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“*Mit innigster Empfindung*”. Luigi Nono and Walter Benjamin on music and feeling

1.

In the history of modern music it is possible to trace a tendency to restrain music both from appealing emotionally to its listeners and from expressing the composer’s subjective emotions. For this reason, modern music has been considered, on the one hand, as an attempt to deviate musical compositions from what has already been called the “*mélocentrisme*” or “*saturation musicale*”¹ characteristic of 19th century music and, on the other hand, as concentrating on the alleged main ‘opponent’ of emotion, that is to say, on reason or rationality. The aim of this paper is to argue that the tendency of modern composers to resist expressing and appealing to emotions is compatible with an articulation between music and feeling which does not exclude critical reasoning. Focusing on the works of the composer Luigi Nono (1924-1990), and particularly on his late compositions *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima* (1980) and *Prometeo – tragedia dell’ascolto* (1981-1985), the paper aims to show that emotional restraint in music does not necessarily entail the suppression of an affective response of the audience even when, as in Nono’s works, instead of aiming to simply delight the ear, music is supposed to arise a reflective state in the listeners. The paper starts by clarifying Nono’s position towards ‘New Music’ (section 1), it then goes on to argue that Walter Benjamin’s ideas on music are helpful to understand the composer’s work (section 2), and it ends by showing

¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta (Figures de Wagner)* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), pp. 221, 224.

how Nono's late works offer a musical experience which requires critical listeners but also concentrates on the expression of human feelings (section 3).

The concern with restraining or refraining the emotional appeal which, at least since Plato, has always been considered constitutive of music² has historical and philosophical reasons that are not exclusive of the musical domain. They define, to a great extent, the history of the modern arts and, in a very specific way, the history of modernism and the worry of modern artists with the consequences of stimulating their public emotionally. Modernists proposed that emotional restraint should also apply to the artist's expression of personal emotions and that works of art should not convey or foster individual feelings. These views related to more general concerns and to the inheritance of art's struggle for autonomy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a struggle that tried to free artistic creation from the influence and even dependence of other realms of human experience. Art's emancipation entailed, in turn, an unprecedented questioning of artistic tradition and conventions, as well as a generalised urgency to look for new forms of expression.

As regards to music, these tendencies were manifest in the transition from absolute music's claim of autonomy³ – that is to say, autonomy from the other arts as well as autonomy from any religious, political or social influence – to the musical innovations brought about by modern composers, and most famously by Schoenberg's dodecaphonism. The reasons that led Schoenberg to the invention of dodecaphonism and to the defence of atonality can be traced back to the debate between Hanslick and Wagner with which “the modern discussion of the expression of emotions in music really begins”⁴. This

² On this topic, see Leonardo V. Distaso, “On the Common Origin of Music and Philosophy: Plato, Nietzsche, and Benjamin” (*Topoi*, 28, 2009), pp. 137-142.

³ On the history of this concept, see the invaluable recent work by Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason. Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 295. On the Hanslick/Wagner debate, see the whole chapter 10 “Emotional Expression in Music” in Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, pp. 293-321. In truth, this debate still goes on in the contemporary

debate can be briefly summarized by the contrast between Wagner's praise of music's ability to express emotions and Hanslick's denial that music has the capacity to express or disclose anything other than itself⁵. Their opposition concerned music's relation to, or independence from, extra-musical domains. Wagner emphasized music's inability to convey concepts and argued for a union of music with the other arts, particularly the verbal arts, in the form of a sung text. Such union would bring meaning or "content" to an otherwise empty group of abstract sounds lacking in social utility, isolated from the world and, therefore, suitable only to entertain the hearing. Contrarily to this view, and against the argument of music's isolation from the world, Hanslick proposed the idea of music's autonomy: its particular form could not be related to any other kind of form, and its beauty could not be related to any other kind of beauty.

