


# A Reconstruction of Late Renaissance Music in Nono's *Prometeo*

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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: November 29, 2019 • Accepted: August 5, 2020

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to stress that the composer Luigi Nono never overlooked early music, particularly Renaissance music, and his avant-garde works were created on the basis of late Renaissance and early Baroque music. Furthermore, this paper has tried to shed light on the relationship between music and space, which was an essential parameter of musical composition in the twentieth century as well as in the Renaissance. The sound modulated by live electronics transports the listener into synesthetic and perceptive listening and sonic space. As a result, it is demonstrated that Nono indicated the power and fascination of the voice, the polychoral structure, and the influence of the interaction between sound and space in his *Prometeo*.

### KEYWORDS

*Prometeo*, Luigi Nono, synesthetic listening, Venetian polychoral style

Luigi Nono (1924–1990) was one of the most well-respected avant-garde composers of the twentieth century as well as a politically-engaged musician. His works have continuously shown experimental attempts and unhesitatingly delivered trenchant political messages connected with social situations. The most prominent of Nono's late works, *Prometeo: The Tragedy of Listening*, is a prototype for and the monumental realization of Nono's idea about the new possibilities for listening. In the work are contained the principal musical keywords of the twentieth century such as live electronic music, the relation between sound and space, the question of resonance, and new vocal techniques. However, from the first moment his compositional attempts are

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predicated on the musical features and textures of the late Renaissance, even though his sound materials show the radical progress of new music. Moreover, there is no doubt that Nono was strongly influenced by the vocal music of the late Renaissance and Italian madrigals, particularly in his early period, the 1940s. Above all, the significant question for the composer was how a new music would be created on the basis of older musical traditions, even if he is recognized as a driver of experimental music. This tradition should not be repudiated, but could be accepted and reconstructed in the twentieth century as well, a point that adds more weight to the assertion of this article that Nono would reconstruct Renaissance music in his *Prometeo*.

*Prometeo* is a crucial work that sheds light on Nono's musical philosophy and his entire compositional characteristics, and a clear consequence of his endeavors associating music of the late twentieth century with the Renaissance. Therefore, this paper focuses on *Prometeo*, which contains his musical ideas and compositional concepts, and which aims to find out the relevance of *Prometeo* to the music of the late Renaissance.

## 1. SYNESTHETIC LISTENING IN NONO'S LATE MUSIC

The later works of Nono raised controversial issues because of the modification of his musical tendency entering into the 1980s. The composer, who had shown extreme musical techniques and radical political engagement, faced another compositional phase. In particular, his string quartet *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima*, completed in 1980, revealed a different direction in his composition. It was as if he had turned to the creation of pure music excluding political views, since the string quartet, which utilizes a range of extreme *p*-dynamics (*p* – *ppppp*) and has frequent long pauses, has been interpreted as a conversion to musical interiority. On the other hand, it can be regarded as intensifying his musical identity and political tendency.<sup>1</sup> Regarding this divergent argument, Nono pronounced that his String Quartet was not an expression of a new retrospective line for him but of his current experimental situation.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, in the *Fragmente-Stille*, Nono experimented with the sound of silence and demonstrated his ideas about musical listening in the latter period of his compositional career.

According to Lachenmann's comments, silence has greater power to intensify our possibility of listening and to stimulate the perception of sound than people think:

The silence into which Nono's late works lead us is a fortissimo of agitated perception. It is not the sort of silence in which human searching comes to rest, but rather one in which it is recharged with strength and the restlessness which sharpens our senses and makes us impatient with the contradictions of reality. It is a silence which does not make one passive and subservient but, rather, activates one's longing, sharpens the perceptions beyond what can be heard, *vis-à-vis* our own human destiny, and makes one long for that clarity in the face of which people understand their sacrifice and to which Nono's *Il canto sospeso* is a monument.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Heinz-Klaus METZGER, "Wendepunkt Quartett?," in *Musik-Konzepte 20: Luigi Nono*, ed. by Heinz-Klaus METZGER and Rainer RIEHN (München: Text + Kritik, 1981), 94.

