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## A Ringing Tone of Outrage: Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*

**Max Nyffeler**

Abstract

Luigi Nono's opera *Intolleranza 1960*, premiered at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice in 1961, defiantly broke with traditional notions of opera at the time. The depiction of physical and institutional violence against people, the expansion of the stage space by slide projections, and sounds coming from loudspeakers as well as a music that expressed constant unrest and protest provoked audiences into taking a stance against oppression and injustice. The work caused a scandal at the time of the premiere, but has since established itself as an opera that articulates, through Nono's music, a timeless human truth in a ringing tone of outrage.

Keywords: Luigi Nono, Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Intolleranza*, Teatro La Fenice, opera, music und politics, Italy—twentieth century

The premiere at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice on April 13, 1961, had the character of a daring experiment, because the form and content of the work was defiantly at odds with all traditional notions of music theater. The depiction of physical and institutional violence against people, the expansion of the stage space by means of slide projections and sounds coming from loudspeakers, and a music that expressed constant unrest and protest: all this served the purpose of provoking the audience into taking a stance about the forms of injustice and oppression that are denounced in the work. At a time when the cultured class wanted to forget the atrocities of a world war that had ended only a decade and a half before, and also longed for the return of “good old opera,” this caused a scandal. Still, the work has since established itself and retains its timeliness to this day. This is due in no small measure to Nono's music, which articulates a timeless human truth in a ringing tone of outrage.

### Luigi Nono in the Field of Music Theater

Luigi Nono wrote three major works of music theater, each of which is a condensation of the composer's artistic and political experiences in the time leading up to the respective work. *Intolleranza 1960* stages scenes of oppression from the fascist era to the present and thus marks the spectacular end to Nono's first creative phase of politically charged

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compositions. *Al gran sole carico d'amore*, premiered in 1975, is a summation of politically radical, formally open scores such as *A floresta é jovem e cheja de vida* and *Musica-Manifesto n. 1*, as well as confessional works such as *Ein Gespenst geht um die Welt* and *Como una ola de fuerza y luz*, which reflected Nono's experiences from his trips to revolutionary Latin America and the Soviet Union. Finally, *Prometeo. Tragedia dell'ascolto* coincides with Nono's retreat into a sphere of contemplation and subjective perception; now the aim was to transform auditory consciousness, rather than society. This work from 1984, which breaks completely new ground in terms of form and content, is the result of Nono's work with live electronics at the Freiburg Experimental Studio and, at the same time, a reaction to the disintegration of the socialist camp and the ensuing collapse of left-wing utopianism.

This trilogy, which spans a quarter of a century, reflects a piece of contemporary history and its concrete events, including the rise and fall of a revolutionary ideology that left its mark on the twentieth century and would hold renewed appeal following World War II. At the same time, it represents three auspicious attempts to create a new legitimacy for the art form of opera after 1945, by critically relating it to current realities. Or in other words: opera had to be radically upended.

### **A Work Anchored in the Real World**

Nono sets the action of *Intolleranza 1960* in a radical representation of the here and now, but does so with his distinct perspective on history and an aspiration to universal validity. He produces a sweeping panorama of war and social conflicts, in which outrage against Nazis, fascists and police of every description is balanced against the utopian hope for social liberation. The news from the colonial war raging in Algeria at the time of composition is added to the mix of images, injecting a note of explosive topicality. It goes without saying that the entire work demonstrates a decidedly anti-capitalist tendency. Nono, who had joined the Italian Communist Party in 1952 and studied Antonio Gramsci's writings on culture and society, conceived the work as a series of snapshots from the global class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Nono had been regularly circling this subject since the early 1950s, with the horizon of his interests stretching back to the early twentieth century. In a 1987 interview with Enzo Restagno, he recalled the enthusiasm inspired in him by his encounters with works from the period of lively cultural ferment in Russia in the early 1920s, mentioning names such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Kazimir Malevich. After he read a book by Angelo Maria Ripellino about Mayakovsky and Russian avant-garde theater, his plans for his first stage work finally crystallized into something more concrete. What he had in mind was a "*Raumtheater* in line with Meyerhold and Piscator." Ripellino wrote a libretto for him, but Nono heavily modified the text and combined it with other sources. The final name for his stage work was *Intolleranza 1960*, with the subtitle *Azione scenica in due tempi da un'idea di Angelo Maria Ripellino* (a scenic action in two parts based on an idea of Angelo Maria Ripellino).