Hanslick's ideas proved to be very fruitful for the music that came after him, mainly as regards composers that reacted to convention and conventional ways of responding to music. An example of this is Stravinsky's statement according to which "music expresses itself"⁶. Another example is the way in which Hanslick's claims about music's autonomy also became a powerful argument against expressionism and against music understood as mere self-expression. But eventually – and ironically – these same arguments ended up contributing for the idea that music's subjective and emotional neutrality is a proof of its engagement with the world, an engagement that could even take social or political forms. We can find an example of this understanding in the words of

reflection on music and the emotions between the partisans of the idea that "although music cannot *represent* emotions", it can, nevertheless, "*express* emotions and *arouse* emotions" (Jenefer Robinson, "Music and Emotions" (*Journal of Literary Theory*, 1.2, 2007), pp. 395-419), and those who claim that it is not essential to music to possess emotions, arouse emotions, express emotions, or represent emotions (Nick Zangwill, "Against Emotion: Hanslick Was Right About Music" (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 44.1, 2004), pp. 29-43; Nick Zangwill, "Music, Metaphor and Emotion" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65.4, 2007), pp. 391-400).

⁵ Bonds, *Absolute Music*, p. 127. See, especially, Part III, "Essence or Effect: 1850-1945", pp. 127-282.

⁶ Quoted by Bonds, *Absolute Music*, p. 267.

a pupil of Schoenberg, the composer Hans Eisler (1898-1962), who in 1928 claimed that the “turn away from romanticism” led to the conviction that “the sentiment of one individual was no longer sufficient to express something of more general validity, and so one wanted to make music absolutely, without feeling, without expression, only a play in tones”⁷.

The search for originality and innovation led to a radical renewal of musical structures and languages and was in line with the opposition between subjective, individual feelings and emotions and music’s “general validity”, which sought to reach objectivity in art. After the First World War, many composers rejected the musical expressionism of the first half of the 20th century and its focus on the depths of subjectivity. The “New Objectivity” (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) emphasized a detached perspective toward all the arts, and emotional detachment was central to this new aesthetic⁸. However, such emphasis led to one of the problems raised by art’s struggle for autonomy, freedom, or emancipation, that is to say, it led to what some have called “aesthetic alienation”⁹. In effect, art’s tendency to impersonal neutrality or independency brought about its gradual separation from the public’s understanding, possible approval, and recognition. In music’s case, emotional restraint developed, in some cases, almost to the point of abstraction and to a level of technical complexity and sophistication that left the public cold or indifferent. Many of the first avant-garde’s works and artists suffered from this separation, as Thomas Mann brilliantly described in his novel *Doktor Faustus* through the character of the composer Adrian Leverkühn. Art’s general validity, objectivity or increasing abstraction often made art almost comparable with science and works of art with a rational search for the truth (in music’s case, a mathematical truth). And the price to pay was the loss of art’s place within a shared, common world. By fighting against an easy appeal to emotion, as well as against forms of a-criticism that might only reproduce and reify the current state

⁷ Quoted by Bonds, *Absolute Music*, p. 267.

⁸ On *Neue Sachlichkeit*’s musical principles, see Bonds, *Absolute Music*, pp. 262-268.

⁹ J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art. Aesthetic Alienation From Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992).

of things, many artists were faced with the consequences of creating radically 'free' artworks: while these were supposed to inspire contemplative freedom in their public, they also ended up losing touch with the experience and references of non-specialised audiences who weren't able to recognise the emancipatory effort proposed by the new artistic forms.

In the 20th century, music was undoubtedly the art that most suffered from these consequences, which became more and more critical in the second half of the century and still affect it in our days. The years that followed the end of the Second World War brought about a new generation of composers that inherited both a world of lost certainties and the hope for a new order and culture. The year 1945 represents, in many ways, a shift in the history of music that started in Darmstadt. Darmstadt became the stage of a rebirth of musical renewal, particularly through the summer courses that took place there and aimed at acquainting young musicians with music that could not be heard under the Nazi régime. The courses gathered composers such as Leibowitz (1948), Messiaen (1949) or Varèse (1950) together with students such as Luigi Nono and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who eventually became leading figures from 1956 onwards¹⁰. These names were responsible for what became known as 'New Music' in postwar Europe. 'New Music' was based on the idea of progress and on the concept of musical composition as *autopoiesis*¹¹, that is to say, as a self-referential system kept apart from other realities. According to this view or tendency, music should organically generate and organize itself as a self-referential system, either by means of a serial principle, or by means of aleatoric devices. Integral serialism and aleatoric music embodied the self-referentiality of music and at the same time continued the effort of suppressing the expression of the composer's subjectivity from the process of composition¹².

