

MUSIC

MUSIC; A Work on the Edge of Anxiety

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Nov. 5, 2000

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LET'S stipulate that when the Venetian composer Luigi Nono wrote "Prometeo," the culminating opus of his life, his first concern was not the comfort of the audience. At 2 hours 20 minutes, with no breaks between movements, with vast stretches of music in slow motion devoid of momentum, with the dynamic level often hovering around the threshold of audibility and with many of the ordinary hierarchies of musical values rearranged or simply jettisoned, the work, to a libretto by the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, does not give a listener a lot of familiar ground to cling to.

None of which has kept the Ensemble Modern from playing to sold-out houses in a European tour of the work, which began last August in Germany and concludes next August in Switzerland. The two performances here, at the Cite de la Musique in collaboration with the Festival d'Automne a Paris, were attended by rapt audiences, engrossed not only by the work's sheer audacity of imagination and pristine beauty but also by meticulous performances of astonishing control and virtuosity, conducted by Emilio Pomarico and Yoichi Sugiyama, with sound-direction by Andre Richard.

"Nono and Cacciari wished to free listening from dependence on seeing," Mr. Richard writes in the valuable collection of commentary issued in conjunction with the performances. Nonetheless, the visual component of the purely sonic work is irreplaceable, especially in a hall as ideal as the Cite de la Musique. Essential to its design is an ability to configure space and acoustics flexibly. The stage -- if one is used -- is modular; platforms, too, can support musicians. Resolving the acoustics for a work requires a dialogue between the musicians and the technical staff.

The Cite de la Musique is not merely a concert hall; it is also part of an ambitious attempt to attract new audiences to the 19th Arrondissement (arguably, the Brooklyn of Paris) by "creating an environment in which people will choose their own way of approaching music," said Brigitte Marger, the general manager. Offering a remarkable museum of instruments, workshops, lectures, children's programs and a concert series that includes indigenous music and even popular artists willing to shed commercial allegiances for artistically innovative experiments, the institution seeks to integrate usually disparate musical activities and thus overcome a primary obstacle to building audiences: as Ms. Marger puts it, "a lot of people feel music is a specialized culture." Still, the Cite de la Musique is decidedly committed to pure forms of music as opposed to multimedia events.

"Prometeo" is subtitled "Tragedia Dell'Ascolto" ("Tragedy of Listening"). In it, Nono, who died in 1990, sought to do nothing less than redraw the boundaries and nature of musical experience. The work was conceived and composed over a number of years, from the late 70's to its premiere, in 1984; over the next year, Nono made substantial revisions.

To create the libretto for this work -- originally an opera that evolved into a drama deliberately stripped of visual elements -- Mr. Cacciari drew fragments from disparate sources, including Hesiod, Holderlin and Walter Benjamin, adding original writing. Nono further transformed the resultant collage (in ancient Greek, German and Italian) to the point that listeners are often in doubt as to just what they are hearing; even when the words emerge clearly, their original logic may not. For one thing, Nono indicates parts of the text that are to be read but not actually articulated.

The performing forces -- five solo voices, two narrators, a small choir, three trios of instrumental soloists, and a small orchestra subdivided into four equal groups -- are integrated with live electronics and deployed around the perimeter of the hall, surrounding the audience and at various levels above. On the first night, I sat near the center, looking into the faces of four sound engineers controlling the electronics. On the second, I sat at the periphery; with most of the performing forces now visible, the drama of performance and the spatialization effects were far more apparent.

Nono's recasting of musical values necessitated simplifying what is ordinarily complex and complicating what has long been elementary. Harmonic and sequential logic -- the first half of the equation -- were for much of the 20th century, and especially for the European composers with whom Nono was most closely associated (Boulez, Stockhausen and Xenakis), the keystone of musical creativity.

As one listens to "Prometeo," it becomes apparent that these dimensions have been radically reduced, becoming the easiest components of all to follow. The intervals of open and diminished fifths, so pervasive that one begins to hear them as functionally equivalent (though qualitatively different) expressions of stasis, offset the sense of motion now assigned to a new dimension: sound traveling through space. (Microphones attached to the musicians enable individual sounds to be recorded, slightly delayed, then dispatched to various loudspeakers.)

There is also precious little linear motion in the conventional sense of musical line. Instead, one hears electronic modifications of the voices and instruments. A group of voices singing one pitch may be individually modulated electronically by fractional increments of a semitone to project a cluster so narrowly confined that the boundaries distinguishing timbre from pitch are blurred. And as Mr. Pomarico, the conductor, pointed out, while opening a breathtakingly large score, singers are instructed to maintain a pianissimo dynamic, which is electronically amplified to match a crescendo by accompanying instrumental soloists. What results for the listener is a crescendo without the changes in timbre that ordinarily come into play.

