

**“When they are dying, men sing...”: Nono's *Diario Polacco n. 2***

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Luigi Nono's *Quando stanno morendo* — *Diario Polacco n. 2* was written in response to the December 1981 events in Poland — the imposition of martial law by General Jaruzelski, and the subsequent mass repression directed against the Solidarity movement. The following paper examines several poetic elements of the piece in an attempt to relate these elements to Nono's open and collaborative compositional process.

Nono had composed his first “Polish diary”, *Diario Polacco '58*, for the 1959 Warsaw festival. In late 1981, some twenty years later and shortly before the political crisis reached its defining point, the organizers of the Warsaw Music Festival asked him for a second *Diario Polacco*. Nono writes in the program note that, following loss of contact with the organizers and the cancellation of the festival, his “desire to write this *Diary* became even stronger” and he dedicates the work to his Polish friends and companions “who – in exile, in hiding, in prison, at work – resist and hope even if they despair, believe even if they are incredulous.”<sup>1</sup> Over the course of slightly more than half an hour, *Quando stanno morendo* employs an ensemble of four female voices, bass flute, cello and live electronics to set a long text compiled by Massimo Cacciari from poetry of Czesław Miłosz, Endre Ady, Aleksandr Blok, Velimir Chlebnikov, and Boris Pasternak.

Nono's response to the Polish events was not limited to the musical sphere. Among the holdings of Venice's Archivio Luigi Nono are two almost identical type-written manuscripts entitled “Appeal for Solidarity”,<sup>2</sup> in which Nono denounces the Soviet Union's support for the Polish military takeover and calls for “a mass movement in concrete solidarity with the Polish people and their freedom of expression.” This political appeal was to have been signed by “composers, performers, critics and directors of musical institutions” who were to “commit themselves to upholding in everyway, within Italy, [the] sacrosanct demands [put forward by a group of 120 Polish intellectuals] and to supporting with every means the justified resistance of the Polish people to the authoritarian regime which today oppresses them.”

The very day before the October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1982 premiere of *Quando stanno morendo*, an interview with Nono by Renato Garavaglia was published in *L'Unità*. Interestingly, despite the title given to the interview, “Solidarnosc elettronica”, Nono does not explicitly mention the Polish events at any point in the interview. But he nonetheless does make a categorical statement about the responsibility of an artist in the given context. Affirming Garavaglia's suggestion that his work involves a continual experimentation, Nono responds that:

Today more than ever the artist has the responsibility to avoid conclusive, finalized results. They must understand that (as Musil says) “it isn't important what *is*, but rather what *could have been*.” This does away with all Manicheism, all sectarianism and intellectual rigidity. Right up to the last moment, my new work is open to all possible transformations.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Nono's program note appears in the definitive score, published after Nono's death: Luigi Nono. *Quando stanno morendo. Diario polacco n. 2*. ed. André Richard and Marco Mazzolini. Milan: Ricordi, 1999.

2 Archivio Luigi Nono (hereafter abbreviated ALN) S155.01/01-02. My transcription and translation of this text is to be found in Appendix A. I have not been able to determine whether or where this appeal was eventually published, but given that it was copied twice via typewriter and is generally fit to print there is no reason to suppose that it was not published.

3 Renato Garavaglia. “Solidarnosc elettronica.” [Interview with Luigi Nono]. in *L'Unità* (2<sup>nd</sup> October 1982). Reprinted in Luigi Nono: *scritti e colloqui* (Volume II). ed. Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi. Milan: Ricordi, 2001. pp. 273-5. pp. 273-4. Translation and italicization mine.