<sup>2</sup>Constantin FLOROS, *Neue Ohren für neue Musik* (Mainz: Schott, 2006), 122.

<sup>3</sup>Helmut LACHENMANN, "Touched by Nono," *Contemporary Music Review* 18 (1999), 27. Quoted in Carola NIELINGER-VAKIL, "Quiet Revolutions: Hölderlin Fragments by Luigi Nono and Wolfgang Rihm," *Music & Letters* 81/2 (2000), 255.



Nono himself emphasized that the *Fragmente-Stille* was a work for “inner ears.”<sup>4</sup> That means that “Stille” (silence) allows us to recognize much more of a variety of sound than we can hear, and that it leads us to the deeper inner world of listening.<sup>5</sup>

After composing the String Quartet, Nono worked intensively on musical sound and space in relation to listening, which resulted in meaningful works such as *Das atmende Klarsein* (1980–1983) and *Io, Frammento dal Prometeo* (1981), both previously completed by Nono while he was composing *Prometeo*. The considerable and practical element that enabled him to experiment with the new possibilities of listening and to realize the *Raumklang* (sound of space) was simply live electronic music learned at the Experimental Studio of Heinrich-Strobel-Stiftung of SWF (Südwestfunk) in Freiburg. Nono visited the studio on November 14, 1980, and the discovery of live electronic music became for him a key to solving the temporal sustenance of sound and actualizing the “motion of sound” in space.<sup>6</sup> Immediately after the visit, Nono concentrated on the composition of live electronic music and regarded it as a means for a new compositional challenge.

After composing *Al gran Sole carico d'amore* (1975), Nono began engaging “the process of perception” (der Prozeß der Erkenntnis)<sup>7</sup> that relates to the resonance and motility of sound and occurs in the mutual interaction of space and music. Therefore, the new possibilities of listening that Nono himself underlined can be interpreted as “the process of perception,” in other words as “synesthetic listening”<sup>8</sup> in which multi-sensory perception is automatically stimulated, and which is fulfilled in the relation between sound and space. Floating sounds electronically modified could be an answer to his compositional consideration as well as a technique that evokes synesthetic perception during the act of listening to music.

The topic of the relation between sound and space was one of the noticeable musical trends in the latter half of the twentieth century and could be actualized by the technological development of electronic music. Nono's tendency of spatial composition already appeared in the *Composizione per orchestra no. 2: Diario polacco 1958* (1959) at the end of the 1950s, which approached Stockhausen's *Gruppen* (1955–1957) and was intensified through the “azione scenica” concept in the *Intolleranza 1960* (1961) and *Al gran Sole carico d'amore*. His musical experimentation involving acoustic dimensions was not confined to visual musical conditions but rather had developed into the auditory scene in *Prometeo*.

However, this subject recalls at the same time Renaissance music that also paid attention to the musical space and progress established by the polyphonic and homophonic soundworlds. It is clear that Nono's insight into the texture of Renaissance music is located in the fundamental basis of his music. If it is especially emphasized that Nono focused on the Flemish Renaissance and Italian madrigals, and that he was under their influence for ages, his intention in the musical construction of *Prometeo* for a connection with Renaissance vocal music and polyphonic space would be more obvious.

<sup>4</sup>Nils RÖLLER (ed.), *Migranten: Edmond Jabès, Luigi Nono, Massimo Cacciari* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1995), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Nono's interest in silence is an evident reminder of the work 4' 33" by John Cage, and he mentioned it concerning his String Quartet. As well as Cage, Nono tried to convey that there are a lot of possibilities of sounds in silence.

<sup>6</sup>Jürg STENZL, *Luigi Nono* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998), 94.

<sup>7</sup>STENZL, *Luigi Nono*, 92.