¹⁰ See Paul Griffiths, "Chapter 3: Total Organization: Western Europe, 1949-54", *Modern Music and After* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 34ff.

¹¹ Mário Vieira de Carvalho, "'New Music' between Search for Identity and Autopoiesis. Or, the 'Tragedy of Listening'" (*Theory, Culture & Society*, 16.4, 1999), pp. 127-135.

¹² As Carvalho ("'New Music' between Search for Identity and Autopoiesis") points out, this tendency was criticised by Adorno in the essay "*Das Altern der Neuen*

Together with Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono was one of the most representative serial composers, although he could not subscribe to the *autopoiesis* principle. For Nono, serialism did not correspond to a static system of rules or to a mechanical composition equivalent to a formula, but to something that gave rise to new possibilities of musical expression and to music's expressive freedom. For this reason, the composer's free decision was for Nono an unalienable element of composition, and this separated him from the strict serial determinism of Stockhausen, as well as from John Cage's aleatorics.

Nono's concern was to reconstruct, within musical communication, a dialogue with life and world events. For the composer, this meant both making art and music inseparable from worldly events, namely historical and political ones, as well as reconstructing the possibility of creatively engaging composer, interpreters and listeners. His works, therefore, "mediated feeling and thinking about actual human existence" and constituted "a music which demanded a strong emotional and at the same time intellectual or critical feedback from the listener"¹³. Hence, while belonging to the movement of New Music that looked for the new in art and therefore extended the paradigm of modernism, Nono was at the same time critical of the principle of aesthetic autonomy and of music's self-referentiality. This critical attitude explains, moreover, Nono's interest not only in politics and history, but also in science and technological innovations, as well as in literature and philosophy. Instead of detaching music from other human experiences and spiritual expressions, this composer looked for the holistic interpretation of phenomena which is expressed in its compositions.

Nono's well-known interest for Walter Benjamin's philosophy should be considered from this perspective¹⁴. Not only did Benjamin's

Musik" ("The Aging of New Music") published in 1956 (Adorno 1988) where he condemns the replacement of the work with the formula that transforms 'new music' into a crystallization of creativity and turns music into a static and unchangeable 'second nature'. Adorno also considers 'New Music' as the end of "free expression as a vehicle of protest against organization".

¹³ Carvalho, "New Music' between Search for Identity and Autopoiesis".

¹⁴ On this interest, see Mário Vieira de Carvalho, "Towards Dialectic Listening: Quotation and Montage in the Work of Luigi Nono" (*Contemporary Music Review*, 18.2, 1999), pp. 37-85.

theses on history influence the composer's understanding of his own time, but, as I suggest in this paper, Benjamin's specific ideas on music also prove to be fruitful to understand Nono's way of conceiving his works. In the next section I shall highlight two aspects of Benjamin's reflections on music that help to clarify the composer's concerns and positions regarding the music of his time and its relation with emotion and reason. The first one is Benjamin's conception of music as "purified feeling", that is to say, not as an illustration or representation of natural feelings, but as their transformation in a process that also involves language. The second aspect is the importance that Benjamin gives to hearing, which is closely related to his idea that music restores a unity of meaning to a world which, having lost it, is now ruled by dispersion. My claim is that both of these aspects of Benjamin's conception of music help to illuminate Nono's definition of his music as a *relational* technique¹⁵, as well as his increasing focus on the act of *listening*, to which his later works give full expression. In order to show it, I shall now turn to Benjamin and focus on his thoughts on the relation of music, feeling, and language.

2.

Besides dealing with the political and historical issues that drew Nono's attention, Walter Benjamin's philosophy is also known for its concern with language. Although this aspect of Benjamin's work is not explicitly mentioned by Nono, my suggestion is that his compositional choices have striking affinities with it, and especially with Benjamin's considerations about the connection between language and feeling. The latter are mainly developed in his early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1917)¹⁶, as well as in his works on the German *Trauerspiel*¹⁷, where

¹⁵ See Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, p. 48, note 24.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Translated by Edmund Jephcott *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 62-74.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977); "Trauerspiel and Tragedy", *Selected Writings*, vol. 1,

Benjamin tries to answer the question of how language expresses feelings, particularly the feeling of sadness or sorrow [*Traurigkeit*].

