

**Luigi Nono: *Prometeo* (UK premiere)  
Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London, May 9th, 2008**

Nono's third and last stage work *Prometeo*, subtitled "tragedia dell'ascolta" (a tragedy of listening), received its UK premiere on 9<sup>th</sup> May (and a further performance the following evening) as the final part of the "Fragments of Venice" retrospective of Nono's work, the bulk of which had already taken place in the September and October of the previous year.

The music Nono composed during the final decade or so of his life is more personal and introspective than the overtly political works for which he is perhaps still best known. *Prometeo* is the longest and most significant product of these years, calling for five solo voices, a four-part chorus, two narrators, four instrumental groups, eleven instrumental soloists and live electronics, under the direction of two conductors. Although their music can boil over into searing violence, much of the writing for the voices and the instrumental ensembles consists of a polyphony of quiet, sustained notes. Against this slowly shifting continuum, the instrumental soloists contribute more decorative lines, incorporating extended performing techniques. The resulting music is (often magically) transformed and spatially manipulated by the electronics.

*Prometeo* is constructed of nine continuous sections, each scored for a different combination of voices and instruments. Section V (*Three voices*), for example, is for three solo voices and an instrumental ensemble, while the penultimate section (*Second interlude*) is for instruments only. The second, third, and sixth sections are entitled "isole" (islands—a concept influenced by Foucault's archipelago theory) and form the nodes around which the rest of the work revolves. The polyglot text, assembled by Marco Cacciari, consists of fragments from a number of sources (including Hesiod, Aeschylus, Walter Benjamin, Hölderlin and Rilke) relating to the myth of Prometheus, who incurred the anger of the gods by bringing the gift of fire to the human race. Nono does not set the text conventionally, but fragments it, so that meaning is deliberately obscured in favour of sound. A significant portion of the text is written in the score as an aid to the performers' understanding, with directions that it is not to be sung or spoken.

André Richard and Helmut Lachenmann have both commented on *Prometeo*'s links with earlier music. Its static, ritualistic form is reminiscent of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century operas of Peri, Caccini, Gagliano and Monteverdi, which also draw on Ancient Greek tragedy and its basis in myth. The influence of the music of the North Italian early baroque can also be discerned in the scoring of the instrumental ensembles, their relationship with the solo and choral voices and the spatial separation of the different groups. The plainsong-like effect of the pitch centres established by the voices and instrumental ensembles hints at an even earlier music.

The "humanistic" selection of texts and the musical references might suggest *Prometeo* is a disillusioned revolutionary's nostalgic backward glance at a bygone culture. The second part of its subtitle, however, hints at the work's element of social and political critique. Nono felt that our ability to listen creatively was threatened by the culture of consumerism and the mass media, which he detested (television was a "breathless succession of sounds and images" which "destroys our understanding of content"). Today, when sounds and images are even louder, more varied and less escapable than in Nono's lifetime, listening can certainly appear to be an endangered, even subversive activity. It is to this activity that we are invited when we attend a

performance of *Prometeo*. The invitation is most clearly signalled by the repetition of the word “ascolta” (listen) several times during the piece: indeed, it is one of the few clearly audible portions of the text. We are drawn in to the act of listening by the lack of narrative, characterisation or any of the other conventional trappings of opera. Instead of being passive spectators, we are literally enveloped in the unfolding vocal and instrumental drama, the formal and harmonic clarity of whose music guide us through the course of the work.

For some of the audience in the Royal Festival Hall the challenge of listening to over two hours of this austere beautiful music clearly proved too daunting, and the end of each section prompted a minor exodus. This might be due in part to the fact that the Royal Festival Hall is not an ideal venue for this work. Its conventional “shoebox” structure meant that much of the hall’s space had to be given over to ensembles and soloists, so that the audience was contained in the stalls. With only a partial view of what is going on in the side balconies, and no view of the balcony, the audience’s participation in the unseen drama was limited, and much of the point of the work was lost. Those of us who stayed the course had the welcome opportunity to hear a clear and beautifully structured performance of an iconic masterpiece under the balletic batons of Diego Masson and Patrick Bailey. The London Sinfonietta (augmented by the young players of the Royal Academy of Music’s Manson Ensemble) can, of course, be relied upon to provide a performance of high quality in this repertoire, but the presence of performers such as flautist Roberto Fabbriciani and Nono’s long-time collaborator, sound designer André Richard, added an extra layer of authenticity. The admirably clear “early music” voices of Synergy Vocals, from whom both vocal soloists and chorus were drawn, negotiated the combination of cruelly high tessitura and incredibly low dynamic levels with seeming ease. The contribution of sopranos Amy Haworth and Juliet Fraser was especially impressive.

Previous performances of *Prometeo* have had a profound, even disorienting effect on those present, and when the final *Stasimon 2* ended, the London audience remained silent for nearly a minute before breaking into applause. I, too, was aware of being present at a very special event. My musical ear was refreshed after its intense aural workout, and I felt profound admiration for a composer who is able to sustain, over a huge time-span, music apparently constantly on the verge of extinction, which manages to pull itself ingeniously back from the abyss. I was not, however, drawn into the music’s inner world, but felt strangely distanced from it, viewing it from afar. This might have been Nono’s intention, but it felt more likely to be my own tragedy of listening.

**James Erber**