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*Inside the acoustic space*

Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* is a foundational work of modern music; its production, directed by Carlo Fontana, at the 1984 Biennale Musica was one of the great cultural events of recent history, as the monumental edition published by Ricordi in 2017 testifies. The printed score, edited by Marco Mazzolini and André Richard, includes 512 preliminary pages in Italian, English and German, with precise annotations regarding performance practice as well as technical indications regarding the arrangement of the sound sources, the treatment of the electronics and the musical dramaturgy. The publication constitutes a veritable bible of Luigi Nono's musical aesthetics and ensures the work's continued accessibility and dissemination, laying the foundation for its presence in the repertoire of the future.

The new production of *Prometeo*, produced by La Biennale di Venezia under the leadership of Roberto Cicutto is a special project of the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC) to mark the agreement with the Fondazione Luigi Nono; it confirms the importance of the 1984 event and serves as an important reminder for the Biennale Musica, both now and in the future, of the need for courage on the part of every artistic director in this sector in terms of programming decisions so as to ensure that music regains the essential recognition it deserves as a fundamental, universal language.

In Luigi Nono's compositional intention, *Prometeo* was – and still remains today, forty years after its first performance – a challenge to our capacity to listen; it is a learning and uplifting journey, an acoustic labyrinth of extraordinary complexity and beauty from which we emerge thanks to the care with which the composer planned every aspect of what he called his “acoustic dramaturgy”.

The treatment of the text is innovative, experimental, impressive. According to one of Nono's most extreme injunctions – “The text must never be read! It must be heard and perceived through the orchestral ensembles” – Massimo Cacciari's texts have an intrinsic literary and dramaturgical value and, at the same time, function as expressive meta-indications for the performers, as well as themselves becoming musical material as Nono deconstructs them into their phonetic components, creating echoes and augmentations of fragments of the text to form extremely diverse textures and patterns. Short phrases and rhythmic or syllabic fragments float in and out of silence, re-emerging and overlapping, suddenly vanishing. The effect is one of cries, whispered moans, gasping breaths, that are lost in liminal acoustic abysses, echoes of voices constantly filtered through spirals of sound, silences hinted at and then dramatically proclaimed, that suspend musical time and treat it as compositional material.

The Prometheus of Nono and Cacciari is a non-personage, an anti-Proposopeia, a non-personified meditation on the drama of human frailty. There is no protagonist: the listener themselves is a Prometheus, attempting to free themselves from their mortal chains through listening. The 224 pages of the score, published on the basis of the definitive version performed at the Stabilimento Ansaldo in Milan on 25 September 1985, is dense with complex harmonic aggregates, constantly changing indications as to *andamento* and intensity, extreme vocal effects and extended instrumental techniques, but also spaces and silences: a lagoon of pauses where musical events emerge like islands in the silence. The musical symbols in the score reflect the sculptural structure of Massimo Cacciari's libretto, with words highlighted in bold and in capital letters and

distributed on the page according to novel formal and creative criteria. At times the sounds, like the letters, cease, only to reappear again abruptly. The unisons of the score, like the assonances of the text, are intensified against each other, with micro-tonal shifts, with echoes and allusions. What we can see in the blinding complexity of the printed score is the symbolic transcription of a vast acoustic theatre created by music and text that does not involve visual aspects, in line with the exhortation of Prometheus that reaches us from Greek tragedy and remains valid in our times: "Listen!".

The Ark constructed by Renzo Piano for the Chiesa di San Lorenzo, with groups of singers, instrumentalists and loudspeakers placed around the audience, is today part of the history of architecture and has influenced more or less explicitly the conception and realisation of all modern halls dedicated to listening, such as Jan Nouvel's Nouvelle Philharmonie and the auditorium created by Arata Isozaki for the Akiyoshidai International Art Village. Renzo Piano's design accompanied the work through its conceptual and compositional process and was used up until the Milan performance that determined the final version of the score. Since 1987 *Prometeo* has undergone a long and complex journey through time and architecture to return to the Chiesa di San Lorenzo, which Nono himself had originally chosen on the basis of its acoustic properties; the architectonic space today no longer contains the Ark, but the definitive score includes in a virtual manner the original architectural structure in the treatment of the sound and its diffusion. The same can be said of conductors Claudio Abbado and Peter Hirsch, programmers and sound engineers Alvis Vidolin, Peter Haller, Mauro Graziani, Sylviane Sapir and André Richard, and soloists Roberto Fabbriani, Giancarlo Schiaffini, Ciro Scarponi and Stefano Scodanibbio, amongst others, with whom Luigi Nono collaborated closely as he worked towards the first performance and the final score. Their interpretative approaches, their technical and timbric research, and their unique performance style are passed into the score, so that their experience lives on through the interpretations of the musicians of the future, based on their own constructive dialogue with the composer. The dramatic power of *Prometeo* is thus entirely incorporated into the music and transferred into the meta-score, a project of the highest editorial quality, with the materials of the Fondo Luigi Nono providing a poetic narrative mirror that recounts through photos, drawings and sketches everything that led to the final work.