To sum up Benjamin's ideas on this problem and focus on the concrete aspects that matter for the topic at stake in this paper¹⁸, it is important to stress that he considers that human language exists not for expressing subjective emotions but to give meaningful expression to nature, that is to say, to events or things who tend to communicate their essence, but which are deprived of language, speechless or mute. According, thus, to Benjamin, language, which is constituted by two essential features, sound and meaning, expresses meaning by giving voice to nature's striving towards expression. In this context, the power of the human voice to name things indicates, therefore, the existence of an expressive continuity between nature and human language. More precisely, in Benjamin's view, there is no divorce between words and things but rather a continuous flux of expression – the continuous flux of expression between man and nature.

However, while acknowledging the human power to name, Benjamin conceives of it as a failure. More precisely, he considers that the expressive continuity between nature and language was interrupted when the single, primordial, paradisiacal language disintegrated into a multiplicity of different human languages. This view is sustained by Benjamin's interpretation of the myth of the Fall. The biblical episode illustrates the loss of a single blissful language that fulfilled nature's striving for expression but was replaced with different languages, which brought about linguistic dispersion and a dispersal of meaning. The Fall is, thus, according to Benjamin, the fall of linguistic expressivity: it illustrates the moment when language becomes capable

1913-1926, Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Translated by Edmund Jephcott *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 55-57; "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy", *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Translated by Edmund Jephcott *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 58-61.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of Benjamin's ideas on the relation between language and feeling, see Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy. Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 141-152.

of signifying and referring to contents, but is no longer expressive. After this moment, signifying words become bare mediations instead of (immediate) expressions, and for this reason they no longer participate in the continuous flux of expression. They rather interrupt it and come to constitute, therefore, a blockage in the expressive continuity between nature and language, reducing the latter to inexpressibility. Accordingly, Benjamin reads the Fall as a failure of man's task of naming nature and, thus, as the story of the degradation of the power to express into mere communication of propositional contents, which hinders the natural striving for expression. The history of language is hence the story of a failure since, in naming, human voice no longer expresses meaning, but rather blocks it¹⁹.

This blockage produces what Benjamin calls "lament", that is to say, "the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language"²⁰. Spoken words no longer express, but mourn for a meaning that they now can only signify. Consequently, they hinder "the [continual] process of resounding"²¹, that is, the expressive flow whereby words and things were once connected. The blockage of infinite resounding produces, therefore, echoes which are fragments of a primordial unity now lost. Nevertheless, in spite of this loss, Benjamin considers the possibility of regaining primordial expressive unity or continuity. To this end, he argues, language must suffer a process of purification. And the thought of this process leads to his ideas on music, presented in his work on the *Trauerspiel*, i.e. on modern, seventeenth-century German baroque theatrical plays.

Benjamin's reflections on the German *Trauerspiel* and its distinction from Greek tragedy address precisely the problem of the unification of dispersed echoes into a recognizable pattern. While in ancient tragedy "pure word" is "the pure bearer of its meaning", in modern *Trauerspiel* the constitutive lack of dramatic unity concentrates in itself "the infinite resonance of its sound"²². And because it encompasses all

¹⁹ See Eli Friedlander, "On the Musical Gathering of Echoes of the Voice: Walter Benjamin on Opera and the *Trauerspiel*" (*Opera Quarterly*, 21.4, 2005), pp. 631-646.

²⁰ Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", p. 73.

²¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 209.

