Thinking music – musical thinking

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When wanting to penetrate to the thematic core of Nono’s ‘tragedy of listening’ Prometeo, most often the libretto, written by the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, remains the primal source recurred to. After all, words do give us a direct access to meaning, whereas music does not. However, in doing so, one runs a risk of interpreting the music as a mere dramatization of Cacciari’s reading of Prometeo. Such an equation between the philosophical ideas of Cacciari and the poetics of Nono is too simple an impression. If we want to find out to what extent Cacciari’s reading of the myth of Prometheus was indeed adopted by the composer, we will have to turn to the music. Because for Nono, “musica è pensare”. His thinking is “a musical thinking, a thinking in tones” – as famously said by Jürg Stenzl.

Therefore, this paper presents an analysis of the creative processes leading up to Isola 3/4/5 of Prometeo. However, before proceeding to this analysis, Cacciari’s reading of the Prometheus myth needs to be looked upon once more. Only a correct and detailed understanding of his interpretation can eventually enable us to discern possible analogies and distinctions between the thinking of these two Venetian intellectuals.

According to the memory of Cacciari, it was during the summer of 1975 that he and Nono first read Aeschylus’ tragedy Prometheus bound together. During that same summer, Cacciari also added the final touches on Krisis – a book that was to cause a great deal of controversy when it reached the bookstores the following year. It does not come as a surprise, then, that both in his interpretation of the ancient myth of Prometheus, as in his theoretical reflection on negative thought, Cacciari eventually came to the same conclusion. Both led to the understanding of crisis as the irredeemable foundation of our dwelling on earth. Whereas this conclusion can be understood as the logical outcome for a book that retracts the history of negative thought, its relation with the mythological story of the fire bringer needs to be explained.

Prometheus, Cacciari argues, belongs to the mythological family of the crisis. Gods and men initially descend from the same race, with Gaia being their common mother. It is Prometheus’ gift of fire that first sheds light on the difference between both. A difference, moreover, that reveals itself as an unjust inequality against which the titan is to rise up. Because Prometheus, literally “he who foresees”, has knowledge of the downfall of Zeus. In other words, he who brought fire and technè to man also possesses the secret to eventually release him from the tyranny of the gods. This is the hope Prometheus gives to men: the utopia of liberation.

At first glance, Prometheus thus seems willing to resolve the crisis between gods and men. However, instead of this ultimate rebellion, Prometheus yields up his secret and Zeus is able to prevent his own downfall. As a consequence, the crisis continues, with on the one hand, mankind thrown into a tragic existence, left to works and days without hope; on the other hand, the gods, bereft of their omnipotence and retired in their celestial homes. However, it is exactly this fundamental opposition between men and gods that becomes the very foundation of their relationship. In the face of almighty Ananke, both had to acknowledge their own boundaries, and it is exactly this recognition that will eventually lead to the reconciliation between Prometheus and Zeus.
What is more, this pact between Prometheus and Zeus founds the polis. In other words, the existence and very possibility of politics (initiated by the foundation of the polis) can be seen as the result of the unflinching awareness and acceptance of a world full of irreconcilable aporias, in sum, as the result of the celebration of the crisis. Here, one can already recognize *in nuce* the appeal to contemporary politics Cacciari was about to make some years later: an appeal to give up the dream of a reconciled society. Only politics aware of their own transience and as such of their own boundaries could, according to the philosopher, be genuinely decisive.

“Fine utopia” is the true message revealed by Prometheus’ fire. However, Prometheus did not only bring men fire, but also technē. Although these technai will not be able to deliver him from the power of Ananke, of fate that is inescapable, they can help him discover the world in an infinite number of ways. Since utopia has come to an end and instead crisis rules this world, there is no longer just one way to go. We have to open ourselves to the world, a world full of possibilities yet in continual change. In the end, the law of Ananke announced by Prometheus reveals itself as the law that governs the continual changeability of our world. Only he who accepts this versatility will attain true freedom of the mind. That man, to quote Nietzsche, “cannot regard himself otherwise than as a wanderer on the face of the earth and not even as a traveller towards a final goal, for there is no such thing.” In sum, Prometheus announces the law of the eternal wandering, that celebrates change and transitoriness, that celebrates… crisis.