<sup>8</sup>Hye-Eun UH, “Synesthetic Listening of Late Twentieth-Century Music Focused on Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*,” *Journal of the Musicological Society of Korea* 19/3 (2016), 211.



## 2. NONO AND RENAISSANCE MUSIC

Nono's interest in the sacred music and madrigal of the late Renaissance can be traced back to his encounter, in 1941, with the musicologist and composer Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882–1973), who was a friend of his father. Although Malipiero as a composer did not have a decisive influence on Nono, his work as an editor of all of Claudio Monteverdi's œuvre provided the young composer with an opportunity to engage in polyphonic vocal music. Furthermore, Malipiero's musical career at the Venice Liceo Musicale, as director of the conservatory from 1939 to 1952, helped Nono and fellow student Bruno Maderna (1920–1973) to become interested in Venetian music of the Renaissance and early Baroque.

More precisely, the friendship with Maderna, who was fascinated by the canon in Renaissance music, was significant to Nono's early works. For Nono, Maderna was another mentor who led him to the study of the musical and aesthetic theories of the Renaissance, in particular the Flemish Renaissance.

He did not teach recipes, he did not hand out catalogues of methods, above all he avoided teaching his own ideas or an aesthetic; his fundamental concern was to teach musical thought, in particular about music in different, combined tempi, like the enigmatic canons of the Flemish Renaissance, for example.<sup>9</sup>

Then we took up scores, for example Ottaviano Petrucci's *Odhecaton*, with its collection of two- and three-part chansons by the great Flemish masters, which we would transcribe, comparing the compositional practice with the theoretical discussion contained in the various treatises.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, according to Constantin Floros' comments, Nono clarified the historical parallels in contemporary music, especially expounding and emphasizing Flemish music and the Italian madrigal of the Renaissance such as the madrigals of Carlo Gesualdo.<sup>11</sup>

The confrontation with counterpoint previously appeared in Nono's early period. He handled canonic technique and contrapuntal construction, for example in *Variazioni canoniche* (1950), based on the twelve-tone series of *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* by Arnold Schoenberg, and furthermore showed the influence of Hermann Scherchen, who intensively engaged in Johann Sebastian Bach's pieces and had a more profound effect than simply the role of conductor on Nono.

Although his pieces generally represent the avant-garde, his compositional statements certainly seem to approach the vocal music of the Renaissance and Baroque. The Venetian music of the early Baroque extends Nono's knowledge and understanding of vocal music. Moreover, the study of Zarlino's treatises would certainly deepen his concern for the coherence of resonance and architecture such as that in St Mark's Basilica.

In regard to Nono's argument about musical space and its connection with Renaissance music, he indicates an explicit compositional tendency in his letter to Stockhausen on May 7, 1956:

<sup>9</sup>Luigi NONO, "Un'autobiografia," id., *Scritti*, vol. 2, 477–478. Quoted in Carola NIELINGER-VAKIL, *Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>10</sup>NONO, "Un'autobiografia," 478–479. Quoted in NIELINGER-VAKIL, *Luigi Nono*, 9.

<sup>11</sup>FLOROS, *Neue Ohren*, 121.



If you think, for example, of the double chorus . . . here in St Mark's, in the time of Monteverdi: they performed masses and other works with 1 to 6 choruses, positioned in different locations of the church; already at that time there was no single sound source. Later and up to the present there has been a single source in concerts (and the same is true for the theatre).<sup>12</sup>

The modern stereophonic structure of Nono's *Prometeo*, namely the architectural stage, vocal and instrumental groups, and spatial arrangement of loudspeakers, resembles the aural architecture of the Renaissance in the above quote. The connection in both musical performance and space leads to the realization of his *Raumklang* and the mobility of sound (*suono mobile*). The music of *Prometeo* was relatively different to the vocal sound of the Renaissance, but its sonic development corresponds to some extent with Renaissance choral music.

