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THE WIDE-AWAKE SELF
LUIGI NONO'S STAGE ACTION *AL GRAN SOLE CARICO*
***D'AMORE* AND ITS UTOPIAN REALITY**

Abstract: The phenomenon of *the wide-awake self*, referring to that most tense level of consciousness that emerges from an attitude of full attention to life and its demands, is problematized in this work in the context of a quite specific composer's script that, although belonging to the avant-garde circle of the Darmstadt generation, actualized the issue of political and social engagement in the domain of music. Namely, the work of Luigi Nono is interpreted as a sort of "composer's metaphor of a contemporary, undogmatic engagement/acting in art and culture", as the acting of the self *in modo presenti*, that is, as participation in class struggle. I will attempt to find "traces" of that class struggle in Nono's choice of (musical) material itself, and, by extension, in his compositional technique, which Nono himself saw as a consequence of his choice of material, using his stage action *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1974) as an example.

Keywords: *wide-awake self*, Luigi Nono, *Al gran sole carico d'amore*, utopian reality, updating history

"To live", Predrag Ognjenović writes in his book *Psihologija opažanja* (Perceptual Psychology), "for all of us, on an internal, intimate level, means to be conscious, and to be conscious is always a relation – to be conscious of something: one's own self, surroundings, other people. For, consciousness is always the consciousness of..."¹ Thus, for instance, if we attempted to invoke in our consciousness the moment when we began to *live*, we would in fact start from:

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¹ Predrag Ognjenović, *Psihologija opažanja*, Belgrade, Zavod za udžbenike, 2011, 7.

the phenomenon the way it spontaneously occurred to us (even if only as an illusion), that is, from the phenomenon that for all of us, life has no proper beginning, that we 'emerged' in the development of our consciousness from a sort of darkness or grayness, from something indeterminate, unclear, inchoate, and chaotic, to light – from nothing to the self.²

Paradoxically, in this quest for our own beginning inside ourselves, we realize that, even though everyone can say where and when they were born, it turns out that the question of the day of birth is, in Ognjenović's view, a social convention and that, in a certain sense, it is psychologically empty, whereas the beginning of each individual's life is in fact located in their earliest *memories* of events, which essentially mean the *beginning of life*. Therefore, it turns out that *event* is a sort of unit of life, whereas consciousness is the domain wherein that unit emerges and is realized, that is, where it, first and foremost, *must be perceived*.

Although the category of *event* usually denotes an external occurrence, our interior is likewise a field of perception in its own right. In that sense, perception may be viewed as the elementary process of consciousness, psychic life, and even life in general. Perception (Lat. *perceptio*) provides every individual with an intimate world of their own (*Idios kosmos*), which, in turn, anyone may consider to be the common world (*Koinos kosmos*), believing that for other people, too, it must be similar or identical to their own; whereas, in fact, the main question is whether that is true or an illusion, or, perhaps, partly true and partly an illusion, sensory deception, self-deceit, mirage, delusion, chimera, misperception.³ But why does that question come up at all? Presumably because our experience suggests that that intimate world of perception of each one of us, since our earliest experiences, began to be filled with individual events, which resulted in the construction, development, and evolution of that (individual) consciousness of ours. Afterwards, there begins a sort of confrontation with the fact that some events have assumed different meanings in the consciousness of other people, which makes us accept that other people are likewise entitled to their own versions of the truth.

The possibility that we may hold different views on one and the same event or object – and that, having considered those different views, we may choose which ones we will accept and which ones we will discard – questions the origins of reality in general. As it turns out, it is *de facto* subjective, made by us, that is, by our "feeling of reality". Accordingly, one may detect countless different orders of reality/worlds/lives, that is, "sub-universes", as William James (1842–1910) called them, each of which exists within its own system, that is,

² Ibid.

³ Cf. Predrag Ognjenović, op. cit, 7–8.

“with its own special and separate style of existence”.⁴ The “special and separate style of existence” of multiple realities is constituted by meaning, which we inscribe in certain experiences, and not by the ontological structure of objects,⁵ James maintained. Writing about the existence of multiple realities, Alfred Schütz (1899–1959) expanded the psychological context of James’s theory in the direction of phenomenological sociology, viewing different orders of reality as “finite provinces of meaning”, that is, as a determinate set of one’s own experiences characterized by a specific cognitive style.

