**Mark Berry**

**To bear witness and build solidarity: Luigi Nono and the creative imperative**

Luigi Nono (1924–90): *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz*

*Quando stanno morendo*

**Human provocation**

In a 1958 article on Luciano Berio for the Darmstadt Summer School’s house journal *Die Reihe*, Piero Santi outlined the post-war Italian avant-garde’s guiding principles:

Everybody’s purpose is authentic organization of the world of sound, which is finally to be freed from […] external compulsion […]. Thus, in the years after World War II, new Italian music, too, had a role marked out. Naturally, it profited from study of hitherto unavailable [modernist] works, and from insights gained elsewhere, but the natural reaction was against our most recent past. To put it more bluntly: there was a reaction against ‘expression at all costs’, against rhetoric (veiled to a greater or lesser degree), against sentimentality which no longer dared to express itself melodramatically, unreservedly.

Politics and aesthetics are interrelated, even identified, more strongly than might have been the case in Germany or France, although everywhere the fiction of a 1945 ‘Zero Hour’, sharply distinguishing post-war endeavour from a world culminating in Auschwitz (and Hiroshima) proved persuasive. In contrast to Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy had in any case remained strikingly open to modernism. Berg’s *Wozzeck* received its Italian premiere in 1942; and at the Venice Conservatory from 1941 to 1945, Nono had been introduced to music by the Second Viennese School, Stravinsky, Bartók and others.

In Nono’s case, a further imperative was political engagement. He took *A Survivor from Warsaw* by Schoenberg, his posthumous father-in-law, as emblematic for what composition might accomplish. We might also ask to what extent it is meaningful to consider Nono, very much a Venetian as well as an internationalist, as an ‘Italian composer’ at all. In any case, no more than Schoenberg was Nono inclined to lack of ‘expression’; their music rather tends towards hyper-expressivity in which not only every note but also the network of relationships between each note is loaded with significance. The problem, rather, was perceived of sentimentality. In a lecture Nono gave on Schoenberg’s *Survivor*, ‘the musical-aesthetic manifesto of our era’, he located it in the line of Jean-Paul Sartre’s question ‘why write?’ and Sartre’s response:

And if I am presented with this world and its injustices, then I should not look at it coldly, but [...] with indignation, that I might expose it and create it in its nature as injustice and abuse.’ […]

And further, should someone refuse to recognise Schoenberg’s *docere* and *movere*, […] he should know that the words which the nineteen-year-old student, Giacomo Levi, wrote in his last letter before execution by the Fascists in Modena in 1942, are also addressed to him: ‘Do not say that you no longer wish to know anything about it. Consider this, that all that has happened is because you no longer wished to know anything more about it.

Nono found such a ‘provocation’ necessary for artistic creation. ‘The genesis of any of my works is always to be found in a human provocation (*provocazione umana*): an event, an experience, a test in our lives, which provokes my instinct and my consciousness, as man and musician, to bear witness.’

**Expressing the inexpressive**

Emblematic even among the death camps, Auschwitz was more than a ‘provocation’, however severe. If the word seems blasphemously insufficient, so does all else, save the imperative to bear witness. Theodor Adorno’s celebrated, often misquoted 1955 claim, made roughly halfway between ‘liberation’ and Nono’s work, retains its sting even after neutering by the culture industry Adorno (and Nono) justly loathed: ‘Cultural criticism finds itself confronting the last stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this also gnaws at the realization that expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today.’ Adorno presented a problem, not a prohibition; the creative imperative remained.

In 1965, Erwin Piscator asked Nono to provide music for his staging of Peter Weiss’s new play on the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, *Die Ermittlung* (The Investigation), at West Berlin’s Freie Volksbühne. Nono recalled that Piscator had been ‘right’ with respect to ‘the relationship between music and theatre: what neither words nor scenes could express and represent, music must’. The following year, Nono reworked the musical material at Milan’s Studio di Fonologia della Radio into a stand-alone work for tape. Material from the children’s choir of Milan’s Piccolo Teatro, sounds and phonemes provided by the Polish soprano Stefania Woytowitz, and orchestral and choral material produced electronically in the Studio from earlier Nono works were combined and elaborated, so as to focus on and give expression to the human voice, while liberating it from the need to ‘set’ or to ‘express’ a pre-existing text, be it verbal (e.g. Weiss) or theatrical (e.g. Piscator). For voices, not words, *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz* (Remember what they did to you in Auschwitz), its title inspired by Alberto Nirenstein’s *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, a reconstruction of Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto and elsewhere in Poland, was the latest of Nono’s memorials with a contemporary imperative.