The interview comes back again and again to the idea that this open approach is tightly bound up with the composer's employment of live electronic means. Garavaglia asks Nono whether “there is no score, no written artifact on which to work?” and Nono responds:

No. Precisely this is the new thing. The score will be born after the Venice 'premiere'. There is a need to change the way we think about music today. The composer should no longer invent their music sitting in front of the piano keyboard but instead should throw the notes that come out of their head into the electronic calculator. They must learn to press the buttons of the elaborator. It's a new and fascinating (but very difficult) creative means. Today it is much more interesting to study how sound is created, how a live voice can be transformed, than it is to give a completed work, codified in a score for the publisher and then for the interpreters.<sup>4</sup>

As it happens, Nono did produce a score prior to the premiere, although this score includes a cover page emphatically marking it as “non-definitive” and explaining that the eventual definitive score will include more information about the live electronics, about the relationship of the performers to the microphones, etc.<sup>5</sup> The apparent contradiction with Nono's declaration that no score would be produced before the premiere is to be explained by the fact that, while Nono had in great measure reduced the role of the traditional score as a mechanism for the creation of a work, he nonetheless continued to use this technology as a facilitator of a particular performance or series of performances of the work.

By the time of this particular musical testimony, Nono had reached an advanced stage in the development of a mode of working in which his compositions evolved from workshop to workshop and from performance to performance, defined more by an oral tradition than by notation. Throughout the 1980s, in close collaboration with Hans Peter Haller and later André Richard at the Experimentalstudio Freiburg, Nono's compositional activity was centred on a process of interaction with particular, virtuosic performers on the one hand, and with the spaces of performance on the other.<sup>6</sup> Veniero Rizzardi notes that this mode of working – which can be traced as far back as Nono's 1964 *La fabbrica illuminata* for soprano and four-track tape – reflected Nono's “will to accomplish a work of art that is conceptually «closed» - which should not in anyway prevent him further interventions – but without the need to fix it in a format that can be handed down.”<sup>7</sup>

The first of three starkly contrasting “movements” that taken together constitute *Quando stanno morendo* is formed from a single monody that has been “thickened” both by orchestration out over the four voices and by electronically-mediated interactions among the four voices (together with contributions from the two instrumentalists). A central feature in the majority of the sixteen different patches employed in the course of this monody is a configuration whereby gates are used to apply the envelope of the signal from one of the voices to the signal of one or more of the other voices (sometimes colouristically modified by other DSP devices). According to Hans Peter Haller, experiments with this use of gates formed an early part of Nono's work on the piece and were bound up with an attempt to achieve an expressive “breaking” or “destroying” of the sound.<sup>8</sup>

4 Renato Garavaglia. “Solidarnosc elettronica.” [Interview with Luigi Nono]. in *L'Unità* (2<sup>nd</sup> October 1982). Reprinted in Luigi Nono: *scritti e colloqui* (Volume II). ed. Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi. Milan: Ricordi, 2001. pp. 273-5. pg. 273. Translation mine.

5 ALN 47.15.01/01R

6 cf. Hans Peter Haller. “Nono in the studio – Nono in concert – Nono and the interpreters.” in *Contemporary Music Review* 18:2 (1999), pp. 11-8.

7 Veniero Rizzardi. “Notation, oral tradition and performance practice in the works with tape and live electronics by Luigi Nono.” in *Contemporary Music Review* 18:1 (1999), pp. 47-56. pg. 54.

8 cf. Hans Peter Haller. *Das Experimentalstudio der Heinrich-Strobel-Stiftung des Südwestfunks Freiburg 1971-1989*. Vol. 2. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. pp. 131-3.

An examination of Nono's sketches shows that a technique of “breaking” was also involved in the preparation of the monody as such, prior to its orchestration or electronic modification. As is almost ubiquitously the case in Nono's work of the 1980s, the initial material from which the melodic lines are drawn is to be found in the sketches for another work.<sup>9</sup> From sketches bearing transcriptions of flute multiphonics produced during Nono's work on *Das atmende Klarsein*,<sup>10</sup> Nono produces a long monody for a single voice, unfolding the vertical sonorities of the flute multiphonics horizontally.<sup>11</sup> This monody is immediately fragmented, and the fragments are assigned numeric indices from 1-18. The black lines at the centre and right side of Example 1 are the immediate traces of this process of fragmentation:



