

**Luigi Nono: *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura***  
**Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010**

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On March 1, 2010, Luigi Nono's late work *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* (1988-89) received an extraordinary performance at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Scored for solo violin and 8-channel electronics, the work was performed by Graeme Jennings and Christopher Burns. Co-sponsored by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and the Instituto Italiano di Cultura, the concert was book-ended by a pre-concert lecture, presented by musicologist Bruce Durazzi, and a post-concert panel discussion/"talk-back," featuring the performers and Durazzi, and moderated by composer Luciano Chessa. In addition, a symposium on the composer's life and work was held at the University of California, Berkeley two days prior to the concert. The program had previously been presented by Jennings and Burns at the University of California, San Diego on February 26.

Scored for solo violin, with music stands set up at stations distributed throughout the performance space, and eight-channel tape, this "*madrigale per più 'caminantes' con Gidon Kremer* [Madrigal for Several 'Travelers' with Gidon Kremer] consists of six sections unfolding over a ca. one-hour duration.<sup>1</sup> *La lontananza* emerged from a period of intense collaboration between the composer and violinist Gidon Kremer at the SWF Strobel-Stiftung in Freiburg (now the Experimentalstudio des SWR).<sup>2</sup> During this period, Nono recorded three layers of material, falling into the following categories: 1) materials derived from extant works, such as Verdi's *Ave Maria* (from the *Quattro pezzi sacri*) and Nono's own earlier compositions *Varianti. Musica per violino solo, archi e legni* (1957) and *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima* (1979-80); 2) fragments of experiments with the sound of the violin and its modes of production; and 3) excerpts of discussions on the search for new sound possibilities, coupled with environmental noises. As such, the assembled "artifacts" of Gidon Kremer's playing that constitute the tape component and the diary-like collection of passages constituting the violin score make oblique reference to a collective and personal history, while demanding a sustained commitment on the part of the performers and the public in service of the search for new listening experiences, of re-exploring the potentials of historical works.

Inspired by a sign encountered on the wall of a cloister in Toledo that read "*Caminante no hay caminos, hay que caminar* [Wanderer, there are no ways, there is only walking]," Nono wished to thematize the experience of the wandering (and by extension, the experience of distanciation and the exploration of margins) that characterized the compositional process for Nono. The work's dramaturgy exists as the most explicit representation of this wanderer-condition. The score calls for the violinist to perambulate between music stands, "arranged on the stage (and in the audience as well) irregularly and asymmetrically, never near each other, but in a such a way as to permit free although never direct passage between them, the players searching them out."

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<sup>1</sup> Durations tends to vary considerably from one interpretation to the next, as shall be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> The 8-track magnetic tape was realized under the direction of Luigi Nono and Hans Peter Haller at the Experimental Studio of the Heinrich Strobel Foundation at the Südwestfunk (SWR) in Freiburg, Germany. Gidon Kremer and Sofia Gubaidulina helped to complete the final version of the tape.

Indeed, the performer may stop or deviate from a direct course, thus forming a network of routes throughout the space. By the same token, the "sound projectionist" is instructed to combine several channels of recorded material, essentially constructing a "path" through the eight-channel reservoir of sounds. In effect, the sound-projectionist is elevated to the role of performer, rather than serving a mere technical function. Furthermore, the violinist appears following the entrance of the tape, which continues to resonate after the violinist's exit. As such, the solo violinist is portrayed as a sort of specter emerging from and receding into the electronics.

Although certain aspects of the piece's realization are indicated with near-obsessive precision, Nono both encodes a high degree of plasticity in the violin part, relative to other works of this period, and provides an abundance of material through which the sound-projectionist must navigate. As such, performances of *La lontananza* vary considerably. Gidon Kremer's 1992 rendition chimes in at ca. 40 minutes, and betrays a relatively Romantic sensibility. By contrast, Melise Mellinger's one-hour rendition is demonstrative of the approach expected of a younger violinist immersed in late 20th-century repertoire, complemented by an emphasis upon the layer of voices and environmental noises in the electronics (as operated by Salvatore Sciarrino, the dedicatee of the work).<sup>3</sup> Of course, no recording can capture the full dimensionality of the work. Indeed, a stereo mix-down and compression of the dynamic range of *La lontananza* entails substantial compromises. With the exception of certain sonic distractions (e.g., the drone of the air-conditioning system), the Yerba Buena Center Forum proved to be an optimal venue for presenting the work. As per Nono's suggestion, the audience was configured in a quadrangle, within and around which the music stands were situated. The performers also took advantage of the two-level structure, quite literally adding a dimension to Jennings' peregrinations through the space. The violinist's trajectory was further enhanced via changes in the lighting, reinforcing the impression of traveling a considerable distance, rather than merely proceeding from one position to the next.

During the post-concert discussion, Jennings and Burns described the work as a quartet, with the ghost of Nono looking over the sound-projectionist's shoulder, and a recorded Gidon Kremer assuming a critical stance towards the violinist. Such an intimate interaction, both between the performers, and with respect to the material with which they were presented, was made manifest in their rendition of *La lontananza*. Both performers had previous experience with the piece (in 2003, for instance, Chris Burns and Mark Menzies presented the work at San Francisco's Community Music Center), a fact clearly conveyed by the extreme sensitivity and sensitivity to extremes, as well as a sense of conceptual clarity that the performers exhibited. Indeed, the delicate balance of polyphonic complexity and mercurial shifts in character appropriate to a "madrigal" setting was maintained throughout this performance. Of particular note was the exposure of the fragile and glacial sustained solo violin dyads in the third and fifth section, which in other versions have been interpreted as a sort of "pedal" upon which the electronics may be layered. Throughout the work, Chris Burns successfully avoided the tendency to focus too heavily upon one type of recorded material, choosing instead to underscore the general "hollowing-out" process of the violin source-material layer. The insertion of environmental noises prior to the looping of the final high "G" violin at the conclusion of

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<sup>3</sup> The work's title refers to Sciarrino's *All'aura in una lontananza* (1977).

the work (following the violinist's exit) proved to be highly effective.

Besides establishing a series of intimate dialogues—between historicized and new material, between the original sounds (produced by Nono and Kremer) and those of the live performers—there occurs a projection of the compositional process upon the performers and (in turn) a transformation of the act of listening performed by the audience into a process of interpretation. That is to say: the mediative role of sound-projectionist and the mobility of the performer provide each section of the audience with only a "partial view" of the work's entirety, just as the composer draws from a universe of resources extending far beyond the boundaries of the single work. Besides bringing one's own memories and assumptions to bear upon the performance, the audience member's perspective might be influenced by his/her prior knowledge of previous versions and particular spatial location to a greater degree than for other repertoire.

At one point during the audience "talk-back" session, one audience member asked whether or not it was the composer's intention to deny the listener full access to the work's surface, symbolizing the impossibility of contact with the vicissitudes of the compositional process. In my view, it is the dissolution of conventional boundaries between composer, performer, and listener, rather than the construction of new barriers, that lies at the core of the work, generating a richly layered experience for the audience. Although the exigencies of listening to a live performance of *La lontananza* may prove new and challenging for some, an overall sense of excitement, curiosity, and engagement expressed by all parties involved was palpable on this occasion.