Some years later, Nietzsche was eventually joined by Walter Benjamin in Cacciari’s reading of the Prometheus myth. Notably to stress that the tragic awareness brought upon us by the fire of Prometheus should in no way cause despondence. Or, in the words of Cacciari’s Prometheus, by no means should it be a reason “to make us seek comfort with the muses”. Instead, we should ask the muses “to lend us voice, so that we can tell our memories to the Angel”. By these words, we are called on to remember. Because by remembering we keep the past open. By remembering, we can save the lost chances of the past from the vortex of classical historiography that is forced by the idea of progress. This is the Weak Messianic Power given to us, introduced by Walter Benjamin and reiterated by Cacciari in *Prometeo*.

This reading of the Aeschylean myth of Prometheus soon found its way into a libretto. A libretto, which – although only partially set to music by Nono – laid the very first foundations for his ‘tragedy of listening’. As a result of the many alterations both Cacciari and Nono made to it over the course of more than five years, its final outlook is rather enigmatic. In general, however, one can observe that whereas the first half of this text deals with the mythological narration that leads to the prophecy, hence, to the acknowledgment of Ananke; the second half elaborates upon man’s dwelling on earth thereafter. The central concepts of Cacciari’s negative thought as well as the power of remembrance thus being concentrated in the second part, it is exactly this part that is of particular interest when one wants to trace the influence of some of these concepts on the poetics of Nono. Therefore, in the following analysis, I will concentrate on this second part of *Prometeo*. Set to music, it begins with *3 voci a* and ends with the second *Stasimo*.

I would like to start by looking at the genesis of *3 voci a* and *3 voci b*, since the composition of these parts will proof of vital importance when discussing *Isola 3°/4°/5°* – being the actual core of the second part. In this analysis, I will exclusively concentrate on the vocal layer, which brings to sound Cacciari’s poem *Il maestro del gioco*, in which Benjamin’s Weak Messianic Power is evoked.
The creative processes leading to 3 voci a and to 3 voci b are actually of quite similar nature. For 3 voci a, Nono began by sorting out all notes with extremely long durational values in the melody that had constituted the skeleton of Diario Polacco no. 2, written two years earlier. Out of the resulting selection of 24 fragments, he let fate pick on 15 and rearrange their pitches into a row. This is indicated in the sketch with the selection of fragments by the annotation “Josquin” – referring to Josquin Desprez’ Missa di dadi (mass of the dices). However, by a deliberate intervention on behalf of the composer, the resulting row mainly consisted of tritones and fifths/fourths, and to a lesser degree also major and minor seconds. Nono then constructed three new rows, build upon different presentations of his initial row: the first presents the original row three times, first in its original order, then in retrograde, to end again in its original order. The second new row begins with the retrograde, followed by the original row and again the retrograde. The third switches first and second half of the original row and then presents it in retrograde. Each of the three resulting ‘voices’ (as we could call these superrows in correspondence with the title) is intended to deliver the raw pitch material for one of the three soloist voices scored in 3 voci a: the soprano, the alto and the tenor. However, before proceeding to the compositional elaboration of this raw pitch material, Nono divides each of these superrows in a distinct amount of fragments, resulting in a stock of tone cells, ranging from one to seven notes each. The first step of the actual compositional process implies the rearrangement of all these fragments following an order determined by fate. Moreover, since Nono sticks to the allotment of each of the – now fragmented – superrows to one voice, and these rows were all split up into a different amount of fragments, an unforeseen shift of tone material takes place when combining them. Within these new and surprising pitch constellations (that are, however, still divided over the three soloist voices), Nono then deduces melodic lines by connecting certain pitches of the three different voices with each other. These are the melodic lines – eventually also completed with durational values – that will figure in the final version of 3 voci a.

The creative process leading up to 3 voci b is quite similar; only the starting point is different. For 3 voci b, Nono derived nine pitch cells – ranging from three to five notes each and highlighting the same intervals as in 3 voci a – out of the scala enigmatica on c. I am not sure, I still have to check this when I go back to the archive, but it could be that these cells were already used in Guai ai gelidi mostri – written the year before –, since Nono first listed them on a sketch with other materials derived from this composition. Anyhow, the use of Verdi’s scala enigmatica of course dates back to former compositions, including the string quartet. After the transposition of seven of these pitch cells, all of them were combined with their own (most of the time tritone-) transposition in retrograde. This resulted in 9 mirror constructions, or else: 18 new pitch cells. Then Nono proceeded by elaborating each of these cells over the length of several measures, roughly adhering to the initial order in which they were listed. Several versions of this final elaboration, however, show how Nono – just like in 3 voci a – continued shifting pitches from one fragment to another, so that in the end yet new combinations were to be heard.

