

***Artistic Experimentation in Music***  
***An Anthology***

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# Artistic Experimentation in Music

INSTITUTE

Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore (eds.)

## An Anthology

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ARTISTIC EXPERIMENTATION IN MUSIC:

AN ANTHOLOGY







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## An Anthology

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Darla Crispin and  
Bob Gilmore

Leuven University Press







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# Revisiting Luigi Nono's Suffered, Serene Waves

Paulo de Assis

Orpheus Institute, Ghent

One often hears that to understand a work of art one needs to know its historical context. Against this historicist commonplace, a Deleuzian counter-claim would be not only that too much of a historical context can blur the proper contact with a work of art (i.e., that to enact this contact one should abstract from the work's context), but also that it is, rather, the work of art itself that provides a context enabling us to understand properly a given historical situation.

—Slavoj Žižek ([2004] 2012, 13)

## AN AESTHETIC OF THE SUBTLEST DIFFERENCES

Luigi Nono's . . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . for piano and tape (1975/77) was composed during a period of intense reflection and self-criticism that led Nono to new modes of composing and to renewed perspectives on the arts, on aesthetics, and, crucially, on the political implications of art. Contrary to Nono's pieces of the previous decade, . . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . has no direct political message. Its main focuses are the study of Maurizio Pollini's piano sonority and playing techniques and the study of diverse compositional techniques and strategies. To a certain extent it is a renewed exploration of some constructive principles that Nono had learned in the late 1940s from his teachers Hermann Scherchen and Bruno Maderna (see also, Assis 2006, 150–55). In this sense, . . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . may be seen as the beginning of a new path, as a piece that opens the door to a new “style”—a style that produced works such as *Prometeo. Tragedia dell'ascolto* (1981/84), *Caminantes . . . Ayacucho* (1986/87), or *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura, madrigale per più caminantes con Gidon Kremer* (1988/89).<sup>1</sup>

The simple aural comparison of . . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . with several of Nono's works that immediately preceded it, such as *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* (1971/72), *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1972–74), or *Für Paul Dessau* (1975), makes the shift from his “second style” (1960–75) to his “late style” the more obvious. Nono himself stated that:

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<sup>1</sup> A reduced version of this text was published as Assis (2013). All translations from the Italian, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.





Paulo de Assis

Immediately after *Al gran sole carico d'amore* there was silence, an unutterable silence. . . . I felt an urgent need to study—not only regarding my musical language but also my mental categories, and I restarted composing again with . . . . *sofferte onde serene*. . . , a piece that requested a lot of work. (Nono [1979–80] 2001, 2:245).

However, the result of this aesthetic and ideological shifting was not that Nono became apolitical or somehow indifferent to political issues of the day. On the contrary, in 1975 he became a member of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party. What Nono realised more and more was that his previous works, with all their explicit political engagement, had been easily misunderstood as bare “pamphlet art,” their political contents shadowing their intrinsic musical features, so that the latter were not properly perceived by the listener. Starting with . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . , Nono’s late works bring the inner musical structures and features to the foreground, focusing on small instrumental forces, on subtle harmonic fields and clearly differentiable vertical sound-aggregates, on extreme soft dynamics and fine articulation markings, on fragmented successions of sections, and on a highly elaborated dialogue with old historical forms. The act of *listening* to these works becomes a highly demanding process—the listener being confronted with his or her own capacity (or incapacity) for listening.

The making and the reception of music gains herewith a new dimension: that of enabling a *redistribution of the sensible*, suggesting other possibilities for *things* to be arranged, configured, assembled, and exposed. Following Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics* (and quoting Gabriel Rockhill’s “Glossary of Technical Terms” in that book), the term *sensible* as I am using it here “does not refer to what shows good sense or judgement but to what is *aisthēton* or capable of being apprehended by the senses” (Rockhill 2004, 85). This broader conception of “the political” opens up wider avenues for artistic practices and activities, pointing to subtle nuances and differences that might function as explosive detonators, first for individual subjectivities, later for assemblages or groups of individuals. There is then a politics of aesthetics that goes beyond Benjamin’s issue of the aestheticisation of politics, or Brecht’s outspoken experimental forms. In Rancière’s words there is “a system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière 2004, 12). Challenging such systems to destabilise them and propose new aesthetic assemblages has therefore an intrinsic political dimension. Luigi Nono’s music after 1975 is an example of such politics of the artwork: an aesthetic and a politics of the smallest differences, of the finest details, of the barely audible; an invitation to question one’s identity and a call for courageous change. In the effort to listen, one feels the urgency of finding new balances, new arrangements, new distributions of the sensible. Through listening one discovers new worlds—one might even rediscover oneself. The crucial question is therefore: What is *listening*?





