

Review of Carola Nielinger-Vakil, *Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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Carola Nielinger-Vakil has contributed a rare English-language monograph to the wealth of mostly Italian and German literature on Luigi Nono, through a dense and rigorous volume that makes a fine addition to Cambridge University Press's "Music Since 1900" series. Beyond music, Nielinger-Vakil devotes much attention to Nono's choices of texts, drawing from letters, writings, and the annotations included in the literary works that the composer owned. Her study, by elegantly interlacing historical with analytical discourse, is exemplary in its survey of the complexities and challenges of Nono studies.

The juxtaposition of "music" and "memory" is involved in the subtly different titles of both halves of the book. Part I, "Music and Memory," addresses Nono's early anti-fascist works, narrating contexts and emphasizing the influences of Bruno Maderna, Hermann Scherchen, the Second Viennese School, and Darmstadt. Both Chapters 1 and 2 begin by exploring important postwar texts, in and outside of music, as points of departure for Nielinger-Vakil's carefully constructed interpretation of Nono's works as politically committed music. Chapter 1 begins with Italo Calvino's 1948 story "The Hanging of a Judge."¹ Nielinger-Vakil views this as a Kafkaesque exploration of modernist social critique, relating it to Italian amnesty laws and partisan trials in the 1940s and 50s. The following chapter begins with references to Sartre's

¹ This story, whose title Calvino was forced to change to "The Dream of a Judge" prior to its first publication, appeared in the collection *Ultimo viene il corvo* (Milan: Garzanti 1988), originally published by Einaudi in 1949. Unlike most of Calvino's output (including some other stories from the same collection) it seems not yet to have appeared in English translation; this will be remedied by the noted translator Ann Goldstein in her forthcoming *Last Comes the Raven* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

“What is Literature” and Schoenberg’s *A Survivor in Warsaw*. These help set the stage for an extensive discussion of Nono’s *Il canto sospeso*, whose very title she links to a poem by Ethel Rosenberg, and thus to the preoccupation with the Rosenberg affair on the part of so many committed European intellectuals of the period. The work, she argues, directly counters Adorno’s claim that “no one is actually challenged by integral serialism...no one senses in it any binding claim to truth” (22). Nielinger-Vakil also contends with the split between West German and Italian receptions of the cantata, comparing the hostile reception from Heinz-Klaus Metzger with a defense from Massimo Mila: “while Germans received the work in the context of the unspeakably shameful...*Il canto sospeso* was part of the legacy of the Resistance in Italy, where letters by...resistance fighters...took their place among the ‘sacred’” (30).

Il canto sospeso also marked Nono’s turn away from an engagement with musical material of an explicitly political nature. Nielinger-Vakil addresses this departure with an extended interlude, beginning with a consideration of Maderna’s *Quattro lettere* of 1953. This is another work connected to the Resistance, one “singled out” later by Nono for its “exemplary ideological engagement and commitment to the musical avant-garde” (32). And politically-charged music was at its core. Nielinger-Vakil describes Maderna’s lodging the Resistance song “Fischia del Vento” deep in the texture of his “uncompromisingly avant-garde idiom”, comparing it with the neo-realist elements in the background of the Calvino story mentioned at the outset of Part I; she places Maderna’s strategy against a “much more conventional rendition” of the song employed by Mario Zafred at the conclusion of his Fourth Symphony, which she characterizes, after Mila, as displaying a “nausea of inadequacy” (31–32). Nono himself made use of similar strategies, disguising musical material derived from political sources in the first *Epitaffio per Federico García Lorca* (1952) and *La victoire de Guernica* (1954) (35); he would

return to explicit political material later, as Nielinger-Vakil documents, through his use of political songs culminating in *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1972–74) (33). But at the time of *Il canto sospeso* he abandoned such compositional strategies as mere “diversion[s]” from “what was happening at Darmstadt: ever more repetitive sterile formulas, supreme exaltation of unifying ‘rationality’” (36). Ironically, as Nielinger-Vakil notes, it was just this “unifying rationality” that he now turned to in *Il canto sospeso*, which she details by examining his use of “a textbook twelve-tone row,” the all-interval row in its “basic chromatic form” (36).² Perhaps a resolution to this apparent conflict, the rejection of political materials in favor of abstraction as the musical content grows ever more deeply political, is available through Nono’s approach to Webern, strongly influenced by Maderna. In Nono’s view, Webern properly understood was not to be taken as “mathematics” but rather as “sounding experience”: “Webern’s artistic consciousness...clearly understood the demands of our time....Expression and form in Webern are a compressed synthesis, in which the essential human qualities of today may be recognized” (65). One could infer that the musical language of *Il canto sospeso*, with its own thoroughgoing synthesis, is exactly what Nono felt a response to its tragic subject matter most demanded.