**Example 1: from ALN 47.06.01/07dx**  
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The eighteen fragments are then reassembled by Nono in two different, parallel orders (one in red, the other in black). As he recopies the reordered fragments to a new series of sketchpages,<sup>12</sup> Nono also makes slight modifications to the rhythm, or register (maintaining the pitch class but changing the octave) or sequence of sounds, sometimes even omitting certain sounds altogether. The left fragment of Example 1 (above) becomes the top-left of Example 2 (below). A C# has been crossed out in red on Example 1, and then omitted on Example 2. The notes B-flat and E are transposed up an octave:



**Example 2: from ALN 47.06.02/01v sx**  
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9 I am indebted to the work of Dr. Erika Schaller at the Archivio Luigi Nono on the indexing and cross-referencing of the vast network of Nono's sketches – particularly indispensable in the case of his sketches during the 1980s. The Archivio's catalog can be accessed online at: <http://www.luiginono.it/cataloghi.htm>.

10 cf. ALN 45.11.01, 2, and 3

11 ALN 47.06.01

12 ALN 47.06.02/01v and 02v

Both the red and black monodies are then recopied as a new single monody,<sup>13</sup> with the black monody beginning where the red monody ends. Once again, the recopying process is accompanied by small changes. This time, the material is copied only to the uppermost system of each sketchpage, leaving the remainder of each page free for notes and short hand instructions, both for the electronics and for the subsequent orchestration of the monody out over four voices. The density of these marks, made with several different writing implements, suggests that this material (shown on Example 3 below) was the basis of several interactive iterations between Nono, the performers, and the electronics:

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation. At the top, there is a staff with a melodic line in black ink, with some red markings above it. Below this are several empty staves. On the left side, there are labels for instruments: 'tuba', 'Fl.', and 'h.'. In the lower half of the page, there are handwritten notes in black and red ink. A list of electronic processing terms is enclosed in a red box: 'MODULAZIONE', 'FILTRO', 'SPAZIO', and 'MIKRO'. Below this list, the words 'NON FINITI' are written in large, bold, black letters. There are also some other handwritten notes and symbols, including a circled 'a3' and some arrows pointing to specific parts of the score.

Example 3: ALN 47.07.02/02sx

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13 ALN 47.07.02



In two final series of sketches<sup>14</sup> the monody is unfolded out onto the voices of the four singers, each of whom is referred to by way of her initials. To sum up, a monody composed from material from an earlier piece has been fragmented, reassembled, and subjected to various intuitive modifications as it has been recopied. Then, in a process of real-time collaboration with the singers, various orchestrations and electronics are “attached” to notes or phrases of the monody, which finally becomes sections A and B of the first movement of the piece. A characteristic feature of this whole process is that, even before the monody is workshopped with the performers, Nono manipulates and transforms it as sound, that is to say, as a unity of durations, pitches, dynamics, etc. Each stage of the composition is potentially performable.

The search for expressively “broken” or destroyed sounds continues in the second movement, which sets a single poem by Velimir Chlebnikov (while the outer movements are each based upon three poems from Cacciari's compilation). Both stanzas of Chlebnikov's poem begin by making explicit Nono's opposition to the Soviet intervention – “Mosca – chi sei? Mosca – vetusto cranio... [Moscow, who are you? Moscow, ancient skull...]” and “Mosca – chi sei? Io so che voi siete lupi ortodossi [Moscow, who are you? I know that you are orthodox wolves...]”.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the second movement, the cello and the flute perform separate streams of jagged rhythmic material (with minimal pitch content). While the flute articulates its rhythms with low repeated pitches, the cellist is required at different points to use one of three additional cellos, each mistuned differently from the others. The signals from both performers are subjected to progressively greater downwards pitch shift over the course of the “movement”, resulting in an extremely aggressive texture (as if to evoke the “orthodox wolves” mentioned in the text) over which the second soprano and the mezzo-soprano project a textless monody.