That specific cognitive style, or, rather, individual’s “inscription”, may also be “read” in the world of everyday life – one in a series of orders of reality/“sub-universes” – which, as Schütz argued, although determined and defined in advance, offers itself to our experience and interpretation. So that every individual may organize the spatial perspectives of that “sub-universe” in the world of everyday life (in the inter-subjective world) and act in it in accordance to their worldview (*Weltanschauung*), in Schütz’s view, the self needs to be *wide-awake*, which means to integrate the present, past, and future into a peculiar dimension of time, whereby the *self* realizes itself as a totality.

The term *wide-awake self* stems from the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), more accurately, develops its central idea, formulated as *attention à la vie* and conceptualized as the basic regulative principle of conscious life, which defines the boundaries of our world, the world that is relevant to us, articulates our unbroken flow of thought, determines the range and function of our memory, “makes us ... live within our present experiences, directed toward their objects, or turn back in a reflective attitude to our past experiences and ask for their meaning”.⁶ Expanding Bergson’s thesis about the existence of various degrees of vigilance in our consciousness – whereby action entails the highest degree and sleeping the lowest – Schütz arrived at the term *wide-awake self* to denote the highest degree of consciousness, which emerges from an attitude full

⁴ Alfred Schütz, “On Multiple Realities”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1945, 5:4, 533–576, also available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/schuetz.htm>.

⁵ This was also discussed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who asserted that all real entities are “unities of ‘meaning’”; *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* For more on this segment of Bergson’s philosophy, see: Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1971; Henri Bergson, “Life and Consciousness”, in: *Mind – Energy: Lectures and Essays*, Westport, CT/London, Greenwood Press, 1975, 3–36; “Dreams”, in: *Ibid.*, 104–133; “Memory of the Present and False Recognition”, in: *Ibid.*, 134–185; “Intellectual Effort”, in: *Ibid.*, 186–230; Anri Bergson, “Opažaj promene”, in: *Misao i pokretljivost*, Sremski Karlovci/Novi Sad, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 205–230.

of attention to life and its demands.⁷ A working *wide-awake self* identifies that segment of the world that is pragmatically relevant and those relevances determine the form and content of our stream of thought: *form*, because they regulate the tension of our memory, thereby also the range of our past experiences, which we recall from our memory, as well as of future events, which we anticipate, and *content*, because all of those experiences, due to the existence of a previously outlined project and its realization, become subject to specific shifts in attention. Starting from that fact, the “phenomenon” of *the wide-awake self* will be problematized here in the context of a quite specific composer’s script that, although it belonged in the avant-garde circle of the Darmstadt generation, also actualized the issue of the world of everyday life and, in it, the question of political and social engagement in the domain of music. This is the work of Luigi Nono (1924–1990), which was deeply immersed in the socio-political environment of postwar Italy, as well as in the cultural-political context of Third World countries, and which will be interpreted in this paper as a “composer’s metaphor of a contemporary, undogmatic engagement/acting in art and culture”,⁸ as acting *in modo presenti*, that is, as participation in class struggle. I will attempt to find “traces” of that class struggle in Nono’s choice of (musical) material itself and, by extension, in his compositional technique, which Nono himself viewed as determined by the demands of his selected materials.

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Luigi Nono became politically active toward the end of the 1940s, following the tendency of postwar Italy to revive the memory of its recent anti-fascist struggle. Soon afterwards, expanding his political horizons in the direction of

⁷ He argues that “[o]nly the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake. It lives within its acts and its attention is exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect, to executing its plan”; Schütz, *op. cit.*

The essential difference between the process of working, which is, in Schütz’s view, *visible*, and that of performing, which is *invisible*, is that in the case of a “mere performance, such as the attempt to solve mentally a mathematical problem, I can, if my anticipations are not fulfilled by the outcome and I am dissatisfied with the result, cancel the whole process of mental operations and restart from the beginning”, whereas the process of working (which, according to Bergson and Husserl, entails bodily movements) constitutes the outside world and its temporal perspectives, dubbed the *living present*. In other words, working, Schütz asserts, is not revocable, because it affects the outside world, unlike the process of performing, which changes nothing in the outside world, that is, leaves no trace even when mental actions are revoked. Cf. Schütz, *op. cit.*

⁸ Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, *Pred muzičkim delom: ogledi o međusobnim projekcijama estetike, poetike i stilistike muzike 20. veka – jedna muzikološka vizura*, Belgrade, Zavod za udžbenike, 2007, 261.