Nielinger-Vakil builds her analysis of *Il canto sospeso* on her own earlier article,³ which addressed its serial organization, in order to show “the compositional freedom...the perceptible large-scale processes...and the characteristic use of instrumentation...against the ‘equality’ of the serial system” (xv). All this creates, in her view, “a truly disconcerting dialectics between

² Indeed, it is the form of the all-interval row cited as “basic” in a noted textbook, Herbert Eimert’s *Lehrbuch der Zwölftontechnik*, a source whose Italian translation Nono had annotated (36).

³ “‘The Song Unsung’: Luigi Nono’s *Il canto sospeso*,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 131: 1 (2006), 83–150. Material on *Il canto sospeso*, along with several other aspects of the argument of Part I, also appears in “‘Between Memorial and Political Manifesto: Nono’s Anti-fascist Works, 1951–1966,’” in A. I. De Benedictis and L. Zattra, eds., *Presenza storica di Luigi Nono* (Lucca: LIM, 2011), 77–137.

tradition and avant-garde” (xv). She focuses on the “perceptible large-scale features which tie this ‘divertimento of different compositional ideas’ into an expressive whole” (37), and she explains Nono’s turn to choral writing through the composer’s own words:

“the human voice is not constrained to the historic functional limits of melodic instruments...Melody is no longer to be understood from the point of view of the perspective succession that is typical of tonal music...Melody results from simultaneity within a differentiated spectrum of unified rhythmic values, their duration and interrelationship...I began such melodic development in the second and ninth part of *Il canto sospeso*.” (38–9)⁴

To avoid purely vertical and horizontal dimensions, Nono envisioned what he called “a net which extends in all directions” (40). “Rigorous serial organization,” explains Nielinger-Vakil, served as a “basis for pitch and interval relationships which prevented regression into tonal modes of thought” (40). She draws on Lachenmann’s explanation of Nono’s strategy as “fundamentally grounded in the necessity to extinguish a material and to a certain extent force it into line, because its tendency to form premature interval relationships or even thematic figures was all too great” (40). Lachenmann, she continues, saw “traces” of what he called “unbroken, merely reduced harmonic thematicism...inevitably present in permanent chromaticism” as a fundamental source of expressivity.⁵

Nielinger-Vakil also discusses the communist overtones of the texts. Her analysis includes what is essentially a detailed listening guide to movements 2 and 9, with summaries in tabular form and a focus on text/music relationships; here, the discussion requires the reader to have a copy of the score at hand. She effectively shows for example how the maximal density point of pitch in movement 9 aligns in the verbal text with the confrontation with executioners

⁴ Nono, introductory remarks in Christoph Flamm, ‘Preface,’ trans. A. Davies, in *Il canto sospeso*, score (London: Eulenberg, 1995), vii.

⁵ Helmut Lachenmann, “Luigi Nono oder Rückblick auf die serielle Musik” (1969) in Helmut Lachenmann, *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1996), 247–57.

(45). Further parallels make a case for the music being inextricable from its text, despite the complex, abstract serial procedures. Nielinger-Vakil traces the origins of the work to an unfinished, large-scale project on the Czech resistance fighter Julius Fučík (46ff.). When discussing the agony of those awaiting their execution, a common theme that links *Il canto sospeso* to Fučík, Nielinger-Vakil might have considered its possible roots in Dallapiccola and his wartime works addressing the same dramatic moments (48). She teases out other strands of the initial conception of *Il canto*, offering a speculative window into Nono's compositional process; she recalls as well the Webernian influence on Nono's early writing, concerning both sound and ethics. To conclude, she summons "the Varèsian dream of a 'melodic totality'" (84).

