



Luigi Nono: Out-Breching Brecht.

Luigi Nono saw himself as a successor to Bertolt Brecht and saw his music as the subsequent step in revolutionary theater. Texts by Brecht, and also Walter Benjamin, are found throughout Nono's librettos and theoretical writings. Nono also acknowledges Weill's important position in "liberating music-theater" from traditional opera⁵⁹. Nono believed that his theater stood, like Brecht's and Weill's, in opposition to the mythological theater of Wagner. His ideas are clearly inspired by Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, as well as the similar device of *ostranenie* [making strange], which comes from the Russian formalist avant-garde, but with some clear differences. Like Brecht, Nono wanted his audiences to be critical. Nono writes that the audience should "faced with clear choices... impelled to become aware of and also actively put into effect its own choices, not channeling them into aesthetic categories, posed and resolved abstractly... but deciding those choices in connection with life"⁶⁰. We see here that Nono also wants to go further than Weill's *Gebrauchsmusik*. Nono doesn't mean to only provoke thought or be of "general" use, but wants to inspire direct decisions and actions. We will come back to this key difference very soon, but it is still clear that Nono uses allegory in order to challenge the audience and inspire thought.

There are multiple examples of "allegorical" techniques in Nono's theater. Even the way that Nono scores vocally is overtly allegorical. Let's look at his treatment of the legendary anarchist Louise Michel in *Al gran sole carico d'amore*, whose first section is based on Brecht's *Die Tage der Kommune*. Multiple soprano's sing the role here, and not just in monophony or homophony. Rather, the character "Louise Michel" is represented through a kind of hocket (see *figure 6*). In the libretto, Louise Michel is a single character and not some kind of chorus, but Nono's text-setting attacks the idea that Louise Michel is a single individual, and raises the idea that she could, for example, exist in the spirit of the people. No individual sings an entire word, but instead, they depend on each other to make meaning. Any direct significance of the polyphonic treatment of Louise Michel is never explicitly stated by Nono, and what is more

⁵⁹ Nono, Luigi. "Possibility and Necessity of a New Music Theater". *Nostalgia for the Future*. ed. Ida De Benedicuts and Veniero Rizzardi. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. p. 217.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.213.

Handwritten musical score for Luciano Berio's "Al gran sole carico d'amore" (mm. 554-557). The score includes staves for NASTRO, FLAUTO-ARPA, CORONA DE S. COLA GRANDE, L. MICHEL, and SOPRANO, ALTO, TENORE, BASSO. The music features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and is marked with "ACCEL" and "1=84u". The lyrics are in French: "RTIENS TOUT E-NTIÈRE", "SO CIA-LE À LA RÉ-VO-LU-TION", "LA RÉ-VO-LU-TION", "LA VO-LU-TION".

Figure 6: Al gran sole carico d'amore mm. 554-557

important is that this gesture *eschews a literal reading* of the music as portraying a historical narrative. This helps the music resist the “cult of personalities” that plagued many leftist depictions of the Commune, or other historical events.

There is another side to Nono’s use of allegory, one that relates more directly to Benjamin than Brecht. In allegory there is a void that opens up between sound of language and the image of text. In his analysis of Baroque theory of language, Walter Benjamin writes,

“Script is not transfigured into sound; on the contrary, the world of this writing remains intent on unfolding, altogether self-sufficiently, its own proper import. Script and sound stand opposed to each other in high-tension polarity... The gulf between signifying image writing and intoxicating speech sound, as it tears open the solid massif of word-meaning, necessarily draws the gaze into the depths of language... ‘Word-Baroque’[sound] and ‘image-Baroque’[text] — as Cysarz only recently designated these forms of expression — are grounded in each other as poles. The tension between word and script is im-

measurable in the Baroque. The word[-sound], one may say, is the ecstasy of the creature, is exposing, daring, impotence before God, script[-image] is the collectedness of the creature, is dignity, superiority, omnipotence over the things of the world”.⁶¹

In Luigi Nono’s 1982 work, *Quando stanno morendo*, for 4 female voices, cello, bass flute, and electronics, this divide between word-sound and text-image, is articulated to its limit. Throughout this work, the text is sung in a sustained, fragmented, and polyphonic manner which makes the words impossible to hear as “words”. Any reference to the rhythm of the language being sung has been removed. What are audible are the vowels, which seem to be floating in their physicality; stripped of any kind of demarcation of time or meaning which could be provided by consonants. In speech, it is consonants divide air into units, rhythmically, creating the aspect of time. It is of great significance that each vowel here is sung without interruption, and indeed without movement or melisma, each seeming to be infinite and final.

