

## LUIGI NONO

Dr David C. F. Wright

WARNING Strict copyright applies to this article and all of Dr Wright's articles

Luigi Nono was a somewhat withdrawn man. He did not have an expansive nature. I never knew him to tell a joke or laugh, and colleagues, who also knew him, say the same thing. He was a sober and serious man and while he may not have been popular to everybody, I liked him.

However strange it is to say, he did not look Italian but rather Venetian with those piercing blue eyes.

He was tall and thin in his early to middle years, still unpretentious and not forthcoming about anything. He married Schoenberg's daughter and I believe that they were separated for a while. It is hard to image him being in love or married in view of the character that he showed to us.

He studied with Malipiero the elder, and dismissed his attitude to music as being too conservative. Nono became interested and, indeed, fascinated by both the mechanics and the science of music and the development of artistry within new forms. Although he seemed to be cold and clinical musically, and said that all music came from formulae, it seems to me that his music always had a human expression. It could, however, be argued that a lot of music is formulae or device. The canon, the *ricercare*, the fugue, the *passacaglia*, the ground bass are all formulae. Bach can use them and it is accepted but formulae used by Webern, Schoenberg and Berg or, for that matter, Bartok or Hindemith are criticised, if not condemned. Early composers used ornamental devices such as the trill, the shake, the mordent (upper and lower), and others, which, quite frankly, can be a downright nuisance and the cause of endless pointless arguments. And so when Nono becomes fascinated by devices and uses them he is in the same category as the Bachs and Handels, et al.

Nono's music was rarely played in Italy until *Il Canto Sospeso* appeared in the mid 1960s. That great conductor, Hermann Scherchen had played Nono's music in Switzerland and elsewhere as Nono was not accepted in his own country.

*Il Canto Sospeso* is a twelve note work with a brilliantly conceived note row

A rising to B flat	minor 2nd
that B flat down to A flat	major 2nd
that A flat rising to B natural	augmented 2nd
that B natural falling to G	major 3rd.
that G rising to C	perfect 4th.
that C falling to F sharp	diminished 5th.
that F sharp rising to C sharp	perfect 5th
that C sharp falling to F natural	augmented 5th
that F natural rising to D	major 6th
that D falling to E	minor 7th
that E rising to E flat	augmented 7th.

Another mechanical device used by Nono was the mirror form which means exactly what it says. He used it in such works as *Composizione* for orchestra and *Variants* for orchestra. Webern used it, for example, in his *Piano Variations Opus 27* and bars 37 to 40 are an ideal example of mirror form.

Nono was meticulous. For example, in the violin solo in *Variants* every note has a different tonal marking which causes the passage to have a constantly changing colour.

He was born in Venice on 29 January 1924. He was educated at the Benedetto Marcello Conservatory and studied composition under Gian Francesco Malipiero between 1941 and 1945. He studied law concurrently at Padua University and graduated in 1946. He was an active member of the Italian Resistance during

1943-1945. A workaholic, he furthered his studies in advanced harmony and composition with Bruno Maderna and Hermann Scherchen. He went to Darmstadt in 1950 as a teacher and further studied the use of electronics in music. This was his decade of research into mechanical music, as it has often been called. He became the artistic director of the Heinrich-Strobel-Foundation in Freilberg.

Electronics in music is decried by many. In addition, because it is often varied at subsequent performances, it is said that the piece is never played the same. Every performance is different. Yes, that may be but it could be said to some extent of early music which employed improvisation, for example, cadenzas in concertos. If we had lived at the time at the end of the eighteenth century and heard several performances of one of the great Mozart Piano Concertos no performance would have been the same, not just in matters of tempo but in the improvisational passages such as a cadenza. I have 60 recordings of the glorious Brahms' Double Concerto, all of them are different but all the notes are the same and the sounds are the same. There is no improvisation

It is appreciated that some works 'written' today are completely aleatory, all down to chance. And I would agree that this may not constitute music that can be ascribed to a composer. But the use of electronics can be very effective and produce relevant sounds that orchestras cannot produce... for example, the wonderful stone throwing passage in Humphrey Searle's opera *The Photo of the Colonel*. But this is a short passage. A whole work of nothing but electronics is different. A work that is partly thorough composed and partly improvisatory with electronics may be a hybrid and some think it to be unsatisfactory.

Nono was a revolutionary both politically and musically and the two go together. The comparatively new order of communism called for a new order in music. All that is traditional is to be condemned. He was a strenuous anti-fascist. It is a great pity when politics dictate to music. How Shostakovich suffered at the hands of Stalin and his evil regime is one example. Nono was a communist and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist party. From about 1964 he organised debates with trade unions in various factories. He visited the Soviet Union many times and Cuba as well as other European communist countries. He was composer in residence at the Dartington Summer School in Devon in 1960.

He was a fascinating character. My friend, the distinguished British composer Reginald Smith Brindle has allowed me to quote from his as yet unpublished autobiography which details his meetings with Nono.

While I was in Venice, I formed a firm friendship with Luigi Nono, at that time reputed to be the most advanced of the avant-garde in Italy. But through he had a strong reputation, his works were never played except in Germany, so he was a bit of an unknown quantity. He lived on the island of La Giudecca opposite San Marco with his wife who was Schoenberg's daughter.