topics that were current on the political stage outside of Europe at the end of the 1950s, Nono realized that the struggle against repression, even after the defeat of fascism, was not finished, but only continued its life under various guises, especially in the so-called Third World. Also, preoccupied with the predicament of the working class in the context of capitalist bourgeois society, Nono stressed that his works in fact stemmed from human stimuli and were always inspired by a human experience, and that their final result was resistance to political and social repression, understood in the broadest terms. Therefore, one may conclude that the framework wherein Nono addressed the problem of political and social engagement in the domain music ranged “from concrete anti-fascist movements, to various forms of modifying them into resistance to political and social repression in general”.⁹

The circle of problems outlined above was quite naturally reflected or, perhaps better, “woven into” Nono’s compositional oeuvre. In other words, over time, Nono’s compositional oeuvre became an organic part of his political work and reflections on the role of music in society, ranging, as detected by Mirjana Veselinović Hofman

from more-or-less indirect hints of politicality [in his *Variazioni canoniche sulla serie dell’op. 41 di A. Schönberg*, 1950], when he used the series from Schönberg’s (1874–1951) *Ode to Napoleon* to express indirectly his anti-authoritarian views; or, when he used, in *España en el corazón* (1952), three studies for soprano, baritone, mixed choir, and instrumental ensemble, the rhythm from *Bandiera rossa*, a song of the Italian communists, thereby symbolically revealing his political orientation, via explicit expressions of his leftist ideological orientation [in *Il canto sospeso* for soprano, alto, tenor, mixed choir, and orchestra (1956), as well as in other, mostly vocal works he composed during the late 1950s], to politicality as a form of social critique and struggle for more just social relations in general [for instance, in his stage action *Intolleranza 1960* (1961), *La fabbrica illuminata* for tape and mezzosoprano (1964), and *Y entonces comprendió* for tape, six female voices, and choir (1970)].¹⁰

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In addition to the correspondence between Nono’s work in composition and his reflections on the role of music in society and his political engagement, he also searched for a sort of correspondence between whatever was current in the domain of musical art at the time and innovations in the domain of other forms of social action, convinced that they should follow each other. In other words, in Nono’s view, just as in philosophy, the natural sciences, art, architecture, etc.,

⁹ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰ Ibid.

one is expected to be in touch with current data and burning issues, so composers should likewise master and integrate contemporary means of musical expression in their works, as well as available procedures in compositional technique, and, together with their “comrades-in-arms”, contribute to the advancement of civilization. Precisely from this attitude one might also read Nono’s position in the context of the avant-garde aesthetic stances of Western European society after the Second World War, which also shaped his approach to the physiognomy of music, which should not seek compromise with traditional musical tools, that is, as Bill Hopkins put it, to turn back “the clock on developments within their own art”,¹¹ but, bearing in itself the imperative of creative searching, find new sonorities and anticipate the music of the future.

One of the most blatant examples of breaking with tradition, or, more accurately, with the traditional view of the operatic genre, may be found in his stage action *Al gran sole carico d’amore* (1974), a work whose story is told not in the expected way – in terms of an exposition, plot, and resolution – but which comprises a series of different “stories”, none of which is narratively conceived either. Thus, one is under the impression that the stage features no clear stage events, but becomes a place where “stage-musical islands happen in motion”. The composer devised the libretto himself; however, he did not write it, but made a sort of compilation, quoting fragments from literary works, historical documents, artistic poetry, political songs from various historical periods and geographical locales. Some of those fragments date from the final third of the 19th century, that is, from the time of the Paris Commune; others come from Russia’s (pre)revolutionary period at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as from the period of revolutionary turmoil in Cuba and Southeast Asia around the middle of the century. Since all of these stories appear only as fragmentary quotations, which stress only certain aspects of those (revolutionary) events, it is clear that, as such, they were not linearly conceived in the composer’s libretto conception.¹² The libretto may thus be interpreted as a spatio-temporal collage, and the stage as the place where those seemingly incompatible stories are “presented” to one another, crosscutting and permeating each other, which generates a sort of web of historical events (stories) and “presents” history in its *delinearized* version.

In terms of Nono’s musical writing, one may follow his montage of various musical materials, but not of musical materials from the past; for, the only

¹¹ Bill Hopkins, “Luigi Nono; The Individuation of Power and Light”, *The Musical Times*, May 1978, 406.

