer of an image but rather challenges the listener to actively question how sound relates to the world.”

Il Canto Sospeso remains an incomparably beautiful work that continues to deliver meaning and wisdom to contemporary listeners. It enables them to delve deep into the music and find inspiration that impels them to resist the repetition of the history it describes. With its complex serial structuring of intense emotional experiences, the composition presents the listener with a unique listening and learning experience. In doing so, the listener can, in the best sense, become lost in their own mind, experiencing both a whirlwind of emotions and intense, reflective contemplation.

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