The discrepancies between score instructions and what is actually heard is problematic for the performers. "Nono liked the confusion that could result," said Gianmario Borio, an Italian musicologist. "He wanted players on the edge of anxiety. He actually did not want such a perfect sound."

Performers are thus inevitably drawn into the creative process, as part of a team effort that perhaps suited Nono's political and social predilections. Yet the music is not improvisational. "Improvisation was in the compositional process," Mr. Borio said. There is, in the classical sense, a "right" way to play a passage. Not that everyone will ever agree. With the score containing so much idiosyncratic notation, interpretation of "Prometeo" depends heavily on oral tradition.

The opening minute of the work covers a lot of ground: a staggered choral chord of superimposed open fifths, nearly imperceptible string harmonics, sharply contrasting full orchestral textures, electronic reverberation, spoken text. Few other moments in the piece traverse such a diverse spectrum so quickly. But events do not flow into one another; a sense of isolation pervades.

Some 20 minutes later, now in the second section, more complex harmonies appear. Powerful blasts from the brass, full of raw power (but not energy), enter without warning, moving rapidly from pianississimo to fortissimo, leaving a reverberant trail. In Part 3, the threshold of audibility is further tested, and new timbres derived from new interactions among the performing forces emerge, yet the overall texture of discontinuity obtains.

Just over an hour into the work, on words of Holderlin, the texture changes radically. The effect in live performance of the sudden shift to flowing, sustained lines in the solo voices, in rich counterpoint with the trio of low wind soloists, is cathartic. I turned to my left to follow the virtuosity of Dietmar Wiesner, Wolfgang Stryi and Uwe Dierksen as they switched with masterly flexibility among an array instruments: Mr. Wiesner on the deepest flutes, Mr. Stryi on clarinets and Mr. Dierksen on trombone, euphonium and tuba. While the wind trio remained largely localized, the voices, building ever more sustained lines (doubtless prolonged electronically), were distributed throughout the hall.

Midway through, the piece reaches the practical limits of audibility. On the excellent EMI CD (recorded live in 1993 and now out of print in the United States but still available in Germany), the textures are so gossamer that you can hear the creaking of chairs and the articulation of consonants louder than the notes themselves. Emerging from this ethereal nadir, new textures continue to reveal themselves. Vocal passages attain a purity of line and harmony that a listener today might associate with Arvo Part.

But Nono shows that there is nothing necessarily meditative about sustained, pianississimo lines. Even in the work's final moments, with high-register triads in the female voices (including the same high F that Schoenberg made indelible in his "Herz gewachse"), one never feels at peace. Instead, one is left with a sense of exhilaration and awe at having experienced, at the same time, a journey and a ritual.

Development is an ambiguous term in music. Broadly construed, it describes nearly any series of events that sound connected; narrowly defined, it refers to sonata form. For Nono, remaining faithful to his musical convictions meant relinquishing any attempt to graft a concept of development onto the musical structure of "Prometeo." Five of the work's sections are called "Islands," revealingly identifying the relationship between the movements; for plotting a course through an archipelago neither denies that all the islands exist at once nor implies that the sequence of the journey is arbitrary.

EXCERPTS from "Prometeo" were performed last season at Carnegie Hall; a successful performance of the entire work demands the right space and collateral events to prepare the audience. The design of the forthcoming Zankel Hall at Carnegie, influenced by the success of the Cite de la Musique (with Pierre Boulez having served as an adviser to both), is promising. It may prove an ideal site for performances of "Prometeo."

Jurg Stenzl, an Austrian music historian, says that Nono, possessed of unshakable political and artistic convictions through the early 70's, was plunged into a crisis of doubt after the overthrow of President Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973. Nono

replaced one set of convictions not with another but with a commitment to the very process of searching and questioning. Philippe Albera, a Swiss music critic, makes the additional point in the performance commentary that Nono questioned "the respective positions of the composer, interpreter and listener."

"The piece is not a work of architecture to be contemplated but a singular experience, a voyage of initiation in which doubts, obstacles, crises are necessary," Mr. Albera writes. "For Nono, it was less important to glorify the object, to add masterpieces to the universal museum, than to contribute to the movement of history."

Maybe so, but in the case of "Prometeo," creating a masterpiece is exactly what he did.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 2, Page 15 of the National edition with the headline: MUSIC; A Work on the Edge of Anxiety