Before jumping to interpretations yet, let us turn towards the islands enclosed by 3 voci a and 3 voci b: Isola 3/4/5. What immediately strikes when looking at the score is that these three islands are in fact composed as one. This had not always been the plan. As you can see in the sketch above, Nono originally even intended to separate the three islands by inserting instrumental interludes. But over the course of 1984, when actually working on the music of Prometeo, he realised that for a genuine musical realisation of these islands, he had to break them up and recompose their fragments into one large structure. This is indicated in the following sketch with the circled words: “non isola tutta completa, ma
tochi”, not a whole island, but broken. The resulting alternation between fragments of the three islands seems to be a perfect illustration of Prometheus, together with the listener, wandering between them.

However, there actually was an overall plan for the composition of these three islands, albeit one that is exactly based on the concept of fragmentation. Whenever it comes to these islands, Nono always made the same note in his sketches: “tutto rompere”, everything has to be broken. This motto was translated into a concrete compositional program, summarized in the following sketch. This sketch shows a complex of systems according to which Nono planned to create Isola 3\(^2\)/4\(^2\)/5\(^a\). Each of the systems described in this sketch is in control of one aspect of the composition; for instance, there is a system that relates to pitch material, a system relating to the live electronics, etc. Each of them thus installs a proper dynamic that will necessarily collide with that of the other systems. Therefore, the overall result will be extremely fragmented.

When taking a closer look, we can discern two “supersystems”, each of them regulating several immediately practicable systems. “Supersystem” II, for example, denotes two systems that are cryptically described with the formulas “3a + 3b = 22 + 19 = 41” and “a) 5 | b) 7” respectively. These two systems stipulate the musical content on which Isola 3\(^3\)/4\(^2\)/5\(^a\) is to be built. In the first formula, the two first components (3a and 3b) refer respectively to 3 voci a and 3 voci b. This first system regards the rearrangement of the entire tone material of 3 voci a and b to build up an important part of Isola 3\(^3\)/4\(^2\)/5\(^a\), notably all the fragments belonging to Isola 3\(^2\) and 4\(^a\). To this purpose, both 3 voci a and b have been divided by the composer into respectively 22 and 19 fragments (hence, the numbers 22 and 19 in the formula). Once again, the annotation “Josquin” indicates that the new sequence in which the total of 41 fragments would appear in Isola 3a and 4a was to be determined by fate. And indeed, amongst Nono’s sketch material for Prometeo, little sheets numbered from 1 to 22 and from 1b to 19b were found. On another sketch he noted down the series that eventually came out.

As you can see in this scheme, in the first hundred of measures, Nono indeed followed the order of the series for the selection of fragments. This is to say, the opening statement of the series clearly comes to the fore, marked by the red circles, but it is combined with a selection of fragments dictated by the series in retrograde and always skipping one number (indicated by the green circles). Of all the stated fragments, the original pitches as well as the durational values are maintained. However, Nono does not adhere to a strictly linear statement of the series, but often combines two or even more fragments. Then, just like he did in the compositional process of 3 voci a, out of the resulting combinations he deduces melodic lines by combining pitches originating from different fragments. This process is even intensified after measure 111, when Nono completely abandons the series and freely chooses between the fragments at his disposal. Now he is able to pick fragments that already show a certain kinship to one another, or on the contrary, expose an interesting complementarity. Anyhow, the general method of elaboration remains the same: pitches and durational values of the original fragments of 3 voci a and b are maintained, but often exchanged between the combined fragments, rearranged among the parts, metrically shifted, etc. In this way, Nono creates new entities that once again show already presented material under a different angle.

The second system, described as “a) 5 b) 7”, refers to the collections A) Veloce and B) Calmo. These are collections of duration values, that were first designed and used by Nono for Con Luigi Dallapiccola. They are now turned to by the composer as a kind of ‘stock’, out of which he freely selected durational values for both the speaking chorus (which he eventually dropped) and the solo winds in Isola 5\(^b\)— the only island that was still deprived of a musical content up till now. Regarding their use in the speaking
chorus, for instance, we can observe how after having made a free selection, Nono subdivided these relatively long values into smaller units, so that they would be able to bear several text syllables. Then these syllables, fixed on one specific duration value, were assigned to three different pitch ranges (akuto – medio – basso) and spread out over the three voices, in such a way that in the end the original duration values are no longer recognisable. The motto “tutto rompere” is thus felt up in the rear ranks.