21

S. 2
31
(O) O
mf ppp p
CI CHIA

Ms.
(O) O
mf ppp p
CI ME

S. 1
♩ = 45^{*)}
mp ppp mf mf
IL SO CHIAMERÀ

IL SOLE CI CHIAMERÀ

Figure 7: Luigi Nono’s *Quando Stanno Morendo*, III mm 31-33.

⁶¹ Benjamin, Walter. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, tr. Eiland. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. pp. 217-218.

However, at the same time, the *text*, or *text-image* stands under the vocal lines in the score (see *Figure 7*). Why is this? Precisely to highlight the separation between voice and language. How the articulation of words through song destroys language in an allegorical disaster. The larger structure of the piece also highlights the “abyss” between text and language. The piece is symmetrical, with the outer, longer sections being sparsely accompanied and marked by the slow and fragmented vocal polyphony described above. The middle section, however, is characterized by noisy chaotic electronic accompaniment and *spoken* text. Here again we have a contrast between *text*[-image], this time represented by audible speech, and *noise*[-sound], which has now become something inhuman, as if to link the *sound* of our voices heard in the outer sections with *all sounds*. This middle section, by far the most active and tumultuous, is simultaneously a figure of the abyss around, and over which, language stands, impotent. Is this a negation of the dialectic mentioned earlier by Benjamin, where the sound of the voice is impotent and mortal while text is silent and omnipotent? Whatever it is, the two poles are clearly at odds with each other and sparks are flying. But this reading of *Quando stanno morendo* as a “negation” of the text-sound dialectic could be a key to its political aspect: as in the earlier example of keening, it seems that the *sound of the voice*, the *noise of the voice*, has gained power over the text.

These Benjaminian and Brechtian perspectives on allegory are by no means incompatible. Rather, it is worth highlighting that the two Nono examples that I chose highlights the exact same vocal technique, and both pieces are explicitly political. While *Al gran sole* is political in content and archetypes, *Quando stanno morendo* is more similar to the political use of laments like keening, mentioned earlier. *Quando stanno morendo* was written when Nono’s friends in Poland were arrested by Jaruzelski. The work is dedicated “the Polish friends and comrades who resist in exile, in hiding, in jail, at work — who continue to hope amidst hopelessness, who continue to hope despite their disbelief”. We have established that the text has been set in an allegorical way, but this work is a great example of the coincidence and overlap of lament and allegory. The texts are indeed perfect examples of lamentation in themselves. Velimir Khlebnikov’s “Moskva, ty kto?” [Moscow, who are you], with its irresolvable conundrums and lists of rhetorical questions, perfectly characterizes the Old Testament lamentational forms described earlier, and contain an ambiguous “hopelessness” (or “disbelief” to use Nono’s own term) that corresponds to the Derridian concept of prayer. Nono’s *Quando stanno morendo* is lamentation

as protest, but it is also lamentation as dynamite whose sound blasts to pieces the Eastern-Bloc's totalitarian domination of meaning.

As we mentioned earlier, Nono wanted to go farther than Brecht and Weill. Instead of merely showing them an allegorical picture of society and leaving the representation open-ended, such that audience could then contrast what they had seen to the real world, Nono wanted his theater to *change* the world directly. Following the example of the early Soviet theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, Nono writes that theater should not only portray real-life, but directly engage real life, meaning that it must “directly involve with political disputes”.⁶² For Meyerhold, and Nono, this “direct engagement” was not just symbolic, but physical and *technical*. Technology for Nono is inherently political, and his chief criticism of Stockhausen is that Stockhausen's non-political engagement with technology made him complicit with technocratic Capitalism.⁶³ This was all part of Nono's quest to “liberate” theater from Wagnerian mythology. Indeed, Wagner's use of industrial instruments in the closed acoustic space of Bayreuth could be seen as the first example of unconscious technological domination of art.

For Nono, in order to change the world, we need to intervene and change technology. Thus, theater needed to be aware of all technological and indeed all technical/formal elements of which the world was made up, and then manipulate all of them simultaneously. All aspects would be integrated into theater – time, space, light, and sound.