The following two chapters of Part I examine *Composizione per orchestra n. 2: Diario polacco '58* (1959) and the score to *Die Ermittlung* by Peter Weiss (1965). *Diario polacco '58* is contextualized within Nono's lecture "History and the Present in the Music of Today" (1959) and the composer's relationship with Stockhausen, whose *Gruppen Diario polacco* resembles in the spatial distribution of its performance forces. For Nielinger-Vakil, however, Nono's advanced serial system, his use of space and, above all, the structural concept of this work are fundamentally different. Nono's use of the spatial dimension "differentiate[s] and move[s] the orchestral sound from within" and appears to be a precursor of his later practice of *suono mobile* (85). This aspect of his compositional journey is traced to several sources. One was his reaction to the 1956 premiere in Cologne of *Gesang der Jünglinge* and its multiple banks of loudspeakers, after which Nono could tell Stockhausen that "You were able to do something...of which I've been dreaming for a long time" (87). An even more abiding influence was Schoenberg's "exploration of space" in his dramatic works, especially *Moses und Aron* (88–91); and Nono reached even further back to the "Venetian school around 1500", especially the work of the

Gabrielis, as a “foundation for the new music theatre which I am planning” (94–95). By delineating this path, she reminds us that Nono’s “spatial concepts were from the very outset intrinsically linked to the dramatic arts, evolved with his concept of the ‘azione scenica’ and eventually culminated in the dramatic use of space in *Prometeo*” (94).

Nielinger-Vakil distinguishes Nono from his contemporaries by relating all decisions back to the artist’s ethical role. His “particular compositional rigor is grasped and understood as historically necessary precisely because it is...the means to address fundamental sociological and political concerns” (97–98). Sidestepping the Nono-Stockhausen clash, her aim instead is to investigate what Nono intended “to communicate ‘with music’ in his *Diario polacco* ’58, the work which largely conditioned his demand for greater responsibility and historical awareness in music at that time” (98–99). Interestingly, the author also sheds light on two unrealized theatre projects that would have fostered this “greater responsibility and historical awareness” more concretely. One was to have had as its subject torture in the Algerian resistance (99). Another was to have been a choral, staged work about Anne Frank; Nono apparently discarded this, as Nielinger-Vakil suggests, because of the danger of a sentimental approach, a worry shared by Simone de Beauvoir (100). In the end, it was an untexted, “abstract” work, the *Diario*, in which Nono “first dared to address the Holocaust” (100). In asking why Nono would do so with a purely instrumental piece, she relates the work’s scoring to *Il canto sospeso*, “where the most violent sonorities are rendered by wind, brass and timpani, and instrumental violence is often effectively enhanced by means of flutter-tonguing and tone repetition” (104). Her description of the “structural use of density” in *Diario* highlights the division of groups on stage through the corresponding percussion sections, discussing how three types of “sound or ‘modes of being’ evolve” in conjunction with four types of sound projection determined through serialized

durations (105). Her detailed discussion of the complex processes organizing this work culminates with a notable comparison of the central section to the architecture of the Holocaust Tower in Berlin's Jewish Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind (120).

Through *Die Ermittlung*, Nielinger-Vakil documents Nono's concept of music being able to represent voices of Holocaust victims through a variety of sound types, vocal, instrumental, and electronic, and not just the choral setting that the director, Erwin Piscator, had initially envisioned. She relates Nono's compositional style back to *Diario* with its series of interrelated fragments and the "progressive increase in violence" (128). Her main contribution here lies in her reconstruction, following Nono's annotated typescript of the play, of a "different...distribution of the music" from those suggested by Matthias Kontarsky and Matteo Nanni in their studies of the work (130).⁶ She highlights for example the exclusive use of phonemes, and the manipulation of electronic sound to disguise syntax in the text (133). Timbre, instrumentation, and electronic manipulation come into play in the author's interpretation of the recorded instrumental material, focusing in particular on the use of the highest registers to provoke anxiety (136–137). She connects Nono's "gas motive"—purely electronic—with the "technological aspect of the Holocaust" and the "charge against capitalist society," commenting on Nono's understanding of laughter as an ironic device, again noting the intertwining of material from *Diario* (138–9).