### 3. PROMETEO: THE TRAGEDY OF LISTENING

*Prometeo – tragedia dell'ascolto* was composed in close cooperation with Massimo Cacciari (born 1944), who struck up a lasting friendship with Nono and conceived the libretto of *Prometeo*. The philosopher had an immediate influence on the composer, and his philosophical thought related to the creation of the tragedy. *Prometeo* consists of nine parts: I. *Prologue*, II. *Isola prima*, III. *Isola seconda*, IV. *Interludio primo*, V. *Tre voci (a)*, VI. *Isola terza – quarta – quinta*, VII. *Tre voci (b)*, VIII. *Interludio secondo*, IX. *Stasimo secondo*. Only the *Isola seconda* is divided into three sections, i.e. *Io–Prometeo*, *Hölderlin*, and *Stasimo primo*. The piece is scored for five vocal soloists, four-part choir, two speakers (one male and one female), four orchestral groups, six instrumental soloists, and electronic devices.

The libretto, where diverse textual fragments written by varied authors are incorporated,<sup>13</sup> was compiled by Cacciari, who created an episode of Prometheus (*Isola* = island) with the different literary sources. However, these fragments are mostly inaudible and incomprehensible, as Nono tried intentionally not to deliver the textual meanings, and instead intended the listeners to concentrate on sound and resonance. Although *Prometeo* is entitled *Tragedy of Listening*, it is not a theatrical piece or opera, so *Prometeo* as *dramma in musica*, using Jürg Stenzl's expression,<sup>14</sup> can be accepted as invisible theater. Hence, this work is a musical experiment for the new possibilities of listening that stimulates a sense and intelligence and idealizes, as mentioned earlier, synesthetic perception through our ears.

Nono's consideration for the correlation between space and music is demonstrated by his special stage design for *Prometeo*, which is composed of separated player groups in the *Wooden Boat*. *Prometeo*, the original version, premiered under the direction of the first conductor Claudio Abbado and the second conductor Roberto Cecconi at the Church of San Lorenzo in Venice on September 25, 1984. At San Lorenzo, the architect Renzo Piano designed the stage,

<sup>12</sup>Luigi Nono, Letter to Stockhausen, May 7, 1956 (Stockhausen Foundation Kürten, copy at ALN Stockhausen/K 56-05-07 d). Quoted in NIELINGER-VAKIL, *Luigi Nono*, 88.

<sup>13</sup>These fragments are derived from Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, Pindar's *Nemean 4*, Herodotus' *Histories*, Hölderlin's *Hyperion* and *Achill*, Goethe's *Prometheus*, Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and Cacciari's *Master of the Game* etc.

<sup>14</sup>STENZL, *Luigi Nono*, 109.



the *Wooden Boat* structure, for the performance, and Nono's longtime friend Emilio Vedova directed the lighting.<sup>15</sup>

While composing *Prometeo*, it became important for Nono to realize the sounds of the Venetian Renaissance in his times. In the premiere, Nono accordingly intended that the players and instruments be separately located in *Wooden Boat*, similarly to the double chorus in St Mark's Basilica. Even though he abandoned the movement of players and the visual and lighting installation in the second version after the premiere of the first in the San Lorenzo, he did not exclude spatial music, but rather actualized the auditory scene, namely synesthetic listening through the sound installation with live electronic music and loudspeakers.<sup>16</sup>

The appearance of spatial music was certainly not uncommon in the second half of the twentieth century. The reason that Nono's *Prometeo* is nevertheless significant, referring to the relation of space and music, is that the composer aimed to accomplish synesthetic music only by way of listening, without the visual direction for a theater. Therefore, the second version of *Prometeo* focuses on synesthetic listening in space and reminds listeners of the acoustic texture of Renaissance music and/or the acoustic design of the architecture, such as the Renaissance churches in Italy.