## A Journey Through a Human Hell

The work, dedicated posthumously to Arnold Schoenberg, consists of a series of eleven scenes, bookended by two a cappella choruses. At the beginning, the chorus is divided into four spatially separated groups and urges alertness with words from a poem by Ripellino: “To live is to remain vigilant.” The final stanza of Bertolt Brecht’s poem *An die Nachgeborenen* (To Those Born After) provides a pensive conclusion to the work. The story of an anonymous emigrant worker or “guest worker,” as they were called in those days, is woven into a series of scenes that also depict various revolutionary situations. As he shifts from being a passive victim of his circumstances to an active participant in revolutionary actions, the emigrant’s consciousness becomes increasingly awakened throughout the piece.

The opening scene shows him in his mining village in a foreign land. Feeling an inner call to return home, he takes leave of his lover and sets out. On the first leg of his journey, he reaches a city where he gets caught up in an anti-fascist demonstration, leading to his imprisonment and torture. He is then detained in a concentration camp, from which he escapes together with an Algerian prisoner. His longing to return home is now supplanted by a strong desire for freedom. The first part ends with the “Chorus of Algerians and Emigrants,” set to an activist text that quotes Mayakovsky: “Beat the tramp of revolt in the square!” In the second part, the emigrant meets the struggle-hardened “companion,” who shares her love with him in the form of solidarity—a contrasting image to the lover in the first part, who is guided by individualistic feelings. The couple resists being lured in by indoctrination, fanaticism, and racism, but when they stand within sight of the emigrant’s native village, they are tested for the final time with a torrential flood. At this point the work concludes, on an open-ended note.

This allegorical depiction of a man-made apocalypse therefore marks the end of the nameless emigrant’s harrowing wanderings, which in their despondency resemble a secular version of the Dantean journey to hell. The paradise of a post-revolutionary society only appears faintly on the horizon as a distant utopia. The chorus draws a line under the musical and dramatic events—after all their disruption and devastation, heady climaxes and dark nadirs—with poetic lines from Brecht: “You, who shall emerge from the flood [. . .] think of us with forbearance.”

## Intersecting Avant-Garde Traditions

In the constructivist framework of *Intolleranza 1960*, widely varying lines of tradition meet head on. The influence of Erwin Piscator’s political revue theater was evident at the premiere, with the installation of acoustic and visual elements that made use of documentary material, as well as in the opening up of the stage beyond the proscenium with the aim of addressing the audience directly. The thinking of the Soviet theater practitioner Meyerhold is apparent in the idea of unity between avant-garde politics and aesthetics, while Josef Svoboda brought the light projections to Venice from the then renowned *Laterna Magika* theater in Prague. The expansion of the acoustic space through the multi-

channel loudspeaker system—at the premiere the extremely difficult chorus parts were pre-recorded and played back via tape—had its roots in the Venetian polychoral style from around 1600, which the young Nono became familiar with while studying with Gian Francesco Malipiero and Bruno Maderna. His inspiration for the chorus’s mass scenes undoubtedly came from Schoenberg’s opera, *Moses und Aron*, which he saw in a concert performance in Hamburg in 1954. At this event, the opera’s world premiere, he also met Schoenberg’s daughter Nuria, whom he would marry a year later.

The arrangement of the varied scenic and spatial elements corresponds with the way the text is structured. Nono combined imagery and quotations from other sources with the excerpts he had selected from Ripellino’s libretto. These were drawn from Paul Éluard and Jean-Paul Sartre, from Brecht and Mayakovsky, from the left-wing cultural politician Julius Fučík (who was sentenced to death and executed by Roland Freisler’s People’s Court in 1943), from Henri Alleg, the communist journalist who fought for Algerian independence, and from slogans used at demonstrations. All these processes, as well as the hyper-expressive music, were directed toward a single purpose: to confront the audience in such a way that it would be impossible to ignore the truth of the harsh realities depicted in the work. Ultimately, *Intolleranza* is an indictment in which the audience is invited to take the side of the disenfranchised. Sartre’s existentialist idea of freedom is present in the background as a kind of guiding principle: freedom not as a state of being, but as an accomplishment of will, based on an individual’s personal decision to rise up. In the torture scene, the fifth scene of the first part, a quote from Sartre is heard from the loudspeakers: “At no time has the will to be free been more conscious or stronger; at no time has oppression been more violent or better armed.”