The purpose of this was to overcome the gap between art and reality, and between art and truth. According to Nono, this was what had kept art from generating real revolutionary change before. Art had always reflected some kind of mythological falsehood instead of being unified with real-life in such a way that enabled intervention. Instead of being “dominated by technology”, Nono wished to use these technologies to destroy mythology and liberate humanity. It was no longer enough to supply “revolutionary mythology”: “It is not a matter of opposing an emphasis on content to various manifestations of formalism, but of affirming the objec-

⁶² Nono, Luigi. “Possibility and Necessity of a New Music Theater”. *Nostalgia for the Future*. ed. Ida De Benedicuts and Veniero Rizzardi. trans. John O'Donnell. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. p. 218.

⁶³ Nono, Luigi. “Music and Power”. *Nostalgia for the Future*. ed. Ida De Benedicuts and Veniero Rizzardi. trans. John O'Donnell. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. p. 293.

tive inseparability of form and idea in overcoming any abstract opposition between art and truth".⁶⁴

But here Nono gets into trouble with the thinkers to which he saw himself successor. In order for Benjaminian or Brechtian theater to function, there must be distance between the empty signifiers on the stage and "the real world". No "real" world is posited at all through allegory, and allegory in itself is diametrically opposed to any notion of "real-life" (or any life) or "truth".

"Allegory, as the sign that is pointedly set off against its meaning, has its place in art as the antithesis to the beautiful appearance in which signifier and signified flow into each other. Dissolve this brittleness of allegory, and it forfeits all authority... Introduc[e] "life" into allegories, [and they] in turn suddenly wither like flowers".⁶⁵

Allegory doesn't have anything to do with life, and remains broken off from reality,⁶⁶ and instead of the present, allegory operates in dialectical now-time which is poised on an impossibly thin border between the past and the present; between death and becoming. For Benjamin, inauthenticity is not a problem for revolutionary art, but a precondition. There is no "original", for the past is constantly recurring and interrupting the now. Benjamin writes that life is "a series of insignificant moments" in a game where "each moment is fraud, a repetition of a repetition".⁶⁷ Nono does not view allegory in this way and, thus, misreads Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility", believing Benjamin's work to be critical of inauthenticity, or at least choosing to read it in a different light. Nono writes that "a tape recording, radio broadcast, or CDs are all *falsifications*: space disappears completely in all of

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 213

⁶⁵ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. p.374.

⁶⁶ Rather than in "life", for Benjamin, the site of the struggle is the *image sphere*, a strange realm where the inanimate is poised to become agentive at any moment. See: Benjamin, Walter. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia." In *Illuminations*. trans. Edmund Jephcott. ed. Peter Demetz. New York: HBJ. 1978. pp. 177-192.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, Walter "Trauerspiel and Tragedy", cited by Kiarina Kordela in *Sparks Will Fly* (SUNY press, 2015), p. 104.

them.”⁶⁸ Because CD’s separate music from their original location, they fail to capture the *truth* of the musical experience – something which, for Nono, is of critical importance.

While Nono successfully avoids the “Tragic” tendency to give one moment in time (death) a centralized and culminant significance, Nono’s reading stands as an – unfortunately common – misreading of Benjamin’s text. Benjamin, while expressing nostalgia for the lost power of art in its original context, was excited by the revolutionary power of this mass decontextualization that occurred with technological reproduction. It was precisely this allegorical distance between the art object and “life” that, for Benjamin, reveal revolutionary potential, whereas for Nono, technology should be used to impact “every aspect of reality”. Nono, while claiming to work against Wagnerian mythologization, may indeed have created a more extreme form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Benjamin writes that mediums whose production is itself a kind labor within the inauthentic, where the question of an “original” recording is totally beside the point, are the mediums which offer us hope in the modern world. Benjamin says of film, “The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation”⁶⁹. Rather than being dismayed by the self-alienation and inauthenticity brought about by technology, one must make use of it. Otherwise, the “revolutionary opportunities implied by this... [will be] used for counter-revolutionary purposes”.⁷⁰

I should stress that Nono’s reading of Benjamin is often on point, and he gains from it a healthy criticality towards “technology for technology’s sake”, recognizing that the aestheticization of technology “in itself” is never be politically neutral. The key for Benjamin was embracing the inauthenticity within recording technologies and using it to subvert capitalism and release new potentialities for mankind, whereas Nono viewed that inauthenticity to be an element of capitalism itself. And so, 30 years after Nono, these are elements that still need to be

⁶⁸ Nono, Luigi. “Other Possibilities of Listening”. *Nostalgia for the Future*. p. 379.

⁶⁹ Benjamin, Walter. “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility (second version)” paragraph XII. In *‘The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility’ and Other Writings on Media*. trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn. ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 32

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.33

restored to opera and music theater at large, and there are many composers today doing this work.