#### 4. THE RECEPTION OF LATE RENAISSANCE MUSIC IN *PROMETEO* THE HERITAGE OF RENAISSANCE VOCAL MUSIC

In Nono's compositions, the use of vocal sound lies at the center of his musical foundation. He places equal weight on the vocal and instrumental music, and in some works, vocal elements rather dominate the musical progression. His rediscovery of the voice was not unique in his time. However, it could be said that his vocal composition re-created the sound and tone color of Renaissance vocal music in the musical context of the twentieth century. In his early period, in which his political engagement was noticeable, vocal tone was a significant musical material for him, because the human voice, as a kind of expressive medium, could testify to "the new power of emotions" (Neue Gefühlskraft) such as the appeal and protest in *Il canto sospeso*.<sup>17</sup>

In the late Renaissance, when vocal music dominated absolutely, a four-part polyphonic choir generated a variety of sound colors. Without orchestral instruments, primarily in the Italian madrigals, polyphonic music shaped the contours of sound via the different vocal colors. The vocal sound in *Prometeo* is produced by a phonetic usage of words and occasionally altered by live electronics, therefore the space is mainly occupied by the polyphonic vocal sounds and is colored with the various nuances of timbre and sonic movement. Interestingly, the use of incomprehensibly different languages such as Italian, Greek, and German contributes to the

<sup>15</sup>After the premiere, Nono extensively revised *Prometeo* on the basis of his experience of the performance, and the second and final version was performed at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on September 25, 1985.

<sup>16</sup>Nono's *Prometeo* differs from the increase in the twentieth century of music such as the theatrical musical work, the instrumental theater of Mauricio Kagel, or any works that directly stimulate the senses and need them at the same time to listen to music. *Prometeo* concentrates only on the sense of sound or the aural sensation, and the result of sound "automatically activates other senses." Dani CAVALLARO, *Synesthesia and the Arts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 3.

<sup>17</sup>Ulrich DIBELIUS, *Moderne Musik nach 1945* (München: Piper, 1998), 163.



change of vocal colors. In *Prologue*,<sup>18</sup> which consists of the largest instrumentation in *Prometeo*, the varied texts are sung and spoken simultaneously and/or in quick succession. Greek and Italian, male and female voices, and solos and chorus are being layered in the overall landscape of sound.<sup>19</sup>

The noticeable similarity between *Prometeo* and music of the late Renaissance is the polychoral style that is especially representative of Venetian choral music. Nono applied the concept of *coro spezzato* (divided choir) in the piece. The composer expanded the polychoral idea so that it evolved into the vocal and instrumental manifestations which go beyond the basic dialogue between choirs. For example, in the *Io–Prometeo* part of the *Isola seconda*, female and male vocalists alternately sing contrasting music as reflecting the scenic dialogue of Io and Prometheus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (Table 1),<sup>20</sup> and electronically modified vocal and instrumental groups occasionally confront each other. At the same time, the progression of the various interchanging sounds and the musical pendulum of Io and Prometheus can be associated with the antiphonal style of Renaissance music, a so-called call and response effect.

The most interesting component of the polychoral style of *Prometeo* is the *coro lontanissimo* (very distant chorus), which comes out only in *Prologue* and *Isola prima*. *Coro lontanissimo* is neither another visible choir nor a hidden one backstage, but instead Nono conceived the modulated sound of the same four-part choir with his application of a harmonizer and delayer. A subtle acoustic difference between *coro* and *coro lontanissimo* realized the divided dimension of space and time.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, even though the text cannot generally transmit the meanings of words, Nono did not ignore the relation between sound and text such as the word-painting technique in the vocal music of the Renaissance. The sound of the Hölderlin in the *Isola Seconda* part is successively floating and moving, corresponding to the meaning of the word and textual interpretation. The libretto of the part is an excerpt from *Hyperion's Song of Fate* and the *Nemean Odes* of Pindar. Both texts handle the subject of wandering or of the wanderer that reflects the life of Friedrich Hölderlin, and therefore that of Nono. The Hölderlin text that is sung in German by two soprano soloists is not entirely understandable to the audience. However, the

**Table 1.** *Io – Prometeo*, bb. 90–102

Bar	90	92	95	102
Io		SFE- RZA VIO- LE- NTA		PLACAMI
Prometheus	VA- RCA FIU-MI		VA ALLE SORGENTI	

<sup>18</sup>*Prologue* consists of soprano, alto, and tenor soloists, chorus (SATB), a male and a female speaker, and orchestra.