### The Fundamental Question of Political Aesthetics

*Intolleranza 1960* represents a daring attempt to press aesthetics and politics, art and life into a unified whole with a high degree of sophistication. Nono was aware that politically correct slogans and righteous indignation alone were no guarantee of artistic success. “The ideological themes of this material,” he wrote in his analytical commentary on the work in 1962, “do not imply any musico-theatrical validity *as such*, nor do they impose it, but they do inform artistic consciousness in the present engagement with the material; the engagement is fulfilled in their elaboration and in the technical-expressive outcome.”

This problem of elaborating and fleshing out the material, a sticking point with every politically committed work of art, is solved by Nono in a convincing way. The writing of *Intolleranza* draws on the method and techniques of twelve-tone serialism, which Nono had been exposed to at the Darmstadt Summer Course for New Music in the early 1950s. But as an undogmatic thinker, he avoided a rigidly systematic approach; artistic freedom took precedence for him. In *Intolleranza 1960* he adapted the principles of serialism in accordance with the dramaturgical requirements of the piece. He did not make compromises that

would make the political message go down more easily; indeed, he matched the staggering events of the drama with densely packed sounds.

The work is based on a tone row that Nono had already used in 1955, in his instrumental work *Incontri*. He isolated distinct segments from the row, using these interval constellations to characterize certain situations and characters: in a linear form when writing the solo vocal parts, for example, or as block chords when structuring the choral tutti or entire scenes. This blend of rigor and flexibility, alongside the wide palette of sounds from the large orchestra, forms the basis for a musical language that brings together precise phrasing, an impression of spatial depth, and highly protean expressive force to give the work its characteristic color.

### An Experiment with an Uncertain Outcome

Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* charted brave new musico-dramatic territory, and the radicalism with which the composer broke away from traditional ideas of music theater can still be admired today. When the rehearsals began for the premiere, nobody knew what the end result would look like, and it was probably not yet entirely clear to the composer himself how the individual elements of the complex whole, at that point purely an abstract concept in his mind, would finally come together on stage. The rehearsal process had the peculiar charm of an experiment with an uncertain outcome.

Diary entries by the mezzo-soprano Carla Henius, who sang the role of the "Woman" at the world premiere on April 13, 1961, provide first-hand insights into the eventful weeks of rehearsals leading up to this event at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. She traveled to Venice two and half weeks before the premiere, carrying her solo part hot off the press and not knowing what to expect. The other artists came from all over Europe: the director Václav Kašlík and the set designer Josef Svoboda from Prague, the vocal coach from Trieste, the tenor from Bulgaria, and the young soprano Catherine Gayer from Berlin, where she had recently completed her vocal studies. The choruses were recorded onto tape in Milan, to be played back over mass scenes performed by supernumeraries and ballet dancers. The BBC Symphony Orchestra was rehearsed by the conductor Bruno Maderna in London and only came to Venice for the final rehearsal before the dress rehearsal. During the rehearsals, the production suddenly acquired a new set designer in the form of the Venetian painter Emilio Vedova. As Carla Henius noted in her diary: "That's how everything is done here: an incredible mixture of real talent, ideas, handy tricks, technical agility, dilettantism and improvisation." Nono's 'frenzied work ethic', she added, infected everyone: "It was sheer pleasure!"

The politicized atmosphere at the premiere was like a tinderbox. The work had been publicly demonized in advance as an insidious piece of leftist handiwork that would show contempt for Italy's venerable operatic tradition and spread communist propaganda. Fascist groups had announced their intention to disrupt the opening night, and indeed there were a few moments when the premiere was on the verge of being canceled. Henius recorded the

height of the tensions in her diary: “The fascists orchestrate a scandal—some of them are arrested by the police just as they shout from their boxes ‘Viva la polizia!’” When the performance finished, the shouts of bravo outmatched the troublemakers and members of the ensemble carried Nono across the stage on their shoulders.

What is the enduring impact of these tumultuous events? Does the fact that the work is tied to the year 1960—an instance of “Kairos,” the *moment juste* in which it could realize its full effect—pose an obstacle to reception today? The world has certainly changed profoundly over the last sixty years: theater scandals have become a rare sight and the victory of socialism has been indefinitely postponed. But looking at the world with a slightly wider perspective, we can appreciate the timeless truth of Nono’s music. Its distinguishing attribute is a ringing tone of outrage, directed toward the persistent violence that is done to people in full view, every day.

Translated by Sebastian Smallshaw