Nielinger-Vakil sums up the "long, tortuous thread" of Part I of her book by tracing Nono's output to *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz*, the last of his strictly anti-fascist works. She notes:

⁶ Kontarsky, Matthias, *Trauma Auschwitz: Zu Verarbeitungen des Nichtverarbeitbaren bei Peter Weiss, Luigi Nono und Paul Dessau* (Saarbrücken: Pfau, 2001). Nanni, Matteo: *Auschwitz: Adorno und Nono. Philosophische und musikanalytische Untersuchungen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2004).

“compositional technique and intention may have taken many different turns during these two eventful decades, but it is obvious that intense reflection on the European anti-fascist resistance and the Holocaust fundamentally shaped Nono’s compositional idiom, resulting in structural ideas, material choices, and a certain vocabulary of sounds that would continue to be of great relevance in the changing political and musical contexts.” (143)

She aptly singles out Nono’s words included in the program note for *Die Ermittlung*, claiming that his was “Not music motivated by rebellion-protest. / Only musical awareness and understanding of yesterday and today for a tomorrow that is finally free” (143).

Part II, “Music as Memory”, contains detailed treatments of *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima* (Chapter 6) and *Prometeo. Tragedia dell’ascolto* (1975–85) (Chapter 7).⁷ In a short chapter introducing this section, poetically titled “Towards other shores”, Nielinger-Vakil begins by examining *A floresta è jovem e cheja de vida* (1965–6), dedicated to the National Liberation Front of Vietnam. By comparing Nono’s thought with that of Marxist intellectual Massimo Cacciari, librettist of *Prometeo*, she espouses the idea that for the composer everything is political: “much in the way Cacciari understood the ‘unpolitical’ as a dimension that arises from the political to overcome and supersede it, Nono’s late thought [grows] out of previous concerns in order to go beyond them” (151). In sum, if “Nono’s late endeavor is to ‘embody the universal’,” then *Fragmente* and *Prometeo* are “by no means less political than anything else he ever wrote” (151).

One way to this ‘universal’ was a reconsideration of what “musical thought” could be; as Nono said in a conversation that took place at the premiere of *Fragmente*, “I have to say immediately that, for me, composing music is not just a technical matter, not just craftsmanship,

⁷ The analysis in Chapter 6 reprints with minor revisions Nielinger-Vakil’s earlier article “*Fragmente--Stille, an Diotima: World of Greater Compositional Secrets*,” *Acta musicologica* 82:1 (2010), 105–47. One striking change is the very last sentence; in the book, she clarifies that “the quest” that took him “ever deeper into the intellectual and spiritual spheres of Jewish thought” led straight into “the very heart of *Prometeo*” (190).

it is about thought...Schoenberg taught us to think, not to compose. Renaissance treatises...also always discussed different ways of thinking musically” (152).⁸ Nielinger-Vakil sets out to provide an interpretation of *Fragmente* that sheds light on this “musical thought,” as opposed to one of the sort Nono complained about, which remain at the level of “ideology” only: “I hear wish to offer a reading...which comes close to what Nono expected of his critics and is concerned primarily with ‘what happens in the music’” (153). She finds the root of the quartet’s “fragmentary stream of fleeting gestures, unstable textures, suspended sound and silence” in the earlier *Con Luigi Dallapiccola*, pointing out the affinity of Nono’s thought with Dallapiccola, with Varèse, and with the form and content of Kafka’s diary entries, which formed the original text for *Fragmente* (155–159). Her analytical strategy focuses on the analysis of “interacting waves”, a “lesson learned from Varèse” as Nono indicated; these waves were generated from the *scala enigmatica*, with texts carefully chosen to elucidate their contrapuntal ebbing and flowing (157).