<sup>19</sup>Texts from Hesiod's *Theogony* (Greek), fragments from Hesychius' *Lexicon*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (Greek), and passages from Massimo Cacciari's *Master of the Game I and II* (Italian).

<sup>20</sup>A passage from Cacciari's libretto, which quotes from Aeschylus' *Promethues*: "Varca fiumi sonori / sferza violenta / va alle sorgenti / placami." (Cross resonant rivers / violent lash / go to the sources / calm for me.).

<sup>21</sup>For instance, the *coro lontanissimo* in *Prologue* performs a drastic *p*-dynamic (*pppppp*), sings the word *Gaia* (goddess of the earth in Greek mythology) in a perfect fifth, and is sustained by electronic devices.





repeated passages of the text and the German word “Wasser” (water), which is barely audible, match the flowing sound that is sustained by a delayer and projected by a halaphone that propels tone in various directions throughout a hall. In the Venetian madrigals of the late sixteenth century, a word’s meaning was stressed and expressed through musical elements such as the movement of a vocal melody (in a descending or ascending direction), musical texture, tempo, harmony etc. In the case of *Hölderlin*, Nono especially accentuated a floating image of the word “Wasser” through the movement of sound.

## 5. POLYPHONIC STRUCTURE

The heritage of late Renaissance vocal music was presented not only materially but also structurally in *Prometeo*. Nono focused on the new sound and resonance of the twentieth century as well as on the reflection of the musical texture of the late sixteenth century. His interest in the Flemish School, as mentioned earlier, had been increasing constantly from the time of his first composition, and his study of the theorist Zarlino’s treatises mainly introduced a fundamental instruction for his composing.<sup>22</sup> Zarlino repeated the importance of composing for several voices in chapter 65 of his *Le istituzioni harmoniche* (“What Must Be Observed in Composing for Four or More Voices”):

The main problems will be to give each voice enough room, to make them easy to sing, and to make them proceed in a beautiful, orderly, and elegant manner. These cannot easily be taught on paper; therefore, they are left to the discretion and taste of the composer.<sup>23</sup>

Zarlino’s teaching generally applies to the harmonic and contrapuntal movement of voices. However, this direction is revealed in the polyphonic voices of *Prometeo*. The musical texture of *Prometeo* embodies the polyphonic structure that consists of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of late Renaissance music. For example, in bars 36–61 in *Stasimo primo*, soloists and choir syllabically describe the homophonic texture. This section acoustically occupies the space and phonetically produces a different timbre by means of the various vowels (Table 2).<sup>24</sup> In this horizontal structure, Nono strove for the deliberate setting of vowels, and subsequently the texture enables the fulfillment of these vowel sounds. According to Table 2, this musical example displays the combined sound of nine voices, each containing its own vocal color.

Nono’s technique, in which a text is syllabically divided into several vocal parts (in Example 1 *Tre voci b*), and which is prominent in his musical methods in company with serial technique, can be explained with reference to polyphonic deployment in Renaissance

<sup>22</sup>Zarlino extracted the musical citations and sources mainly from Willaert’s and his own pieces, as well as Josquin’s, in order to explain his polyphonic musical theories in the *Le istituzioni harmoniche*, parts III and IV. Cristle Collins JUDD, *Reading Renaissance Music Theory: Hearing with the Eyes* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 203–205.

<sup>23</sup>Gioseffo ZARLINO, *The Art of Counterpoint: Part Three of Le istituzioni harmoniche* (1558), trans. by Gut A. MARCO and Claude V. PALISCA (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1976), 226.