²² Benjamin, "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy", p. 61.

echoes, the *Trauerspiel* makes possible the fulfillment of meaning. Yet, this fulfillment is accomplished, Benjamin claims, not by words, but by music. In effect, the linguist principle of the *Trauerspiel* is “musical”, and Benjamin calls it “language in the process of change”²³. He conceives of this process as a process of purification whereby “nature enters the purgatory of language only for the sake of the purity of its feelings”²⁴. The *Trauerspiel* purifies natural feelings through an “emotional life cycle” whose various stages consist of natural sound, lament, and music²⁵. Words that block the voice of nature consist therefore only in a transitional stage towards the expressive aim embodied by music understood as purified feeling. And this means that in music feelings are purified both from their natural, non-linguistic state and from linguistic dispersion so that they reveal, at a new level, the unity of language or a nature that can be shared. In Benjamin’s words, music is “the affective recognition of a shared linguistic ground”²⁶ where expressive continuity between man and nature is restored by “the rebirth of the feelings in a supra-sensuous nature”²⁷.

That music is a “supra-sensuous nature” implies that musical expression of feelings contrasts with natural feelings. More precisely, it implies that music is neither natural feeling nor does it provoke it, as it were, physically or sensuously. And yet, Benjamin claims, music is feeling, purified feeling in the sense that what is at stake in it is the same thing which is at stake in meaning – namely, “the recognition of an inner relationship between things that are diverse and disparate”²⁸. Although this recognition implies purification, it nevertheless consists in an affective, and not in a purely rational, recognition. Indeed, although music allows for the already mentioned “rebirth of feelings”, the

²³ Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, p. 60.

²⁴ Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, p. 60.

²⁵ “Words have a purely emotional life cycle in which they purify themselves by developing from the natural sound to the pure sound of feeling. For such words, language is merely a transitional phase within the entire life cycle, and in them the *Trauerspiel* finds its voice. It describes the path from natural sound via lament to music.” Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, p. 60.

²⁶ Friedlander, “On the Musical Gathering of Echoes of the Voice”, p. 640.

²⁷ Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, p. 61.

²⁸ Friedlander, “On the Musical Gathering of Echoes of the Voice”, p. 640.

purification at stake here has nothing to do with a process of increasing abstraction that might exclude affective responses (Benjamin refers rather to a "process of change"). What interests Benjamin is not the rational process of abstracting and generalizing, but the possibility of perceiving the connection between what has previously become disaggregate and yet may now be reunited through the expressive continuity embodied in music.

This possibility is a first aspect that brings Benjamin close to Luigi Nono's concerns about musical composition. In effect, Nono's rejection of integral serialism resulted from his critical views on the fragmentation of musical parameters and led him to concentrate on new ways of relating the parts that other composers were now treating as isolated from one another. In addition, as I shall clarify below, Nono's refusal of the self-referentiality of music also embodied his concern with connecting art with worldly events and with a common meaning shareable by the whole of humanity. Accordingly, in Nono's music the expression of meaning implies a participation in meaning, such that listening to it amounts to actualizing the hope for the restoration of a shared, common world.

Listening is of crucial importance, both to Luigi Nono and to Walter Benjamin. And to understand its value for the philosopher, we must turn again to lament as a major example of what he calls purified feeling. Benjamin considers that the failure of language's task of expressing or giving voice to nature entails nature's *Traurigkeit* or mournfulness, that is to say, an ontological sorrowfulness which cannot be expressed by a single individual or by the portrait of the circumstantial feelings of a sole human being. For this reason, pure feeling is not an individual's subjective feeling. Individual emotions, such as sadness, are only part of the whole range and diversity of feelings and cannot, therefore, embody pure feelings (the pure feeling of sadness, for example). Benjamin's account of the *Trauerspiel* makes a good case for this idea, while also pointing to the second aspect which brings him close to Luigi Nono's conception of music. In Benjamin's view, in *Trauerspiel* none of the specific emotions of the characters of the play can be identified with the mournfulness or lament characteristic of these plays, that is to say, of the plays as a whole. Instead of illustrating individual emotions,

lament there connects a full range of emotions within an emotional whole. Consequently, what Benjamin calls “the most profoundly heard lament”²⁹ that constitutes the interconnection of all emotions is more a matter for the ear than for the voice. Indeed, emotional dispersion cannot be sung because it refers to different voices rather than to the single voicing of an individual emotion. And because emotional dispersion is voiced by the attunement of different voices, it can only be heard or perceived by the ear. What is heard is the relationship between what became dispersed or fragmented, the connection of different echoes, their shared nature, which Benjamin calls “purified feeling”. Pure feeling is thus distinct from individual emotion in that it arises from the recognition of a relationship between different fragments. Precisely this recognition endows language with internal accord, with “a unity that unfolds in words” whereby “lament must dissolve itself” and “enter into the language of pure feeling – in other words, music”³⁰.