¹² Also, in the production itself, Nono’s concept was to stage each one of those “stories” so that the audience could see it from all sides.

musical materials in the work that belong to the past are three political songs: *The Internationale*, from which the composer used both the text and the music, and two Russian revolutionary songs – *We're No Longer the Paris Commune* and *My Rifle, My Old Friend* – which the composer used only as musical quotations. In the second part of the stage action, they are joined by the Russian strikers' song *Дубинушка*, which Nono likewise used only as a musical quotation. Therefore, there is no *delinearization of history* in the music, but there is a sort of *delinearization* of musical flow, which is conceived in terms of a collage, so that different textural images are superimposed or, rather, juxtaposed. An illustrative example is the introductory music for *Al gran sole carico d'amore (Come preludio)*, in which Che Guevara's text in Spanish and Louise Michel's text in French are superimposed so that the role of the primary "protagonist" is assumed by a soloist and a large choral ensemble, while the role of the secondary "protagonist" is played by four solo sopranos and a smaller choir. Concerning the political songs Nono quotes in this work, they typically serve the function of a "sonorous identification" of the working class. Regardless of their historical/geographical/national origins, the composer used them equally, in each "story", and not only in their original contexts. However, one also notes, as Hans Thomalla put it,¹³ that they are structurally expanded and not just stylistically defined; this is a quite specific way of illuminating a musical material, for instance, in the case of the melody of *Дубинушка*, which is at one point in the musical flow seemingly structured according to serialist principles, while at another moment, it is given as a choral *tutti*. In Thomalla's interpretation, such procedures suggest that the composer no longer considered it primary to "take original material at face value, but to examine it from the perspective of the possibilities available at that particular moment";¹⁴ that is, as the composer himself maintained, the chosen material should be subjected to re-examination, analysis, various kinds of (acoustic) experimentation, including revealing its potentials in different contexts and media.¹⁵ Upon discovering the latent capabilities of the chosen musical

¹³ Thomalla wrote the sleeve notes for the double-CD edition of Nono's *Al gran sole carico d'amore*, Hamburg, Teldec Classics International GmbH and Warner Musicmanufacturing Europe, 2001.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. Veselinović Hofman, *op. cit.*, 267. Here, one can cite Nono's treatment of *Дубинушка*, the Russian strikers' song, which, although not quoted integrally, but only in fragments, which are few and far between, leaves an impression of wholeness, when one notes the causal connections that emerge between the quoted fragments, the musical space that separates them and is also found "underneath" and "above" them. Namely, the structuring of the musical flow and the role of certain musical components, together with the contrapuntal weaving in the orchestra (characterized by thematic material different from that in the vocal

material, compositional procedures “impose themselves” naturally, and their application structures the musical flow and the work itself.¹⁶ What seems particularly interesting is the content of the selected material (as in *Al gran sole carico d'amore*), which for Nono always has an attribute that is not strictly formal in character, but present, whether as a political, textual, conceptual, emotive, or another kind of (semantic) layer of that material. Although a composition based on such simple musical material might be expected to veer into spheres of banality, simplification, and readymade solutions in order to approximate the tastes and cultural needs of the broadest strata of society, Nono avoids this “trap” by creatively approaching his musical materials, at all times guided by the idea that art, just like society, ought to pursue the harder path.

Since Nono was preoccupied, as I mentioned above, with the problems that beset the working class in the conditions of capitalist, bourgeois society, his *self* became utterly preoccupied with *the spirit of the time*; hence it began living “in its own acts”, striving to realize its (musical) projects, that is, to translate concepts into actions. In other words, as music and politics became inseparable categories for Nono, in his view, his very act of composing (acting *in modo presenti*) meant participating in class struggle; and vice versa, by engaging in certain political activities – “turn[ing] back in a reflective attitude to [his] past experiences and ask[ing] for their meaning” – he was inevitably also refining his musical views. With his political engagement and realization of specific musical projects in the spirit of that politicality, Nono turned to the outside world, where-

parts), “dictates”, in a way, the manner *Дубинушка* is quoted. The fact that the orchestra's thematic material is fragmented in structure and completely atonal in conception conditions a likewise fragmentary quoting of the song, encompassing various tonal areas.