## Revisiting Luigi Nono's Suffered, Serene Waves

Silence.

Listening is very difficult.

Very difficult to listen to others in the silence.

Other thoughts, other noises, other sounds, other ideas. When one comes to listen, one often tries to rediscover oneself in others. To rediscover one's own mechanisms, system, rationalism in the others.

And this is a violence of the utmost conservative nature.

Instead of hearing the silence, instead of hearing the others, one often hopes to hear oneself once again. That is an academic, conservative, and reactionary repetition. It is a wall against ideas, against what is not yet possible to explain today.

... To listen to music.

That is very difficult.

I think it is a rare phenomenon today.

...

Perhaps one can change the rituals; perhaps it is possible to try to wake up the ear. To wake up the ear, the eyes, human thinking, intelligence, the most exposed inwardness.

This is now what is crucial.

(Nono [1983] 2001, 1:522)

### GENESIS AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF . . . . . *SOFFERTE ONDE SERENE* . . .

In September 1971, Luigi Nono started working with Maurizio Pollini (1942–) at the Studio di Fonologia della RAI, Milan, for the composition of *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* (1971/72) for piano, soprano, orchestra, and tape. Recently returned from an extensive South American tour, Nono was excited about the idea of creatively collaborating with both Pollini and Claudio Abbado (1933–2013), with whom *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* would be premiered almost two years later, on June 28 1972: “Claudio Abbado and Maurizio Pollini: their new musical activity is the development of an artistic partnership into the acquisition and adoption of musical responsibilities that result from the human necessities of our time” (Nono, in Stenzl 1975, p. 143). As this quotation makes evident, Nono was fascinated not only by Pollini's and Abbado's impressive musical and technical qualities, but also by their strong commitment to society, by their engagement in socio-political causes, and by their strong, outspoken political positions.





Before and beyond the mere making of music was a human component that proved to be quintessential to Nono's creative collaboration with them.

Four years later, starting in December 1975 and continuing in several diverse shorter recording sessions during the year 1976, Nono and Pollini collaborated on another piece, . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . , a fundamental work if one is to understand Nono's late style and his polemically debated aesthetic and ideological turnabout. The working sessions with Pollini at the Studio di Fonologia della RAI, which involved both pieces (*Como una ola de fuerza y luz* and . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . ), are extensively documented through working tapes and sketches preserved at the Foundation Archivio Luigi Nono, Venice. The study of these materials opens up illuminating avenues for the understanding of creative collaborative practices in the third part of the twentieth century—a period in which the electronic medium (first through magnetic tape, later through live electronics) became increasingly important for composers. A detailed description and analysis of the concrete modalities of the collaboration between Nono and Pollini is beyond the scope of this paper, though it was treated extensively as part of my research work nearly a decade ago (see Assis 2006). Here, however, I wish solely to focus on . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . and point out that in this work several new elements emerge in Nono's musical language, namely a new understanding of the use of vertical sound-aggregates (“chords”), the exploration of complex variational and canonical procedures, and, crucially, new modes of organising “multi-temporalities,” with the piano and the tape following different paths across the same landscape.

This piece—written by Nono in a moment of personal and artistic crisis—marks the beginning of his late creative period. It was conceived experimentally (especially the tape production), and its concert rendering involves various degrees of uncertainty and unpredictability of sonic combinations. Nono achieves this, in the first instance, through the use of “shadow” sounds—similar sonorities that come sometimes from the piano, sometimes from the tape, and that generate a perceptual (con)fusion for the listener. This (con)fusion is enhanced by relatively free time relations between piano (live) and tape, allowing the performer on the piano and the performer controlling the sound-projection to intertwine a great variety of sonic relationships. From an analytical perspective<sup>2</sup> the piece might be seen as a succession of five units, each featuring its own specific sound material and employing different compositional tools and strategies. Taking into account the durations in the tape and the bars in the score, the five sections of . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . appear as follows:

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2 For which see Assis (2006, especially 208–37); see also Linden (1989) for a different reading.





