

## Luigi Nono's Harsh Music Inspires Reflection and Action

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FEB. 23, 2018

In his politics and in his music, the composer Luigi Nono favored bold moves. In his 20s, Nono joined the Italian Communist Party, and loudly held fast to the party line for decades. Neo-fascist protesters demonstrated at the 1961 premiere of his opera “Intolleranza 1960” (which will be given a rare performance on Thursday at Carnegie Hall) and Nono remained a loyal Communist to the end, visiting the Soviet Union in 1988, not long before his death.

He remained similarly pledged to his chosen aesthetic. For his entire career, he was a champion of modernism, reveling in the possibilities offered by dissonance and electronic experimentation. But that reliability did not make him predictable, as a pair of New York performances demonstrates.

At a packed free concert on Wednesday at the Italian Academy at Columbia University, presented by the Talea Ensemble, the violinist Karen Kim and the electronics specialist David Adamcyk gave a vivid performance of Nono’s haunted and often spare 1989 work “La Lontananza Nostalgica Utopica Futura” (roughly, “The Nostalgic Utopian Future Distance”).

Nono wrote that the piece “is not in any circumstances a concerto for solo and accompaniment.” As Ms. Kim paced among a half-dozen music stands scattered between sections of the audience, she embraced this peculiar evocation of instrumental unity. Her sound often seemed to recede into the landscape established by Nono’s eight channels of pretaped textures. The piped-in materials included some errant chatter and slammed doors, as well as violin motifs — these last courtesy of the great musician Gidon Kremer, who recorded

them ahead of the work’s first release, on Deutsche Grammophon, not long after it was composed.

Yet Ms. Kim also stood apart when necessary. She gave some of Nono’s harsh, percussive phrases a clarity that felt personal, even warmly sincere, when overriding a passage of ambient unease that had been fostered by the electronic material. She and Mr. Adamcyk also fashioned some mystical balances when arranging Nono’s stray polyphonic whorls in this surround-sound environment.



*The violinist Karen Kim was the soloist in Luigi Nono’s haunted, spare “La Lontananza Nostalgica Utopica Futura” on Wednesday at the Italian Academy at Columbia University. Credit Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times*

During these moments, the division between Mr. Kremer’s recording and Ms. Kim’s live playing remained perceptible. Yet the harmony suggested a collapsing of the distance between identities and perspectives — if only for a utopian moment — before the textures inevitably diverged once again.

In a program essay, the critic Paul Griffiths noted that this work was written nearly 20 years after the “heady days” of the late-1960s protest movements. He hears in “La Lontananza” its composer’s “widespread alienation from a world in cultural decay, of people living in distance from each other, and from themselves.” The performance on Wednesday, sensitive though it was, did carry some of that sense of ennui. It was less a call to action than to reflection.

Anyone looking for the more overtly impassioned, idealistic Nono will have an opportunity when “Intolleranza 1960” is performed on Thursday by the American Symphony Orchestra. The 75-minute work is a dizzying succession of brief, powerful scenes as a migrant worker stumbles upon a political protest that in turn delivers him to a jail where torture is routine.

The American Symphony’s music director, Leon Botstein, said that Nono’s varied writing for chorus, as well as some ferocious orchestral textures, would be electrifying under any political circumstances. But in a recent interview, he added that “the reason to do this was not only to keep the achievements of radical musical modernism alive.”

Comparing Nono’s dramatization of xenophobic politics to the current debate over immigration, Mr. Botstein said, “Here’s this foreign worker being harassed and tortured — and we’re looking right at it,” adding that the performance would arrive just days before the protected status of the undocumented immigrants brought here as children, often referred to as Dreamers, expired on March 5.

In the opera’s fifth scene, a chorus of the tortured seems to address the audience directly. “And all of you there?” a translation by Todd Portnowitz renders it. “Are you deaf? Complicit in the herd? In vile shame? Do the cries of our brothers not stir you?”

Mr. Botstein asked, “What are we going to do when in fact people start disappearing from our midst, legally?”

He said he hoped that this would be the question in the minds of those hearing “Intolleranza 1960.” Mr. Botstein seemed far less worried about whether the mainstream classical audience was still as hostile as it once was to Nono’s dissonances.

“Modernism has left more of a residue than we remember,” he said, “whether you hear it in Bernard Herrmann scores, or in the sound world that accompanies the visual media we have now. The audience is going to be less shocked. The question is, will the audience be moved? In that sense, he wants to do the same thing that late Beethoven does.”