

Luigi Nono: Master of Sound and Silence Festival

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by Emily Hall

Presented by the Conservatoire de Montréal, with Serge Provost as artistic director, five of the seven concerts generously had free admission, and all took place at Salle Pierre-Mercure. This review covers a selection of the compositions performed throughout this special seven-day festival of concerts, master classes, talks and even films, focusing on the Venetian composer Luigi Nono (1924-1990). As the program reads, the festival was a way to “shed light on the works and thoughts of the most inspired and the most personally profound composer of the 20th century.” These accolades were supported by sensitive performances, often showcasing the talents of student performers in a professional light. Those willing to go along for the sake of the journey were indeed rewarded.

Heavy on the technical set-up, the sound engineers were kept busy at almost every concert, such as in the stunning inaugural performance, “La Fabbrica illuminata” (1964), for soprano and tape, which has been considered Nono’s best-known work. The soprano’s role, though sparse, especially at the onset, kept my attention due to Sophie Martin’s effortless tone, sensitive nuances, elastic agility, and convincing dedication to this composition that denounces the inhumanity and cruelty of factory work conditions, and an immoral social order in general. Hearing the work live in surround sound improves its now rather dated tape technology: the shouting cries of a mob, combined with industrial sounds (recorded inside a plant in Genova-Cornigliano) come from everywhere – disembodied and incongruous - and

therefore create the illusion of chaos and futility.

“...sofferte onde serene...” (1976) for piano and electronics was deftly performed by Raoul Sosa who appropriately accentuated this heavy and violent - but exquisitely formless - interior landscape. The title roughly translates to “...serene waves endured...” and Nono wrote it for his friend, the pianist Maurizio Pollini, in response to the passing of some of his and Pollini’s family members. A single speaker, placed almost underneath the piano, projected the electronic component, which consisted of recorded sounds of a prepared piano: electronic and live sounds thus became an impressively compact unit.

The falsetto range of the tuba is lovingly explored for a large portion of “Post-prae-ludium no. 1 par ‘Donau’” (1987), for tuba and live DSP. Porpoise-like gestures are processed through delays at varying durations, resulting in a natural and continuous flow of overlapping echoes that are then projected from multiple directions around the audience. Eventually, a sudden low bass pitch marks the beginning of a meditation on single, drawn-out pitches. Congratulations to the young tubist Philippe Legault who presented this quietly tender and poetic example of Nono’s late style.

Nono found this phrase on a cloister wall in Toledo: “Travelers, there are no paths, you must walk”. Several late works were subsequent reactions, including this concert’s final piece (which is also Nono’s final composition) whose title translates to ‘We must walk’ dreaming (“‘Hay che caminar’ soñando”, 1989). The “enigmatic

scale” from Verdi’s “Ave Maria” is Nono’s starting point for this searchingly formless but concentrated dissection of sound which was sensitively performed by violinists Lizann Gervais and Clemens Merkel.

Mrs. Schoenberg-Nono, who is seventy-five this year, was unfortunately unable to join pianist Stefan Litwin for their presentation of “Album Photo: The life and work of Arnold Schoenberg,” due to health problems. Nonetheless, Mr. Litwin proved to be a remarkable orator and wealth of detailed knowledge. From as close as possible to Schoenberg’s own point of view, Litwin provided a window into the man’s artistic thought process, his cultural and political contexts, and his relationships with students, family, and the artistic community. Interspersed, Litwin performed piano pieces by Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and Eisler with silky-sublime clarity – an invaluable addition to the festival.

The Percussion Ensemble of the Conservatoire under the direction of Jean-Guy Plante presented “Con Luigi Dallapiccola” (1979), with a packed stage of percussion equipment, six percussionists, and amplification (including ring modulators on the bell plates). It was a complex choreography – visually, it evoked images of a spider’s limbs weaving about the stage – but the young performers remained focused and composed through the sparkling rings of the many crotales.

“Incontri” (1955) translates as “encounters”. A serial piece for twenty-four instruments, it has aged very well (much better than “Polifonica-Monodia-Ritmica,” also written by a young Nono in the 1950’s). Starting and ending with two trombone blasts, this symmetrical construction (the second half is a retrograde of the first half) presents two contrasting musical entities kept in constant contact with one another. I can only say that I was disappointed when the sound was gone – the tantalizing

rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic combinations could have carried on longer.

Eight sections constitute “Das atmende Klarsein” (1981) for bass flute, small chorus, live DSP, and pre-recorded sounds. The chorus sections, alternating with increasingly capricious bass flute sections (performed by the hypnotic Maxime Lataille), symbolized purity through their simple exploration of perfect fourths and fifths. In words, this seemed a banal idea, but in sound, it was transcendently satisfying; and this particular group of singers conducted by Véronique Lacroix was breathtaking, often singing in the stratospheres and hardly ever reaching above *mp*. The text was made up of fragments from “Duino Elegis” by Rainer Maria Rilke and ancient Orphic poetry – none of which could be understood, but this did not take away from the performance. Nono wrote this over a period of three years, creating a truly memorable experience that ended the concert.

One of the concerts featured works by conservatoire alumni and professors. In his work “Île arc-en-ciel” (1991) for soprano and electronics, Gonnevillle believes he has achieved the same kind of balance between construction and expression he perceives in the works of Nono. Taken from a larger work composed for dance, Gonnevillle reworked the piece to create this concert version. Written completely in one mode derived from the natural harmonic series, “Île arc-en-ciel” is a single gesture - both refreshing and soothing.

An original and ambitious composition by Jimmie LeBlanc was premiered under the direction of Duk-Kyung Chang. Containing microtonal elements likely rooted in the spectral system, “Votre voix humaine et ardente”, for horn, cello, and 3 double basses, was written as an homage to Nono himself. Leblanc studied under Serge Provost at the Conservatoire so

his affinity for Nono is not surprising: it also suits his aesthetic, which tends towards the contemplative.

The highly captivating Vincent Ranallo (baritone) and Mariève Bock (cellist) performed, with conviction and facility, “Ce pays incantatoire” by Vincent-Olivier Gagnon. This peculiar composition contained hyper-exaggerated rants and was Byzantine in its ornateness and exoticism.

The premiere performance of “Kéléütha – les chemins du jour et de la nuit” by Serge Provost, for bass voice, 3 horns, 3 double basses, and live electronics, was full of brooding sustained sounds. The text is sung (with live electronic processing) in ancient Greek, and the title also points towards the Greek composer Xenakis: a collection of his articles from 1955-1988 was published under the title “Kéléütha”. But Provost distinctly says this work is a tribute to Nono, and no one could argue the enormity by which Nono’s ideas have influenced him as a whole. Indeed, Kéléütha is the Greek word for “paths” and the rest of the title translates from French to mean “paths of day and night.”

One is reminded again of the writing from Toledo - “Travelers, there are no paths, you must walk”. Nono’s rumination on this phrase is evident in his later and most enduring works, which require close focus on each sound moment, often at the threshold of hearing. Sound is no longer a carrier of musical structure: to get something out of this music, you must value the journey rather than the destination.

-Emily Hall

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