## Revisiting Luigi Nono's *Suffered, Serene Waves*

	Tape	Bars in the score
1.	0:00–2:32 [2:32–2:45]	1–25
2.	2:45–4:50 [4:50–5:00]	25–49
3.	5:00–9:17	50–101
4.	9:18–11:49	102–37
5.	11:50–13:40	138–55+

Table 1

To provide an example, let us briefly consider the first section. It is made of five different presentations (“variations”) of the basic sonic material—a transparent constellation of twelve pitches (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1

Following the sketches used in the recording sessions (ALN 42.01 and ALN 42.02), Nono asked Pollini to play these pitches in diverse combinations and successions. The results were recorded almost as a basic sample of sounds, which would be mixed and assembled later by Nono at the mixing desk. This means that during the studio recordings there was no “score” in front of Pollini. On the contrary: it was the concrete recorded sounds that slowly, in a constructive way, defined more and more precisely the sequence of sonic events—that is, the score for the pianist playing the piece’s piano part. And if it is very clear that the score and its writing are the complete responsibility of Nono (who remains “the composer” in an orthodox sense), it is also true that the concrete sonic input produced by Pollini was of the utmost importance for the definition of the music.

Beyond the *creative* collaborative practice between Nono and Pollini, another aspect of collaboration must be mentioned—namely, the collaborative *performance* practice between them. . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . was not only premiered by Pollini, for some years it was performed only by him—normally with





Nono taking care of the tape's sonic projection. There has been much discussion (among performers and sound technicians who play this piece) about how loudly to set the acoustic level of the tape. In recent years the tendency has been to overemphasise the tape, to make the part equally as important as the live piano. This tendency seems to contradict early recordings of the piece, including the world premiere, a recording of which is preserved in Salzburg in Jürg Stenzl's Luigi Nono Archiv, where the tape plays the role of a soft background, a shadow of a shadow. Independent of this important question, a major feature of the piece is the correspondence between tape and live piano and the problem of synchronisation.

Luigi Nono, liberating the music from strict prefixed temporal grids (as he still did in *Como una ola de fuerza y luz*), creates for this piece an extremely flexible system based in eight "reference numbers for the tape" (see Nono 1977). If we consider that between these reference points there are time slots of up to two minutes it becomes clear that there is room for flexibility in terms of vertical coordination. This aspect is extremely relevant, since it creates the basic structure for a concrete multi-temporality where the "live" part (the piano) gains a new dimension—that of being able to generate real differential repetition from one performance to the next. Piano and tape, both built around the same sonic materials (pitches, rhythms, and timbre), enter a dialogue full of echoes and resonances and also of announcements and foreshadowings. That these relations should not be fixed permanently is a consequence of Nono's new orientation, both aesthetically and politically.

Almost four decades after the premiere of . . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . this work is well established in the broad concert repertoire. However, the performances of many pianists do not reflect the profound component of multi-temporality that pervades this music. Moreover, the question of reconsidering the piece, of critically rethinking the unpredictability of sonic combinations for every new performance, remains widely unaddressed. The majority of the performers simply aim to reproduce Maurizio Pollini's timings following his recording for Deutsche Grammophon. Most critically, however, the issue around the original stereo tape remains unsolved, as the tape distributed with the commercialised score is monophonic. In this respect, my ongoing research project produced a replica of the original stereo tape. This replica of the tape—technically realised by João Rafael (Freiburg im Breisgau) under my direct supervision—can be heard, for academic purposes, at the Orpheus Institute, Ghent. It is the tape used for the recording of the piece that I made, which accompanies this chapter.<sup>3</sup>

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3 CD, track 10: Luigi Nono, . . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . performed by Paulo de Assis.







# ..... sofferte onde serene ...

PARTITURA B

Luigi Nono  
orch. by Paulo de Assis

**Riferimento 0**

Start ORCHESTRA

0" 1" 5" 10" 15"

♩ = 60

**LEFT GROUP**

Bass Clarinet in B♭ L

Horn in F L

Trombone L

Cymbals High Medium Low

Percussion 1. L

Bass Drum

Harp L

Viola L

Double Bass L

**FRONT GROUP**

TACET until bar 32

♩ = 60

**RIGHT GROUP**

Contrabassoon R

Horn in F R

Trombone R

Wood Block

Percussion 2. R

Glockenspiel

Celesta R

Violin R

Double Bass R

con aria, suono velato

col legno battuto

arco CRINI + LEGNO

SUL TASTO PLAUTATO LIGERISSIMO

pizz. ord.

arco

lasciare vibrare!

