

## 10 | Luigi Nono and the Development of Serial Technique

ANGELA IDA DE BENEDICTIS AND VENIERO RIZZARDI

Among the Italian composers engaged with the redefinition of musical language through (multiple) serialism, Luigi Nono was the first to articulate a theoretical reflection about this technique. As it is demonstrated through Nono's correspondence with Bruno Maderna and Karlheinz Stockhausen, his earliest conversations about serialism, of an entirely private nature, date back to 1951 to 1952. However, it was only in later years, between 1956 and 1957, that Nono decided to take up a public discussion of serial technique from the perspective of its *historical* foundation. Considering that multiple serialism – that is, an approach that treats multiple musical parameters in a serial manner – was conceived around 1950 to 1951, and that composers had been positioning themselves around the new technique since then, Nono's initiative may appear tardy. At that time, however, the theme of history as a dialectical process was at the centre of Nono's thought, which was influenced by both Marx and Gramsci.

In the summer 1956, Nono took part in a seminar organised by Hermann Scherchen and centred on the analysis of Schoenberg's *Variations* op. 31 and Webern's *Variations* op. 30 (Nono 1956; cf. Schoenberg 2011). It was in this context that Nono developed his earliest (public) reflections on serialism, which he illustrated in a short article published in the same year examining the development in the way in which the series had been employed beginning from Schoenberg's *Serenade* op. 24 and the main theme of his *Variations* op. 31 up to the work of Boulez, Stockhausen, and in Nono's own latest composition, *Il canto sospeso* (1955–6) (cf. Nono 2018b). Also in 1956, Luciano Berio had invited Nono to contribute an analytical article to the first issue of his journal, *Incontri Musicali* (Nono to Berio, 10 January 1956, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel). In response, Nono wrote a detailed analysis of the 'Thema' of Schoenberg's op. 31, which he further developed for a lecture

that he gave in Darmstadt in 1957 and later published under the title 'The Development of Serial Technique' (De Benedictis and Rizzardi 2018b).

The main purpose of both the 1956 article and the 1957 paper was to demonstrate a direct continuity in compositional strategies between Schoenberg and the music of the so-called Darmstadt School (a term first more widely popularised by Nono in his 1957 essay, though coined at least a year earlier (cf. Wehagen 1956)). In these writings, Nono implicitly opposed the theories that Boulez had been promoting since 1951, especially Boulez's argument regarding Schoenberg's presumed 'confusion between theme and series' in his 'serial works', an opinion that was well entrenched among many composers in the Darmstadt music circles (Boulez 1991f: 212).

Nono's analysis of the op. 31 theme aims, in particular, at overturning Boulez's theories. From Nono's perspective, the foundation of serial composition lies precisely in the combinatorial possibilities implicitly underpinning the *thematic* process which generates the variations devised by Schoenberg. Nono's argument also rested on his interpretation of the BACH motif in Schoenberg's *Variations* as 'a thematic-formal element independent of and pre-existing the row itself' (Nono 2018b: 129). In Nono's view, this motif acts as a secondary combinatorial texture, traversing the entire composition. In spite of its implicitly polemical stance, however, Nono's approach only found limited resonance among his peers. The text of his 1957 Darmstadt lecture was published in German only, and the portion on the *Variation's* theme did not appear in *Incontri Musicali*, simply because of a disagreement with Berio over the style of the essay. Ironically, Nono's article was replaced by another one by Henri Pousseur that advanced the argument that Nono had attempted to reject – namely, the discontinuity between the thematicism of Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique and the foundation of the New Music (cf. Pousseur 1956; De Benedictis and Rizzardi 2018b: 148–9).

It should be observed that, by 1957, Nono's serial technique had already been developing from the simultaneous definition of multiple sonic parameters towards the construction of sonic fields. For Nono, however, going back to examine the conceptual continuity between series and theme was, at that time, a way to demonstrate a consistency in the evolution of his own technical choices since the beginnings of his career. It is thus necessary to clarify how this continuity can be verified in time going back to Nono's earliest experiences with the twelve-tone technique and, so, to his earliest attempts as a composer *tout court*. While describing this earlier portion of his musical output, it would be reductive and historically inaccurate,

however, to discuss Nono's first experiences with serial or proto-serial technique without a parallel consideration of Bruno Maderna's procedures, because the didactic workshop in which the latter had invited him to take part in Venice in 1946 would soon become a *creative* workshop, where the analysis of early and contemporary music was inextricably connected with compositional experimentation on the grounds of shared aesthetic and technical premises.