Although the skeleton of Isola 3⁴/⁴⁵⁵ already gives a shattered impression, being the result of the interpolation of two highly contrasting systems, it will immediately be broken again. This time on a lower lever, by the remaining systems classified under “supersystem” I. Without having the time to discuss all these systems in full, I would like to elucidate the “various combinations” of system 1. These refer to the possible combinations for the interaction between the voices and the instruments, realized by the gate control. This is a live electronic device by which one instrument imposes its dynamic profile on the output of another player. That is to say, the intensity with which for example the flutist blows into or makes a sound on his instrument opens the gate to the speaker to which another instrument is connected. So in fact the musicians are divided into two groups: the controlling ones, and the controlled ones. To which group each musician belongs, and which other instrument he or she controls or is controlled by depends on the program, of which there are 26 in total in Isola 3⁴/⁴⁵⁵. The result is a spatial planning of the sound that is no longer fully defined a priori, but also dependent on the interpretation of the controlling instruments. Moreover, Nono makes use of it in a way to break the already ruptured discourse of Isola 3⁴/⁴⁵⁵ yet again. For example, when selecting duration values out of the collections A) Veloce and B) Calmo for Isola 5⁴, he made sure to choose the longer ones for the (controlled) voices and the shorter ones for the (controlling) winds in order to continuously break the discourse of the former, because it is only amplified for very short moments, with long silences in between.

The reconstruction of the creative process leading to these specific parts of Prometeo is interesting in two respects. First, the retracing of this process by way of the sketches discloses new insights in relation to an analysis that takes the final score as its point of departure. For instance, in her recent book “Luigi Nono. A Composer in Context”, Carola Nielinger states that the vocal layer of Isola 3⁴ taken as a whole can be reduced to an exploration of the scala enigmatica on c, beginning with the first four pitches of the scale and then gradually expanding outwards. After having traced the generative ideas lying behind Isola 3⁴, I argue that this is indeed a very interesting and valuable observation, however, one that seems not to have been deliberately planned by Nono. As it happens, and as we have seen, for the realisation of Isola 3⁴ the composer first of all adhered to a series determined by fate, which goes against the idea of a gradual expansion. What is more, this series ordered fragments taken from both 3 voci a – being built on material that does not originate from the scala enigmatica – and fragments taken from 3 voci b – being actually built on constellations derived from the scala enigmatica, yet transposed constellations. In sum, contrary to Nielingers belief that Nono planned a gradual exploration of the scala enigmatica over the course of Isola 3⁴, I am inclined to think that he was actually trying to explore and trying out to a maximum extent the inner possibilities of a given material in a nondirectional way.

This is, I believe, also demonstrated by the second compositional stage common to the three parts of Prometeo under discussion. Because, as we have seen, in all three cases the pitch material as well as the durational values were fixed either by chance procedures or by rigid systems the composer set out himself; this being the first compositional stage. But then, he started to make small shifts within the rhythmical organisation of a part, he
highlighted certain notes so that a melody would rise, binding the different parts together, he carried out expansions, deductions, etc. In sum, he was trying out different perspectives to approach the already fixed material at hand. And he did this in a very intuitive way, genuinely exploring the inner potential of this material, just in the way he had been working with musicians in the Freiburg Studio.

Moreover, Nono made sure that this exploration would be continued every time *Prometeo* is being performed, due to the important part he reserved for the live electronics, and as such, for the space. For instance, the use of the gate control in *Isola 3⁴/₄⁵/₅⁴* brings along a totally new role for the musicians. No longer they are handed a score that can be read as a simple formula, but they are given a musical thought that acts upon their own thinking. The system of the gate installs an open interaction between the controlling and the controlled musicians, between them and the music, between them and the space. Therefore, both have to listen very intensely, to the other and to the self. In sum, by exploring the space through the system of the gate, Nono not only opened himself to the unknown, but he also instigated his performers to do so.

The second reason, for which I believe the retracing of the compositional process being interesting, is to highlight potential analogies between the thinking of Cacciari and Nono. At first glance, Nono’s compositional method seems to be mirroring Cacciari’s thought brilliantly. Both in *Isola 3⁴/₄⁵/₅⁴* and *3 voci a b*, Nono started from very limited basic material on which he then carried out numerous operations in a very open, intuitive way. The inherent versatility and transitoriness of our world is thus greeted by the composer as a richness rather than as a limitation, exactly as Cacciari together with other negative thinkers prescribed it. Moreover, Nono’s recurring to already existent material is not just a beautiful illustration of how he continued exploring new possibilities of one and the same origin, but it also seems to answer Benjamin’s appeal to remember the lost chances of the past. However, it is exactly here that a fundamental difference with Cacciari shimmers under the surface.