According to these views on feeling, language and music it can therefore be said that for Benjamin, as well as for Nono, music is neither absolute nor objective because it only exists in relation to language and nature and, perhaps more importantly, because music is what connects language and nature and makes possible the reestablishment of their expressive unity. On the other hand, however, Benjamin rejects the reduction of music to individual subjective emotions. Rather, as seen above, he claims that music purifies feelings and emotions from their dispersion, thereby revealing a unity of meaning that can be heard³¹. In music the dispersed voices of nature which mourn their separation achieve a new expressive stage, and one that calls for or depends on listeners. And precisely this way of understanding what listening amounts to sheds some light on Luigi Nono’s account of music, as I shall now argue.

²⁹ Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, p. 61.

³⁰ Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy”, p. 61.

³¹ Both points are made by Eli Friedlander in the end of his illuminating paper. See Friedlander, “On the Musical Gathering of Echoes of the Voice”, pp. 631-646.

3.

As already mentioned, Luigi Nono was from early on a dissonant voice within the second generation of the leading Darmstadt composers. Nono did not subscribe to the pursuit of total serialism and its resulting fragmentation of musical texture, which he tellingly called "pointillism"³². He was deeply interested in new musical forms, but instead of looking for them in separate organizations of musical parameters, he concentrated his efforts in looking for new connections among them. An example of this strategy is his insistence on melody rather than on counterpoint. The typical melodic lines, so characteristic of Nono's music, stand in clear opposition both to serial "pointillism" and to contrapuntal strategies that accentuate discontinuity by contrasting the musical elements within the piece of music, as Stockhausen's *Kontra-Punkte* (1952-1953) so clearly exemplifies. Moreover, Nono's use of melody indicates the importance he gave to the expressive force of music without falling into the excesses of expressionism and its focus on subjectivity. Contrarily to most of his contemporaries, Nono believed that melody could survive and even gain from the absence of tonality and from the loss of its function as theme, becoming, as he understood it, simultaneously passionate and objective. The condition for this was that melody be "unrepeating" and speak in a "personless voice"³³, that is to say, that it become free from merely reproducing or giving voice to individual and subjective feelings and emotions. Thus liberated, melody could become, e.g., the voicing of a common hope for freedom, as in the case of Nono's choruses in the works *Der rote Mantel* and *Epitaffio*, but also in *La Victoire de Guernica* (all from 1954).

All these works manifest the composer's suspicion and rejection of the principle of aesthetic autonomy and of music's self-referentiality. Throughout his life and works he always defended the intertwinement between an artist's creations and his concerns with the world he

³² "Pointillism", as he later put it, "is contrary to my technique of sound *relations*." Quoted by Griffiths *Modern Music and After*, p. 48. On Nono's dissonance within the Darmstadt group, see Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, pp. 48ff.

³³ Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, p. 50.

lives in. The attention paid to historical events and the implicit and explicit political positions in Nono's musical pieces always indicated his perspective on the artist's responsibility and critical engagement with history, as well as with the spiritual and cultural tradition that he inherited. Nevertheless, Nono's late compositions came as a surprise for his peers, although they share important connections with his earlier compositional options. They were received as bringing about a profound break in style and technique, and were considered as a sign of decline of avant-garde modernism in the composer's work. Furthermore, the combination of precarious sounds, fragmentary forms and introspective titles without explicit political references raised the suspicion of a possible change in Nono's ideas about his art. The introverted pieces that arouse the impression of a music which is about to disintegrate suggested that the composer had abandoned the ideal of revolution and communism – Nono had joined the Italian Communist Party in 1952 – to embrace pure interiority, thereby combining ideological and political retreat with aesthetic regression and alienation³⁴. The lyricism of these compositions seemed, thus, to imply that instead of denouncing worldly injustices and human atrocities, Nono's music now explored inner states and deplored humankind's impotency to create a more just and meaningful world.