<sup>24</sup>Passage from Cacciari’s libretto, which in turn follows a passage from Euripides’ *Alceste*: “Ignora aidôs inaccessa [u] ha la cima.” (She knows no shame and cannot be touched; she is at the [moral] summit.).





Table 2. *Stasimo primo*, bb. 36–61

	Bar	36		37	39		40	41–43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52–54	55	58	61
SOLI	S		GNO-	RA												HA		LA	CI-	MA
	S		GNO-	RA												HA		LA	CI-	MA
	A		GNO-	RA												HA		LA	CI-	MA
	A		GNO-	RA												HA		LA	CI-	MA
	T	I-		RA												HA				
CORO	S				A-	I-	$\Delta\Omega\Sigma$		I-	NA-	CCE-	E-	SSA	U		HA		LA	CI-	MA
	A				A-	I-	$\Delta\Omega\Sigma$		I-	NA-	CCE-	E-	SSA	U		HA		LA	CI-	MA
	T				A-	I-	$\Delta\Omega\Sigma$		I-	NA-	CCE-	E-	SSA	U		HA		LA	CI-	MA
	B				A-	I-	$\Delta\Omega\Sigma$		I-	NA-	CCE-	E-	SSA	U		HA		LA	CI-	MA





Example 3. Prologue, bb. 37–39

### Example 3. Prologue, bb. 37–39

Depending on instructions for the performance of Renaissance music such as the works of Orlande de Lassus or Adrian Willaert, it is important to maintain the individual musical parts in the polyphonic layering:

The problem facing the director of a chorus singing Lassus (or Byrd or Willaert) is not so much in getting the singers of an individual line to phrase musically in isolation from the other parts, but in training them to maintain their independence – especially when the line calls for a falling-off (i.e. decrescendo) – at a point where other lines are singing other motives or other words.<sup>26</sup>

Nono applied this direction to his *Prometeo* as well. In a *pppp* dynamic (Example 2), even though three voices gradually decrease in volume, the vocal lines in a circle of fifths continue to present their syllables independently and clearly.

Of course, according to Lachenmann's memories of his mentor Nono,<sup>27</sup> for Nono it was very substantial progress to avoid composing a recognizable melody, so in *Prometeo*, finding a remarkable motif or melody is nearly impossible in spite of the vocal music. Only the contour

<sup>26</sup>Jeffery KITE-POWELL (ed.), *A Performer's Guide to Renaissance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2/2007), 20.

<sup>27</sup>Helmut LACHENMANN, "Helmut Lachenmann in Conversation with Sarah Willis," interview by Sarah WILLIS. Berlin Philharmonic Digital Concert Hall, March 23, 2019, 17 min. <<https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/interview/51856-3>> (accessed on August 28, 2019).



and movement of sound are perceptible, despite the fact that the polyphonic structure of acoustic layers presents vertically and horizontally the various musical evolutions like the polychoral structure of the Renaissance.

## 6. AURAL SPACE

The arranged design of *Prometeo*, which is suggestive of Greek tragedy (e.g. the usage of the term *stasimo*, the function of choirs, and the concept of the stage), naturally arouses an interest in musical space. The reason why a coherence of sound and space needs to be more elaborately discussed in *Prometeo* is that the *Wooden Boat* intended for the first version is plainly reminiscent of an architectural structure, such as the church of the Renaissance and particularly St Mark's Basilica. Above all, Nono did not long only for the manufacturing of a spacious performance on the stage.

The separated performers in the *Wooden Boat* inevitably form a parallel to the divided choirs of St Mark's Basilica, which could accomplish the previously-mentioned Venetian polychoral style. Even though Nono at first intended the movement of performers between islands for the acoustic representation, he resolutely abandoned this design of performance in the second version in order to focus on the sonic environment. Finally, the *suono mobile* was realized by the live electronics, and this further conformed to the acoustic ideal of late Renaissance music.