Mit den Fingerknöcheln auf der Decke geschlagen, linke Hand auf den Es

arco ord.

Arco mobile: Ponte

Tasto

CRINI + LEGNO

Timpani

Poch.mo arco, velocissimo

Mit den Fingerknöcheln auf der Decke geschlagen, linke Hand auf den Es

arco

SUL TASTO PLAUTATO LIGERISSIMO

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Fig. 3

Figure 3. Nono, .....sofferte onde serene..., version by Paulo de Assis for orchestra and three groups, Score B, bars 1–4.



## Revisiting Luigi Nono's *Suffered, Serene Waves*

### ORCHESTRAL EXPANSION

After dozens of performances of . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . as a pianist (between 1995 and 2012), after a doctoral thesis on it (1999–2003), and after the realisation of a critical edition of its score (2009, supported by the Orpheus Institute, Ghent), I decided to revisit this work from a completely new angle, making an orchestration both of the piano part and of the tape. To further explore and develop specific practices of multi-temporality, two completely different scores were written down: one for the orchestra (onstage) playing what had been the piano part, the other for three groups (positioned around the audience) performing on acoustic instruments what had originally been the magnetic tape (see figs. 2–3). The two conductors—reading two completely different and partially independent scores—have to develop the sense of a chamber-music-oriented performance while conducting more than sixty musicians. The focus is thus placed on the *collaborative creative performance*. Every rehearsal and every concert rendering will be concretely different, while retaining the basic musical structure. Beyond the flexible coordination of temporalities established by the two conductors, the individual orchestral musicians have certain degrees of freedom, especially in the many notated suspensions—spots where their creativity is “locally” demanded. In such moments, the conductor stops conducting for a moment and gives space to the individuals.

Another crucial element of the original composition concerns the spatialisation of the tape projection. According to the evidence from the sketches and from the LP produced by Deutsche Grammophon (with Maurizio Pollini), Nono composed a stereophonic tape with some sections in mono. Sections 1, 4, and 5 were (partially) in stereo, whereas the central sections, 2 and 3, were in mono. This means that the return of the sound materials from section 1 in section 4 (which functions as a “reprise”) coincided also with a reopening of the acoustic horizon—from monophony to stereophony. This aspect is currently lost, given that the existing tape is completely monophonic. In my orchestration, I bring it back to life: sections 1 and 4 are played by the two external groups (Left and Right), while the centrally positioned group plays sections 2 and 3. For the last section all groups play together. Table 2 summarises this aspect:

	Bars in the score	Original tape	Orchestral groups
1.	1–25	Stereo	Left & Right
2.	26–49	Mono	Front
3.	50–101	Mono	Front
4.	102–37	Stereo	Left & Right
5.	138–55	Stereo	All

Table 2



This orchestration of . . . . *sofferte onde serene* . . . was commissioned by the WDR Cologne and premiered on 9 November 2012 at the Kölner Philharmonie with the WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln, conducted by Peter Rundel and Léo Warynski. During the rehearsals several possibilities for vertical coordination between the two musical entities (the orchestra onstage and the groups in the space) were tried, explored, and worked out. For all the musicians involved in the project this seemed to be an innovative exploration of different temporalities running parallel to one another but coinciding in basic structural points. By reworking a composition that resulted from a collaborative creative practice and that enacted multi-temporalities through the articulation “piano-tape,” this orchestration suggests new modes of presenting and performing multi-temporal music pieces: works with multiple, independent, smoothly-varying tempi. In addition to the technical challenges, one must find common musical ground on which the different performers may meet despite their lack of a unifying tempo. These concrete artistic investigations—where the practice of art functions as a research tool—may lead to new kinds of collaborative *creative* practices and to extended collaborative *performing* practices.

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For the long-lasting study of the music of Luigi Nono and for their generous insights in Nono’s creative thinking I wish to warmly thank Nuria Schoenberg Nono (Foundation Archivio Luigi Nono), André Richard (Experimental Studio of the SWR Freiburg), Jürg Stenzl (University of Salzburg), Wolfgang Motz (Musikhochschule Freiburg) and Erika Schaller (Foundation Archivio Luigi Nono). For his support in the making of the Critical Edition I am thankful to Peter Dejans (Orpheus Institute, Ghent). For their active engagement and support towards the performance of the orchestral version I am sincerely thankful to Peter Rundel, Harry Vogt (WDR), Helmut Lachenmann, and Giovanni Morelli (to whom my orchestration is posthumously dedicated).

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