Nielinger-Vakil points out that it is uncertain when in the planning of the composition Nono decided to use texts by Hölderlin for this purpose; strikingly, the composer seems to have been influenced as much by the methods employed by the philologist Dietrich E. Sattler in his critical edition of the poet’s works as by the poetry itself.⁹ These methods were not designed to show how Hölderlin had reached a single, perfect solution; rather they allow one to trace the “open” quality of the poet’s thought processes. As Nono wrote to Enzo Restagno, “Over one word you thus find another two, three, four, five, like a process of elaboration which advances by means of accumulation of various types of material, various types of thought, various

⁸ A comprehensive guide to this topic has recently appeared; see Jonathan Impett, *Routledge Handbook to Luigi Nono and Musical Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁹ Hölderlin, Friedrich, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. D. E. Sattler (Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern, 1975–).

possibilities of drawing together extremely uncommon and unrelated words” (165). Hölderlin might use the results of such elaboration or not; thus the edition represents numerous paths that he might have taken as well as the ones he eventually settled on. Nielinger-Vakil’s summary is particularly apt: “In Hölderlin’s poetry, Nono found an ideal fund for what he had in mind, in terms of both topic and sound world, but also, and perhaps even primarily so, in terms of the compositional process” (165). The resulting “intricate, multi-layered web of interrelations” sets up the strategy for the close reading of the music to which she proceeds (166).

Her discussion of the monumental *Prometeo. Tragedia dell’ascolto* (1975–85) hinges on philosophical foundations shaped by Cacciari concerning the ways in which the political fuses with abstract musical thought. In exploring “perceptible large-scale processes and the use of live electronics, in terms both of sound transformation and of the dramatic movement of sound in space,” the author aims to reveal its music “to be as politically charged as it always was” (xvi). Her account is also heavily informed by André Richard, director of live electronics from early on in the performance practice. In examining conception, architectural logistics, and the use of live electronics to control the movement of sound in space, the author turns to *Das atmende Klarsein*, interpreted as the precursor of *Prometeo*, along with related influences on Cacciari’s interpretation, including the poets Rilke, Baudelaire, and Trakl, as well as Benjamin’s *Theses on the Concept of History*. Finally, she unfolds a thoughtful study of the tragedy as understood by Aeschylus and Hölderlin. In the section entitled “Reflections on the harmonic system” she sets out the significance of the *scala enigmatica* on C throughout the work (225ff.). In Nielinger-Vakil’s view, “because the tragedy of Prometheus is generally marked by the gods’ absence [. . .] the *scala enigmatica* on C primarily came to represent the *Grenzen der Menschheit*, the ‘Limits of Humanity’ which are to be transcended and overcome.”

She also describes the role of Gaia's independent material, two sets of interlocking tritones (forming two 0167 tetrachords) labeled by the composer "T" in his sketches; this material depicts "the primordial power" of the "goddess and common mother of god and man, whose power exceeds that of all men born to her.". Nielinger-Vakil notes some striking interactions between the Gaia material and the pitch classes that form the complement of the *scala enigmatica*, namely G, D, A, and E flat; indeed, the collection of notes itself just barely misses forming a collection of the T kind, a point she might have made more explicit. And she points out that three of the four pitch classes in the complement represent the open strings shared by violin, viola, and cello—a nice observation that reinforces the sense of primordial sonic power that she connects to Gaia generally. "The overriding use of the interval categories of the Gaia material, however, also ensures that a genuine dialectic between the two types of material ensues. It is with their compositional application that Nono controls the large-scale processes and allows for total assimilation as well as maximum contrast, sudden openings into Rilkean *Klarsein* and truly disconcerting clouds of microtonal tension" (229). The reader is then led through *Prometeo* with a focus on how "these harmonic categories are used to dramatize and elucidate Cacciari's reading," and how that drama unfolds in space (234).

Drawing on archival sources, conversations with Richard, interpretation of texts set to music, existing scholarly literature, and the score, the cumulative effect of Nielinger-Vakil's comprehensive discussion of *Prometeo* is remarkable. Despite its density, the prose, here and throughout the book, flows well, helped by supporting figures and tables, while keeping the concept of listening central to the narrative.

In closing, I would like to express special appreciation for Dr. Nielinger-Vakil's dedication to the field with such high standards of scholarship over the course of her career,

culminating with this outstanding monograph, published shortly before her tragically premature death in 2016. Deeply regrettable for all of us in the relatively small community of scholars of twentieth-century Italian music, we can pay tribute to her legacy by continuing the conversations she has begun, with the same level of diligence, attention to analytical detail, and respect for historical and biographical context.

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