I went there mostly while he was composing *Il Canto Sospeso*, a politically orientated work of choral-orchestral character which involved the most abstruse constructivism I have ever come across. Mathematics governed every detail of the composition... the pitch of the notes, their duration, volume and sound character. In his study, there was a wall entirely covered with successions of numbers, notes and performance details, and from this he extracted all the details of the composition. It seemed to me that all his intense constructivism was a certain formula for the creation of non-music, yet from recordings of his music, I got the impression of a highly sensitive artistry. I was so taken up with his intellectual principles that for some years afterwards I would use his methods here and there in my music. Nono had strong political views, which came out in the texts he used. He was a communist but also a rabid anti-fascist, and I think this partly accounted for the lack of performances in Italy. Only towards the sixties did he have works performed at Venice, his home town. At the Festival performance of *Il Canto Sospeso* there was a fracas at the back of the theatre between communists and neo-fascists which caused no small disturbance. I was at the front, a critic's privileged position, so I was not much bothered. However, William Glock, Head of BBC Music at that time, was in the middle of it and quite visibly shaken.

However, Nono was obviously most pleased at the political row his music had provoked. He invited me to a 'little' celebration after the concert, but when I got there, I found myself in a jostling crowd of at least two

hundred guests and then pushed into a place opposite Glock and his wife, who both looked quite stunned. After trying to quiet their obvious unease with much tedium and little result, I had had enough and went off leaving the party still not yet started. I could see that it was going to be a long and tiresome evening.

Nono's opera, *Intolleranza 1960*, was performed in La Fenice in 1961 but this time the neo-fascists used a different and more subtle stratagem of opposition. The performance was well under way when a shower of stink bombs rained down on the orchestra. There was a mad scramble to get out, including we critics on the front seats and there was mayhem for the next ten minutes. The stink was incredible. Eventually, the performance was resumed, but in a rather subdued fashion. This time, I don't think Nono was pleased.

I don't believe he was really a convinced communist at all, though he was certainly anti-fascist. Like many Italian composers, he found support in the Communist Party which was not available elsewhere. There were many cities and regions in Italy under communist rule and these promoted music of party members. For example, in Tuscany, thirty four performances of Nono's *La Fabbrica Illuminata* were given at various factories for the edification of the workers, but just what the workers thought of this arduous and enigmatic piece does not seem to have been recorded.

When one considers that Italy is predominantly Roman Catholic and that communism is opposed to the teaching of the Catholic church one might ask why some much of Italy became communist. In fact, it could be said that, at one time, it was on the brink of total communism. This is because throughout history the Papacy split Italy into various sections. Many Popes were, of course, not Christians or even religious or had any training in ecclesiastical or theological matters. Some Popes were Dukes or important landowners or political figures and would claim that they represented that which was above and that which was on the earth. Some Popes began their rule as mere children simply because they were next in line and, if Catholic dogma is to be believed the next descendant from the apostle Peter. One Pope might also be the ruler of a part of Italy and his successor another part and so Italy was divided politically although maintaining its overall Catholicism. The political activities of the Papacy were of more impact than any ecclesiastical ones and it is a fact of history that many Popes were villains and rogues. This caused Italy to be divided and although Catholicism was upheld, a large percentage of people were so sick of its political input and its blatant hypocrisy that to welcome any new order, such as communism was more than a possibility even after the unification of Italy in the 1870s.

This two-sided situation was a feature of Nono. He could be bellicose and argumentative on political issues to the point of real anger but in his dealings with people on other matters he was gentle, withdrawn and reticent.

Whatever one thinks of Nono's music, *Il Canto Sospeso* is a magnificent achievement. It is scored for soprano, contralto, tenor, mixed chorus and orchestra and consists of excerpts from the last letters of those condemned to death because they were members of the European Resistance movement. It is a profound, deeply felt work, a veritable masterpiece with a simple serialism. There is lyricism and clear melodic lines. The chorus sometimes use merely vowel sounds and, at other times, explore new ideas of considerable expression.

But it must not be taken that he is a one work composer. In the mid 1970s the mood of his work changed to a sort of peaceful resignation as in *Con Luigi Dallapiccola* and the string quartet *Frammente-Stille*. He returned to his fascination with electronics and composed his massive work *Prometeo: Tragedia dell'ascolto* which includes literary excerpts from a wide range of writers.

Of his more conventional music are his orchestral works *Variations canoniche* (1951), *Composizione I* (1951) *Der expressioni* (1953) *Composizione II* (1959) and two piano concertos (1972 and 1975). Instrumental pieces include *Polifonica-Monodia- Ritimica* (1951) *Canti per tredici* (1955) *Varianti* for violin, strings and woodwind (1957) and *Frammente-Stille an Diotima* for string quartet (1980). There are some marvellous scores for choir with and without orchestra..

Nono died in Venice on 8 May 1990.

He was a most interesting man although it has to be said that his music is for the informed and for the discerning. The ignorant will simply dismiss it but that will take us more about them than it will about Nono.

A museum in his memory has been set up in Venice.

---

Copyright David C. F. Wright 2002. This article, or any part of it, must not be copied, reproduced or stored in any retrieval system without the prior written consent of the author. Failure to comply is illegal and will render any offender liable to action at law.