An important target of these criticisms was the string quartet *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima* (1979-1980), a work commissioned for the 30th *Beethovenfest* in 1980. Its premiere caused scandal because of the apparent lack of political messages in the music of a composer who had the reputation of denouncing totalitarian regimes of the past and the present, incorporating politically motivated texts in his compositions. The title of the piece – an address to a woman whose name evokes Hölderlin's poem *An Diotima*, as well as Plato's dialogue on love, *Symposium* – apparently indicated that lyricism had now taken the place of Nono's previous political concerns. The quartet encouraged the idea that Nono had replaced universal questions with the realm of sheer individual and subjective emotional experience. This idea was reinforced by the fact

³⁴ See Friedemann Sallis, "Le paradoxe postmoderne et l'œuvre tardive de Luigi Nono" (*Circuit: musiques contemporaines*, 11.1, 2000), pp. 68-84.

that, besides the textual references taken from Hölderlin which punctuate the whole piece, Nono also quotes an expressive performance instruction taken from Beethoven's op. 132: '*Mit innigster Empfindung*'.

But if there was any change, the truth is that it had started earlier on. The writing of the quartet was preceded by a solo piece titled "... *sofferte onde serene...*" (1974-1976) written for the pianist Maurizio Pollini and where, according to the performer's words, "you listen to something that passes, but you don't hear the start, you don't hear the end: you perceive a continuity of distances, of presences, of undefinable essences"³⁵. In this piece, meaning and movement seem to be tied to each other and past moments coexist with the present moment of live performance by means of the use of sounds recorded on tape. The pianist echoes the sounds that emerge from the recording which, in turn, reverberate a wider space and time which seem to come from a distance and to call for other, new temporal and spatial distances.

As in this piece, the musical atmosphere that Nono will develop in his subsequent works cannot be reduced to a simple reproduction of subjective states or feelings, although it does not seem to convey any universal or more general valid message; it rather proposes, through its fragmentary form, an expressive continuity which subtly establishes connections among its sounding parts. And what Nono points out in this echoing context – to composers, as well as to performers and to the audience – is the importance of the act of listening. Indeed, writing and performing music become here an exercise of listening which is also proposed to the public, such that the latter should become a "meaning producing listener"³⁶. The affinities with Benjamin seem now rather clear: not only music connects, relates, and expresses continuity – in spite and even because of its fragmentation –, but it also consists in an exercise of sensing new possibilities, of listening to them and thereby participating in the expressive flow of meaning in a way which is neither merely affective, nor exclusively personal, but reflexive and supra-individual. To be sure, for Luigi Nono, as for Benjamin, feeling and emotion are not excluded from this process; instead, they are, to

³⁵ Quoted by Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, p. 316.

³⁶ Carvalho, "Towards Dialectic Listening".

use Benjamin's expression, purified, not to the point of abstraction or inexpressibility, but to its opposite, that is to say, to the point of connecting different echoes or voices, past and future, language and music, mourning for dispersion and hope in some unity yet to come.

Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima continues Nono's new way of conceiving and writing music. In the quartet he uses quotations from Hölderlin which are meant to be indications for the players who should silently sing them during the performance. The composer understood them as "diverse moments, thoughts, silences, 'songs', from other spaces, other heavens, for rediscovering in other ways the possibility of not '*decisively bidding farewell to hope*'"³⁷. These last words are a direct quotation of a letter Hölderlin wrote to Susette Gontard in 1799, and they point to Nono's conception of hope as the hope for a just world endowed with meaning. From this point of view, hence, rather than a rupture with his earlier concerns, there seems to be a coherence between the political ideas of the revolutionary frescoes of a decade earlier and his subsequent interests³⁸.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify an important change: Nono's late compositions seem to substitute persuasion with listening, and rhetoric with silence. The string quartet explores the importance of the inaudible or barely audible, and differentiation occurs only through subtle nuances of sound that give rise to "a web of silence and diverse but quiet sounds"³⁹. Nono's conception of silence strongly contrasted with John Cage's in that, contrary to Cage, he did not understand silence as a void, but as a state of intensity that calls for mental response – and,

³⁷ See Preface to the score.