As is well known, the catalyst that encouraged Maderna and his pupil Nono's transition to serialism was their encounter with Hermann Scherchen during the conducting course that Scherchen directed at the Venice Biennale in August and September 1948. Scherchen engaged as his assistant for this course his former pupil Hans-Joachim Koellreutter, who had emigrated to Brazil in 1937. During his several-month-long stay in Italy, Koellreutter strengthened his relationship with Maderna and Nono, who in November 1948 attended a course on twelve-tone music that he taught in Milan. Nono's personal notes from that course show that Koellreutter based his teaching on Paul Hindemith's theories, in particular the idea of tonal relationships founded on acoustic 'natural' laws and the consequent classification of intervals according to their own 'melodic' and 'harmonic strength', directly derived from Hindemith's *Unterweisung im Tonsatz*. At that time, Nono and Maderna were both already familiar with Hindemith's treatise, and they had been adopting its main principles since their earliest attempts at coordinating advanced twelve-tone techniques with a serialisation of durations and/or rhythms (Guerrero 2009; cf. Nono 2018a: 27). Many of the rules that Koellreutter proposed in his class, however, revolved around his taxonomy of 'melodic' rows (where 'tense' intervals prevail), 'harmonic' rows (with a majority of 'calm' intervals), and 'compensated' rows, balanced between the two. These appear in just these terms in both Nono's and Maderna's notes and musical sketches at least until the end of 1951. Beginning from this moment, such a classification of musical material would be permanently inscribed within the compositional technique of both Nono and Maderna, and its influence would extend throughout their use of twelve-tone technique and beyond it in their respective properly serial and post-serial phases.

Works such as *Liriche greche* (1949), Maderna's first serial composition, and Nono's *opus primum*, the *Variazioni canoniche sulla serie dell'op. 41 di Arnold Schönberg* (1950), are the result of the assimilation of Hindemith's ideas via Koellreutter and already demonstrate how both composers distanced themselves from the Viennese School models that their Italian colleagues Luigi Dallapiccola, Riccardo Malipiero, Riccardo Nielsen, and

Camillo Togni were more or less slavishly following in the same years. Leaving aside other formal elements that referred to pre-classical if not to Renaissance models, in Nono and Maderna's works the tone row is not only presented in its retrograde, inverted, and transposed forms but is also subject to permutation, sieving, and proliferation. Most importantly, the tone row is not the only musical material to receive systematic treatment: note durations, while organised independently at first, are later coordinated with the tone row itself. The most significant aspect of Maderna and Nono's compositional strategy is their creation of tone rows based on the expressivity implied in their intervallic content and their reliance on intervallic quality for the determination of the row's transformations. This is a recurring aspect in Nono's serial works of the following years.

On many levels, the aforementioned *Variazioni canoniche sulla serie dell'op. 41 di Arnold Schönberg* is an exceptional debut composition. Already in its title, Nono announces his intention of applying a process of transformation of the original pitch material, intended as a 'theme' but only in an abstract sense, with no regard to (or for) the historical form of the variation. By taking to extremes a typical compositional practice of the Viennese School – that is, the deduction of formal consequences from the intrinsic characteristics of the basic pitch material – Nono begins from the distinctive structure of Schoenberg's row, whose symmetrical configuration is repeated as such also within its hexachords; indeed, each individual movement of the *Variazioni canoniche* is built on the 'mirror image' (*Spiegelbild*) principle. Furthermore, in accordance with the principle of intervallic 'calmness' and 'tension', Nono generates a first variation on Schoenberg's row by deriving from it three permuted rows completely different from the original – one of them with a prevalence of fourths and major thirds, another one based on tritones, semitones, and minor thirds, and a third one which is more differentiated. The preliminary sketches show that Nono meant to start from each of the three rows that he had generated, plus the original one, to build four distinct episodes differentiated from each other according to their degree of 'tension'. This project would never be realised, perhaps because Nono preferred to exercise more direct control over the intervals. Yet such a project exemplifies the consistency of Nono's proto-serial thought, which at that time already tended towards a simultaneous coordination of multiple sound parameters. Indeed, the *Variazioni canoniche* adopt a systematic device for the assignment of durations, a *serie base* (a 'basic row', as Nono called it in his sketches) consisting of six different units: five individual duration values respectively equalling 8, 7, 6, 5, and 4 semiquavers plus another value



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# SERIALISM

Edited by **Martin Iddon**

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As the central trend in twentieth-century art music, serialism is unparalleled in multi-perspectival range and depth. This *Companion* introduces readers to diverse perspectives on serialism, its composers, performers, champions and detractors, from its foundations in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna through to the Soviet Union, South America, and Asia.

Edited by **Martin Iddon**, *University of Leeds*

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