In the compositional life of Luigi Nono, *Prometeo* represents the final destination in his long poetic journey towards silence and rarefaction. In *Prometeo* acoustic events rarely rise above a whisper, except to dramatically highlight the restoration of silence, and the organisation of the frequencies returns to the primary architectural forms of the founding intervals of western music, the octave, the fifth and the fourth, contrasted by dense microtonal processes that reveal the acoustics of space and modulate them in a continuous process: a long, lava-like expanse of sound and silence that invades and creates space: "How sound reads space, and how space reveals sound". For Luigi Nono, as for many other Venetian composers before and after him, Venice is a reality created by architectonic and natural forces, where exteriors and interiors resonate in a single harmony, a great acoustic macro-instrument made up of interconnected open and enclosed areas that composers listen to from early childhood as an ancestral sound; a complex Mahlerian *Naturlaut* which becomes a privileged key to access gestalt reality: "I myself strive to listen to the colours, just as I listen to the stones or the skies of Venice: as relationships between undulations, vibrations freed from all symbolic ties."

In the Renaissance treatise writers of Adrian Willaert's Venetian School, Luigi Nono discovered the same ambition he himself had: to combine his own contrapuntal skills

and compositional forms with the extraordinary sound universe of the city, which teaches musicians to perceive sound as an ontological reality: “In Zarlino and Vicentino, for example, there is a unity or correlation between musical numerology and an acoustic perception of the musical phenomenon that dispenses entirely with subjective, sentimental, figurative moments”. He was accompanied on his long exploratory journey from listening to the concrete reality of Venice to the development of complex, hyper-structured music by two great Venetian masters, Bruno Maderna and Gian Francesco Malipiero. Like Nono – and together with him – both these composers would spend hours in the Biblioteca Marciana studying the past in depth, and analysed the acoustics of St. Mark's Basilica, the first historical locus of experimentation with the diffusion of sound. The “acoustic multiverse” of Venice, with its “resonant silences of inaudibility”, emerges from all their works, and never more powerfully than in the score of *Prometeo*, in its sound islands connected by silences and enveloped by “waves of voices”.

The audience of the new production in the Chiesa di San Lorenzo will experience inside the church what Luigi Nono lived in his ongoing exploration of the sounds of the city, in the walks which Carlo Fontana recalled in a recent interview: “Long walks through the Venetian calli, at night, during which he would tell me about the project, strongly rooted in the life and tradition of the city. Through live electronics and the traditional musical part, Nono was evoking the magic of certain Venetian enchantments, in which he found particular sonorities.” Luigi Nono's dream of an open-air Venetian musical project for “towers, instruments, bells and voices” finds fulfilment in a score that involves the evocation and spatialisation of the concrete sounds of Venice, but which, in printed form, can be transmuted back into the performative future through its extremely precise musical symbols, which can always be turned into a pure listening event. From the city of Venice, the generative cradle of printed music in the Renaissance, comes a printed meta-score destined for posterity.

*Prometeo* is the point of arrival, the bridge to the compositional future, of Luigi Nono's idea of expanding the concept of musical space: not only the performance in a given architectural space, but also the creation of an inner musical space for performers and listeners alike: “the sound reads the space” and radiates into the environment that gives it form; the acoustic waves flow into the space, generating reverberations that are constantly recreated and synthesised by the listener.

The final score represents Luigi Nono's *Promethean* effort to free our extraordinary and unexplored faculty for listening from the shackles of familiarity; its publication embodies the ever-evoked *Wanderer*, the wayfarer who will continue to bring the sound and silence of Venice to the world.

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