¹⁶ Among others, an example is another stage action by Nono, *La fabbrica illuminata*: “Nono's first, apparently instinctual approach to the task was to abolish music's reliance on the convention of ‘language’ by stripping away all the special relationships between sounds which rendered possible a discursive music. That is why from the first he embraced Schoenberg's principle of serialism. It provided him with the means to generalize musical material. In order to do this, he had to melt down all those special relationships, particularly of an intervallic nature, that persisted in the row forms of Schoenberg himself and his immediate followers and that were potential sources for a thematic, hence linguistic, function of the series. Nono therefore concentrated his attention on the most general of all possible arrangements of the chromatic total: the all-interval wedge-shaped row. Once the Schoenbergian method had yielded this by-product it ceased to play an essential role in his thinking. Neither dodecaphony nor serialization was ultimately to prove vital to the organization of musical material, although the principle of chromatic complementarity continued to be useful, even when (as in *Como una ola de fuerza y luz*) Nono has worked with ‘blocks of sound based on quarter tones, minor and major seconds, up to the limit of a tritone.’” Bill Hopkins, *op. cit.*, 406.

in he accomplished, as Alfred Schütz would put it, communication with *others*, sharing with them the same or similar ideas/aims, that is, using the same or similar means. His work was aimed, it seems, to create socially engaged music, that is, music that would be in harmony not only with the time that gave rise to it – a time of interdisciplinarity and the development of communication systems – but also with events and contributions in other domains of human activity.¹⁷ In that way, staying in touch with the world of everyday (social) life, through the shared inter-subjective world of communication and social acting, Nono anticipated all those changes caused by his projected activity.

However, there is another dimension of Nono's oeuvre that might be interpreted in light of that segment of Schütz's theory where he problematizes the moment of overstepping the boundaries of the finite province of meaning, defined as *schock* or *leap*.¹⁸ Namely, this concerns, as Schütz explained it, a radical modification of the tension of consciousness based on a different kind of *attention à la vie*. That shift in the tension of consciousness, called a *leap*, may be identified in the rather peculiar way Nono "read" literary and political texts, as well as music from various time periods. This peculiar way of addressing bygone ages has been rather illustratively discussed by the composer Salvatore Sciarrino (1947), to whom Nono dedicated his 1988/89 work *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura*. He says: "The past reflected in the present (*nostalgica*) brings about a creative utopia (*utopica*), the desire for what is known becomes a vehicle for what will be possible (*futura*) through the medium of distance".¹⁹ In that regard, I must ask the following question: in what way does Nono weave these three different temporal perspectives in a single, peculiar dimension of time?

Occupying a reflective position and surveying its acts and reflecting on them in *modo preatorio*, the unity of the composer's *self* collapses. However, when in the present it rebegins to live through its ongoing acts, facing objects and objectives that it needs to realize, the working *self* experiences itself as a source of ongoing activity and therefore as an *undivided self*. Applying this to a concrete musical example, we may note how, by invoking different social and cultural texts, history is first *delinearized* and then also "updated". For example, revolutionary slogans, revolutionary songs, historical texts, and the voices of liberation movements are presented through dialectical images within the work itself,

¹⁷ Cf. Veselinović Hofman, *op. cit.*, 267.

¹⁸ Cf. Schütz, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Quoted in: Tijana Popović Mladenović, "The Longing for Lost Time and Utopian Space of the Musically Fantastic", in: Vesna Mikić, Ivana Perković, Tijana Popović Mladenović, and Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman (eds.): *Between Nostalgia, Utopia, and Realities*, Belgrade, Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music, University of Arts, 2012, 30.

which erases the context of their political “experience”: “Bandiera rossa” and “L’Internationale”, which in their original context might be defined as “musics of participation”, are “renamed”, that is, resignified into structural components of “music for listening”. These as well as many other fragments of social experience become “alienated” (*verfremdet*), exposed (in a new perceptual context) to new semantic possibilities, striving to activate the audience on the basis of reflexivity and rationality, which will lead to the disintegration of “the false and deceptive totality called ‘audience’”.²⁰ That “tiger’s leap into the past”, “into the open space of history”, which Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) called dialectic, liberates the fragments discussed above from their original contexts and enables them to function as allegories pointing to other situations or processes. Those different moments, snatched from the continuum of history, communicate with one another in constellations that, through a sort of *ars combinatoria*, generate space for a “free play of signifiers” or, in other words, for “enhancing” meanings with new sets of sonorities, i.e. a new and different sonorous and social “ensigning” (*узначавање*). In other words, seeking to compress distances and halt or stop time altogether, to defer and negate every finality, *temps durée* is paradoxically suppressed in music by *temps espace*. This Time seeks in a utopian way to transform into and enter Space, wherein Nono’s every *leap* into the past becomes a possible imaginary musical space of “the infinite reserves of eternity against time”.²¹

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London/New York, 1998, 10.

²¹ Gilbert Durand, *Antropološke strukture imaginarnog: uvod u opću arhetipologiju*, Zagreb, Biblioteka August Cesarec, 1991, 367.