This difference first came to the fore in a letter from the philosopher that was probably written at the beginning of the 1980s. In this letter, Cacciari stated the following: “We, the living, praise Mnemosyne – Memory of the Intemporal – Memory of the Unlived – Memory of a way we have not walked. This is the memory that you should make us listen to.” In an article written about the same time, entitled “Conversio e Memoria”, we find a further explanation of this statement. Here, Mnemosyne is portrayed as the goddess that guards oblivion. Although this might sound peculiar for the goddess of memory, it is only a logical consequence of the fact that the Origin, the unreachable foundation of everything to which we cannot aim, can only be seized in its absence, as its own forgetting. Moreover, this was an idea that was also present in the original libretto, but interestingly, these lines were removed by Nono.

**Muthos:**
E sempre conosce
l’ombra dell’impossibile:
Philia non Eros,
Eroe non nato.
Parola non Musica,
Silenzio.

**Onoma: Prometeo:**
Miracolo
è questo conoscere
non possedere.
Miracolo è che il conoscere
per questa assenza possa potere.
Hence, what brings man the closest to the Origin is precisely the act of remembering. Because when he turns inwards, as the German word ‘Erinnerung’ suggests, he will eventually find himself in front of the abyss of the forgetting, guarded by Mnemosyne. In other words, when Cacciari argued that this was the memory Nono’s music should bring to sound, he described music as a process of withdrawal into the self. In another letter to the composer, Cacciari further explained that “this withdrawal – that ought not to be seen as an annihilation, but rather as an Erinnerung – is exactly what grants the sound its raison d’être, because only by withdrawing it will be able to, or at least try to reach its own essence: a being full of possibilities at the Origin.” The justifying tone of this last letter suggests that Nono had already vented some severe criticism on this subject. Sadly enough, his own letter that induced Cacciari to this explanation is lost – or at least, that’s what Cacciari says. However, I think we can deduce the content of Nono’s criticism from the way his music is composed. We have seen how Nono is always returning to already familiar material, how he is remembering this material, and as such actualizing new possibilities of it. In other words, his remembrance was directed towards specific moments lifted out of his personal musical history. In the video showed at the first roundtable of this conference, we heard Nono talking about Silence, about how he perceived in this silence the voices of his daughters, of his friends from ‘68, of Stockhausen and Hartmann, to name just a few. So he was talking about very concrete voices, sometimes also ‘lost voices’ – as he wrote in the text to Guai ai gelidi mostri – which he wanted to give voice again in the present moment, by way of his music. His compositional method therefore seems to be a very concrete and active application of Benjamin’s historiography as a work of remembrance, and never as a process of withdrawal.

This is also beautifully illustrated in an annotation Nono made in another sketch for Isola 3¹/4²/5⁴, regarding the redistribution of the entire tone material of 3 voci a and b over these islands: “3 voci a and 3 voci b are il Maestro (Il maestro del gioco being the poem paraphrasing Benjamin’s Theses), then he continues: 3-4-5 viene frantumato il testo su 3a 3b: the text from Isola 3/4/5 becomes shattered on Tre voci a and b, and he concludes: Prometeo diventa il maestro, Prometheus becomes Il maestro”. The image actually evoked here is that of Prometheus, wandering amongst the debris of musical history in Isola 3¹/4²/5⁴, continuously actualising its unrealized possibilities, as he was urged to in 3 voci a and b. This image illustrates how Nono actually approached Benjamin’s Weak Messianic Power as an almost palpable power, genuinely “able to change everything for us”.

Although both Nono and Cacciari defined listening as “opening oneself for the Other”, I hope it has become clear by now that they actually meant something quite different. Cacciari essentially understood listening as a turning inwards towards the Silence of the Origin, which resulted in an open, but passive listening attitude that he actually described himself as ‘a state of resignation’. Nono, on the other hand, formulated the verb as an imperative: ascolta! Listen! Open yourself, open your thinking, go and search for the unheard, the unknown. If eventually, Prometeo became a genuine ‘tragedy of listening’, it did so not only because the composer himself adopted this attitude. But because in every of its aspects, the music of Prometeo urges its performers and its listeners to do the same. In this way, Prometeo’s appeal to listen should be heard as a deeply political one. Whereas Cacciari’s Prometheus actually came to announce the end of utopia, it seems to have survived in Nono’s ‘tragedy of listening’.