The text of Chlebnikov's poem is spoken by the contralto. In the piece as a whole the text is generally not deducible by ear, both because Nono subjects Cacciari's compilation to various juxtapositions and interruptions, and because individual phonemes are often stretched over relatively long durations. But the contralto's spoken denunciation of Moscow is a single, striking exception. And this even though their speech is subjected to the “Reverser” – two 1.5 second memories, configured such that audio is alternately written to one memory while it is read back in reverse from the other. The official performance notes specify that the sound director is free to alternate between passing through either the reversed sound or the non-reversed sound (but never a blend). On the recording issued by Dischi Ricordi the words “Mosca – chi sei?” are transparently comprehensible at the same time as the majority of the text is once again “broken”.<sup>16</sup>

The third and final section of the piece resumes the thickened line concept heard in the first section, but in contrast to the beginning of the piece there are moments where a real counterpoint, an additional and independent line is added. The three subsections of the third “movement”, each of which set a different poem from Cacciari's compilation, are primarily differentiated by their “orchestration”. The first subsection is occasionally punctuated by interludes in which the flute produces “aeolian sounds”. The second subsection answers this with a quiet down-transposed cello pizzicati. There is thus a structural juxtaposition of low,

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14 ALN 47.07.03 and 47.08.01.

15 From the libretto as translated by Nigel Jamieson in the official score. Luigi Nono. *Quando stanno morendo. Diario polacco n. 2.* ed. André Richard and Marco Mazzolini. Milan: Ricordi, 1999.

16 CRMCD 1003 (1991).

dark, percussive sounds with high, bright sounds lacking sharply defined attacks and releases. The third and final subsection responds to this juxtaposition by removing both elements, leaving only the four voices, which are now treated with only the plainest of electronics – some reverb and spatialization.

The text presented by these “plain” voices functions as a sort of “punchline”, in the sense of an element at the end of a work that leaps back through the work, altering the resonance of all that has preceded it. Chlebnikov's text explicitly refers to the concept of song: “When they are dying, horses breathe, / when they are dying, grasses wither, / when they are dying, suns fade away, / when they are dying, / men sing...”<sup>17</sup> I would say that the obvious reflexivity of this text – people singing *about* people singing as they are dying — indicates something of the nature of Nono's treatment of the voice throughout the piece. These are not voices that are singing in order to present some or other extrinsic content. Instead, the constant play of contrasts between between the different voices (intensified by the electronic re-exposure or re-framing of these sounds) functions to draw attention to the category of voice as such.

At this point, several poetic elements of *Quando stanno morendo* have been identified: the pursuit of expressively broken sounds, the desire to oppose the machinations of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the reflexive use of the voice. What is the relationship between these relatively specific elements and the open, collaborative process which Nono employs in order to give them form?

In his “Appeal for Solidarity”<sup>18</sup> Nono writes that the “condemnation of General Jaruzelwskij's military coup”, “the condemnation of the military's repression of the union movement, of independent Polish political bodies”, and the “simple denunciation of the oppressive Soviet intervention and the concrete support given to the authoritarian regime in Warsaw by the USSR” all no longer suffice. To these insufficient measures he counterposes efforts to “give life to a mass movement in concrete solidarity with the Polish people and their freedom of expression.” Certainly, the process of solving musical problems in intimate collaboration with the performers could profitably be viewed as a microcosm of the mass, concrete solidarity for which Nono calls.

More fundamentally, in the case of both the collaboration with the performers and the adaptation of a work to each new hall in which it is performed, it is a matter of continually placing the musicians (Nono included) in a situation in which they must understand and respond to a high quotient of complexity. This stands at the centre of Nono's explicit response to the Polish events – he calls for *complex* activity rather than, or in addition to, *simple* protest. For their part, the reflexive use of the voice and the expressive breaking of sounds also involve an orientation towards complexity, but with the important difference that these particular complications can be grappled with by a wider audience unaware of the music's genesis.