The divided choirs of St Mark's Basilica essentially lead the subject of discussion to the interrelation between resonance and architecture in the Renaissance. Zarlino, in his treatise published in 1558, *Le istitutioni harmoniche*, already clarified that Willaert's music should be performed in a *coro spezzato* formation. Moreover, according to the scholarly study (2009) of Howard and Moretti, for the listener the sound of the separated choirs in each *pergolo* proved ideal: "the volume was good, the separate voices could be clearly distinguished and the effect of a 'conversation' across the space gave added drama."<sup>28</sup> Regarding the case of the *coro spezzato*, in its spatially partitioned position the outstanding acoustic results could be improved in St Mark's Basilica.<sup>29</sup>

Nono's *Prometeo* is polyphonically built using multiple vocal groups and instruments. He often mentioned the polychoral compositions and concertato style of Andrea Gabrieli, and especially Giovanni Gabrieli, and acknowledged the impression of the resonance of St Mark's Basilica on him. The composer emphasized that *Prometeo* should sound above the audience similarly to the *coro spezzato* in the Basilica, and his intention is revealed in the spatial design of the stage. The spacious position of choir lofts corresponding to the polychoral style in the Basilica could have inspired the composer to formulate the idea of the *Wooden Boat* ("Schiff"), which recalls the German word "Kirchenschiff" (nave), so ultimately *Wooden Boat* has two significant meanings: boat and nave.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Nono devised in *Prometeo* the

<sup>28</sup>Deborah HOWARD and Laura MORETTI, *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice: Architecture, Music, Acoustics* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2009), 39.

<sup>29</sup>HOWARD and MORETTI, *Sound and Space*, 42.

<sup>30</sup>Lydia JESCHKE, *Prometeo: Geschichtskonzeptionen in Luigi Nonos Hörtragödie* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), 184.



reverberation time of four seconds, which is practically comparable to that of St Mark's Basilica.<sup>31</sup> The diverse ways of performing *coro spezzato* would provide Nono with the fundamental idea about the musical construction of *Prometeo*.

They are arranged and divided into two choirs, or even three, each in four parts; the choirs sing one after another, in turn, and sometimes (depending on the purpose) all together, especially at the end, which works very well. And . . . such choirs are placed rather far apart.<sup>32</sup>

In this quote, which was taken from Zarlino's treatise, it can be supposed that the choirs intended not only to accomplish the polychoral style but also the movement of sound and resonance in the space "depending on the purpose." The musical result of *coro spezzato* resembles "modern stereophonic sound."<sup>33</sup> As with other composers and musicologists, Nono would articulate the sound in his works with great effect. Additionally, the circumstance that is fulfilled by the planned process of each separated loudspeaker enables the listeners to feel synesthetic sound.

Luigi Nono was indisputably a pioneer of musical and political engagement, and his compositions represent avant-grade music as much as ever in the history of music. *Prometeo*, which contains his musical ideas and new techniques such as live electronic music, crystallizes the compositional features of Nono's late period and delicately articulates the connection of sound and space. In the Renaissance, in the correlation between sound and space, the antiphonal performance of choirs achieved a spatial listening in the polychoral texture. According to circumstances, the sound needed a tangible structure such as *cori spezzati* and directly depended on the architectural design. The use of live electronics in *Prometeo* definitely facilitates the concept of spatial music beyond the constructional substance. Furthermore, Nono embodied spatial music in collaboration with the various musical parameters such as *coro lontanissimo*, the disposition of loudspeakers, and the musical process of the polychoral style.

In this study of *Prometeo*, it becomes manifest that the composer would maintain the heritage of Renaissance music and recreate it in the context of the music of the twentieth century. At this standpoint, Nono's *Prometeo* can be regarded as a significant masterpiece linking past and current times.

<sup>31</sup>JESCHKE, *Prometeo*, 184.

<sup>32</sup>ZARLINO, *Le istituzioni harmoniche* (1558). Quoted in HOWARD and MORETTI, *Sound and Space*, 39.

<sup>33</sup>HOWARD and MORETTI, *Sound and Space*, 28.