³⁸ Nono's interest in Hölderlin, for instance, is indebted to the reevaluation of this author as a poet of the French Revolution and to the new interpretations of his writings that considered him as an individual intensively reflecting about the world and existence, turned to his intimate feelings, but simultaneously suffering under the pressure of questions which involve the public sphere. The coincidence that, at the same time, Nono had discovered and was deeply impressed by Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history also contributed to the identification of Hölderlin's and Beethoven's questions as his own questions. On this particular aspect, see Carvalho, "Towards Dialectic Listening", pp. 37-85.

³⁹ Carola Nielinger-Vakil, "Quiet Revolutions: Hölderlin Fragments by Luigi Nono and Wolfgang Rihm" (*Music & Letters*, 81.2, 2000), pp. 245-274.

consequently, as a space of possibilities⁴⁰. In *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima* silence has to do with the expectation of "something that is not yet available, that cannot yet be heard, that goes on being searched for"⁴¹. The quartet is thus a musical expression of the belief that "what absorbs all importance is the next step, not some hoped-for destination"⁴². In the words of Helmut Lachenmann, a former student of Luigi Nono, "it is a silence which does not make one passive and subservient but, rather, activates one's longing, sharpens the perceptions beyond what can be heard, vis-à-vis our own human destiny"⁴³. Accordingly, hearing the piece does not imply passively absorbing the sounds so that one will be able to recall individual motifs or movements to which one was exposed and which music makes available. On the contrary, it is as if everything – the changes of speed, the fleeting meters, the absence of motifs – conspired to ensure that only the whole texture of the sounds can be remembered and never the individual elements of the piece, as Benjamin claims happened in German baroque *Trauerspiele*. It can, therefore, be argued that *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima* confronts and engages the listener with purified feeling, which appears as a "flow of fragments of sounds" participating in an "open-ended system of relationships", so that "it is the vast variety of actual and possible relationships one engages in and remembers, and not so much the individual sound or text"⁴⁴.

The importance given to listening in *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima* prepared the way for the last decade of Nono's musical concerns. Listening became as much a musical as a political act: the act of addressing others instead of looking for echoes of the self. In his own words: "When one comes to listen, one often tries to rediscover oneself in others. To rediscover one's own mechanisms, system, rationalism, in the other. And that: that's a violence that's thoroughly conservative."⁴⁵ The string quartet can, hence, be considered

⁴⁰ In Nono's own words, quoted by Nielinger-Vakil: "The pause in Cage originates in Asian thought – 'empty' and 'full'. For me, however, silence – the musical pause – is truly intensive. One lives in it as if at a crossing-point. One remains silent there, one realizes that one needs to be alert towards all directions."

⁴¹ Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, p. 319.

⁴² Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, p. 320.

⁴³ Quoted by Nielinger-Vakil, "Quiet Revolutions".

⁴⁴ Nielinger-Vakil, "Quiet Revolutions".

⁴⁵ Lecture of 1983 quoted in Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, p. 318.

as the announcement of a subsequent work significantly entitled *Prometeo – tragedia dell’ascolto* (1981-1985). In this “tragedy of listening” there was no action and no staging, and drama took place between sound and ear in a wooden boat-like construction made by the architect Renzo Piano. Again taking recourse to philosophy and literature – to texts by Walter Benjamin, Aeschylus and Rainer Maria Rilke –, *Prometeo* tells the ancient myth of the origin of mankind and further develops the aim of achieving an “activation of the audience” on the basis of “reflection”⁴⁶. The golden age is lost, but history goes on, and it is up to mankind to build its future. For this purpose, however, men must be able to “listen to” – an appeal constantly repeated by the singers of Nono’s “tragedy of listening”. In it, meaning is not given, it must rather be produced by the audience in a model of interaction which is also a model for relating to the world. Again in this piece, “emotional identification and expression, which were always essential in Nono at the moment of creation and are quite evident in his music at the moment of reception, might not exclude at both moments the attitude of critical detachment”⁴⁷.

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⁴⁶ Nono quoted by Carvalho, “Towards Dialectic Listening”.

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