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17 From the libretto as translated by Nigel Jamieson in the official score. Luigi Nono. *Quando stanno morendo. Diario polacco n. 2.* ed. André Richard and Marco Mazzolini. Milan: Ricordi, 1999.

18 cf. Appendix A.

## Appendix A – Nono's “Appeal for Solidarity”

Sono ormai passati due mesi dal 13 dicembre 1981. Non può più bastare la condanna del colpo militare del generale Jaruzelwskij. Non può più bastare la condanna della repressione militare del movimento sindacale degli organismi politici autonomi polacchi. Né è più sufficiente la semplice denuncia delle pesanti interferenze sovietiche e del concreto appoggio, poi, da parte dell'Urss al regime autoritario di Varsavia.

E' ormai necessario che ogni organismo democratico, politico, sindacale, culturale, tenti ogni strada per dar vita ad un movimento di massa in solidarietà concreta col popolo polacco e le sue libere espressioni. Gli stessi movimenti per la pace, che tanto peso hanno avuto nel recente passato contro i programmi di riarmo atomico americani e europei, perderebbero ogni credibilità morale, prima ancora che politica, se non facessero oggi del ripristino delle libertà in Polonia il loro primo obiettivo.

Compositori, esecutori, critici, e i dirigenti di istituzioni qui sottoscritti, molto dei quali negli ultimi decenni, quando più vivaci in Polonia sono stati i movimenti di innovazione culturale, hanno potuto stringere rapporti di lavoro e di ricerca di amicizia con le tendenze musicali e artistiche polacche, chiedono, in completo accordo con quanto contenuto nel Documento dei 120 intellettuali polacchi:

- l'immediata fine dello stato di assedio
- l'immediata scarcerazione di tutti i detenuti politici
- il ritorno a serie trattative tra governo e le libere espressioni sindacali, politiche, culturali, religiose del popolo polacco
- piena libertà di associazione, organizzazione e movimento per Solidarnosc

Si Impegnano a sostenere in ogni modo, all'interno del nostro paese, queste sacrosante rivendicazioni e ad appoggiare con ogni mezzo la giusta resistenza del popolo polacco contro il regime autoritario che oggi lo opprime.

LN

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Already two months have passed since the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1981. The condemnation of General Jaruzelwskij's military coup no longer suffices. The condemnation of the military's repression of the union movement, of independent Polish political bodies, no longer suffices. Nor is the simple denunciation of the oppressive Soviet intervention and the concrete support given to the authoritarian regime in Warsaw by the USSR any longer sufficient.

It is now necessary that every democratic, political, trade union and cultural body take advantage of every opportunity to give life to a mass movement in concrete solidarity with the Polish people and their freedom of expression.

The peace movements, whose opposition to the program of American and European nuclear rearmament has gained strength recently, would lose all moral credibility, not to mention political credibility, were they not to make the restoration of liberty in Poland their prime objective.

The below-signed composers, performers, critics, and directors of musical institutions, many of whom in recent decades, when movements of cultural innovation were more alive in Poland, were able to form close relationships of work, research and friendship with Polish musical and artistic tendencies, request, in complete agreement with what is contained in the statement by the 120 Polish intellectuals:

- the immediate end to the state of siege
- the immediate release of all political prisoners
- the return to serious negotiations between the government and the free trade union, political, cultural and religious organizations of the Polish people
- full freedom of association, organization and movement for the Solidarity movement

They commit themselves to upholding in every way, within Italy, these sacrosanct demands and to supporting with every means the justified resistance of the Polish people to the authoritarian regime which today oppresses them.

LN (Translation: David Ogborn)

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Translator's note: 2 copies of Nono's “Appello per Solidarnosc” are contained in the Archivio Luigi Nono, with the shelfmarks, S155.01/01-02. The differences between the two are of no significance. The text is © the estate of Luigi Nono and is here reproduced by the kind permission of Nuria Schoenberg-Nono.