That attempt was grounded in a technical-aesthetic as well as a socio-political quest; arguably the two were for him the same. Nono’s interest lay less in an attempt to express what cannot be expressed – Auschwitz ‘itself’, say, or the Warsaw Ghetto of Schoenberg or Nirenstein – but in what might never have been considered ‘expressive’ in the first place. One can fancy here, for instance, that one hears a marching band or a chill wind, but the sound is almost certainly not intended to represent or to express that; more likely, it may express the dread force we feel to lie behind such representations of destruction. Violent and raucous, tender and sweet within a few seconds: those swings are doubtless part of a continuum of experience, but also seem to be opposing forces, one might even suggest of good and evil. Sound lies within an ominously contained band, beyond which is the uncanny realm of memory, Nono’s own included. His choice of self-quotations was instructive: *Composizione per orchestra no.2: Diario polacco ’58*, in which he had previously memorialized his visit to Auschwitz; *Cori di Didone*, in some sense expressing, if hardly representing, the atmosphere of death; and *La fabbrica illuminata*, whose ‘virtual sonic theatre’ of industrial sound and workers’ voices took on a still more ominous and deadly exposition of factory conditions in its new setting. This was an industrial and capitalist as well as racial genocide.

And yet, Nono’s longstanding fascination with voices solo and polyphonic, their embodiment and our spatial experience of them endures. As his friend Claudio Abbado attested, Nono ‘never lost the deep-rooted ties to the long tradition of Venetian music, as demonstrated by his unerring feeling for the relation of sound and space, recalling the music [Giovanni] Gabrieli wrote for the church of San Marco. Gigi’s sense of an *espressivo* or *cantabile* line also stems from this tradition.’ Here a voice that cries, that laments, that exults, is a voice, albeit mediated; yet no more than in *Fidelio* or Nono’s own *Prometeo* is it *only* a voice. It can express, if not represent, something of humanity, of resistance, however tragic and unspeakable its fate. There is no utopian liberation to be heard; the work is not concerned with survival or redemption. Yet perhaps freedom lies nonetheless in truth, witness and action.

**Return (or not) to Poland**

Nono’s 1958 Polish visit and musical ‘diary’, ‘in memory of my Polish friends and of that country’, was followed almost a quarter of a century later by a *Diario polacco No.2*. This witnessed a non-visit to the Warsaw Autumn festival of contemporary music – for there was no 1982 festival, on account of General Jaruzelski’s declaration of martial law. Nono dedicated *Quando stanno morendo* (When they are dying) to those who had invited and commissioned him in 1981, yet from whom he had heard no more: ‘To my Polish friends and comrades who, in exile, in hiding, in prison, at work, continue to resist and hope even in despair, to believe even in disbelief.’ Or, as we read in Nono’s own ‘Appeal for *Solidarnosc*’ combining specific, Polish resistance and universal, socialist humanism:

Condemnation of […] [the] coup no longer suffices. Condemnation of the military’s repression of the union movement, of independent Polish political bodies, no longer suffices. Nor is the simple denunciation of oppressive Soviet intervention or the concrete support given to the authoritarian regime in Warsaw by the USSR any longer sufficient. Every democratic, political, trade union and cultural body must now take advantage of every opportunity to give life to a mass movement in concrete solidarity with the Polish people and their freedom of expression.

Resistance and organization, like human activity in general, were complex, not simple. Art was no mere protest; nor was solidarity.

Nono’s friend and comrade, the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, assembled the written texts from verse by Czesław Miłosz (1980 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature), Endre Ady and Alexander Blok (Part I); Velemir Chlebnikov (Part II); and Boris Pasternak, Miłosz and Chlebnikov (Part III). Voices are to the fore in the first (initially, quasi-monodic) and third parts; instruments in the second, where text-setting is at first less fragmentary, more immediately comprehensible, until instruments and electronics do their invasive, even corrosive work. ‘The music “contracts”’, to quote Jürg Stenzl, although an *a cappella* close offers greater prospect of hope than had been permitted by the Auschwitz work. Where sound and music then had been constrained, now they look – listen, and enable us to listen – outwards. The world of *Prometeo*,Nono’s third and final opera and another Cacciari collaboration, beckons. As Nono and Cacciari explained: ‘we shall still be able to make “daylight” by refusing the death now coming to us. […] it will never be Death, so long as these voices speak.’

Renaissance polyphony and Venetian madrigalism meet a post-Webern present in which the qualities of every note and the connections between each one of them – intervals and other parameters – take upon themselves expressive force, moral and political as well as aesthetic, pointing in solidarity toward the future. Nono shadows and extends the horizons of voices (four female) and instruments (cello and bass flute) with *live* electronics, technological advances having enabled greater openness in every sense. He even declared that the score would ‘be born after the Venice “premiere”’. He did in fact produce a score beforehand, albeit one explicitly marked as ‘non-definitive’, pending eventual publication with greater information achieved in the light of performance.

The day before the premiere, Nono gave an interview to the Communist newspaper *L’Unità*, entitled ‘Electronic *Solidarnosc*’. In it, he declared that today, more than ever, ‘the artist has the responsibility to avoid conclusive, finalized results. He must understand that (as [Robert] Musil says): “it is not important what is, but rather what might have been.” This does away with all Manichaeism, all sectarianism, and all intellectual rigidity.’ Right up until the last moment, Nono insisted, his new work remained ‘open to all possible transformations’. The owl of Minerva only spreads its wings at dusk, leaving the future open through understanding and empathy with present, past and alternative paths not yet taken but that might be. ‘When they die, men sing …’ concludes the final line of Chlebnikov’s verse. Therein lie hope and freedom of a kind.